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Vico
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The First New Science

The principles of a New Science¹
of the nature of nations through
which the principles of a new system of
the natural law of the gentes are discovered

A Iove principium Musae [The Muses descended from Jove]²
Virgil

¹ From the start Vico makes it clear that his work is intended to be a ‘science’, complete with its own metaphysical and substantive principles and methodology, as distinct from works which he characterises as products of the undisciplined use of imagination and traditional memory. Cf., for example, paras. 79–82 and 88–9 below. Hereafter, as in the body of the text, cross-references to other paragraphs will be given simply by citing the paragraph numbers.

² Virgil, *The Eclogues*, III, 60.

1. To the academies of Europe, in this enlightened age in which not only the fables and vulgar traditions of gentile history but all the authority whatsoever of the most esteemed philosophers is submitted to the criticism of severe reason, for the supreme praise with which their illustrious professors adorn the natural law of the gentes, this work is respectfully addressed. Since the natural law of the gentes of Sparta, Athens and Rome comprised as small a part of this law as Sparta, Athens and Rome were themselves parts of the world, the principles of a new system are herein meditated on through the discovery of a new science of the nature of the nations from which this law undoubtedly arose. For the origins of the sciences, disciplines and arts are certainly to be found in the humanity of this nature, within which their life proceeds and to which they are primarily indebted in all their practices. Hence, such is the height of perfection to which the doctrine of the academies is raised when it embodies the excellence of their erudition and wisdom, as corrected and amended by the discoveries made here, that Giambattista Vico is encouraged to devote his whole being to honouring the profession of the law. And such are the expressive qualities of the venerable language of Italy, to which alone, given the weakness of his ingenuity, he owes such learning as he has, that his work is written in Italian.³

³ With the exception of the two *Responses* to the hostile reviews of *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* and the *Synopsis of Universal Right*, all of Vico's previous academic prose works were written in Latin. His decision to write in Italian, a practice continued throughout the different versions of *The New Science*, was inspired by a wish to free himself from the constraints of a traditional, and often theoretically loaded, vocabulary and to enable him to express himself in a manner that captured the flavour of his subject matter. To this end he not only frequently uses words that were already antiquated by his time but also chooses increasingly antiquated variants of the spelling of these words.

Idea of the Work

2. Wherein we meditate on a science of the nature of the nations from which their humanity arose, beginning everywhere in their religions and coming to completion in their sciences, disciplines and arts.

Book⁴ I

3. *Ignari hominumque locorumque erramus* ['We wander ignorant both of men and places']: Virgil.⁵
 – The necessity of the end and the difficulty of the means of discovering this science in the ferine wandering of Thomas Hobbes's licentious, violent men,⁶ or Hugo Grotius's simpletons,⁷ solitary, weak and lacking all their needs, or Samuel Pufendorf's men,⁸ thrown into this world without divine care or assistance, from whom the gentile nations came.

⁴In the text of 1725, Vico divides the whole work first into sections under 'capi' or headings, and each of these subsequently into sub-sections which are indicated by a title and a number. In order to help clarify the text Nicolini, followed by Battistini, has treated each heading as a book, and each sub-section within the book as a chapter.

⁵Virgil, *Aeneid*, I, 332–3 (henceforth *Aen.*).

⁶There is no evidence that Vico's knowledge of Hobbes was based on any first-hand reading of his texts. Such knowledge as he had may have come from earlier Italian writers or discussion in the Academies. The reference to 'i violenti' of Hobbes was, however, a commonplace in general philosophical discussion.

⁷Hugo de Groot (1583–1645), *The Law of War and Peace*, II, II, 1–2 (henceforth *The Law*). Grotius was one of the most important influences on Vico. See introduction, pp. xxi–xxiv.

⁸Samuel Pufendorf (1632–94), *De jure naturae et gentium*, II, 2, 2.

Necessity of the end and difficulty of the means

Book II

4. *Iura a diis posita* ['The laws laid down by the gods']: a common expression of the poets.
 – The principles of this science drawn from men's ideas of a provident divinity from whose warnings or commands, as they were believed to be, all the gentile nations arose.

Book III

5. *Fas gentium* ['The divine law of the gentes']:⁹ an expression used by the Latin heralds.
 – The principles of this science drawn from a language common to all nations.

Book IV

6. *Leges aeternae* ['The eternal laws']:¹⁰ an expression of the philosophers.
 – The ground of the proofs which are established here by showing how and when, in certain particular modes and certain determinate first times, the customs that constitute the entire system of the natural law of the gentes were born with certain eternal properties, which demonstrate that the nature or mode and time of their birth was thus and not otherwise.

Book V

7. *Foedera generis humani* ['Treaties of mankind']:¹¹ an expression of the historians.
 – The order of development through which, in diverse places and times, on the basis of the identical origins of their religions and languages, the nations share the same birth, progress, state [of perfection], decay and end, and are gradually spread throughout the world of human generation.

⁹Tacitus, *Annals*, I, 42, 2 (henceforth *Ann.*).

¹⁰Cicero, *De natura deorum*, I, 15. 40 (henceforth *De nat. deorum*).

¹¹Livy, *The History of Rome*, IV, 19, 3 (henceforth *Livy*).

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BOOK I

THE NECESSITY OF THE END AND THE
DIFFICULTY OF THE MEANS OF
DISCOVERING A NEW SCIENCE

[Chapter] I Reasons for our meditation on this work

8. The natural law of the nations was certainly born with the common customs of the nations.¹ Furthermore, there has never been a nation of atheists in the world, because all nations began in some single religion.² The roots of these religions all sprang from man's natural desire for eternal life, a desire, common to human nature, which arises from a common sense, concealed in the depths of the human mind, that the human soul is immortal. But however hidden this cause, its effect is equally evident: that, when faced with the final afflictions of death, we wish for a force superior to nature by which to overcome them, a force that is to be found only in a God who is not identical with, but superior to, nature herself, i.e. an infinite and eternal mind. And when men stray from this God, they become curious about the future.

¹ One of Vico's constant targets is any form of natural law theory which rests the foundations of society upon some kind of rational insight into the desirability of social life. His basic objection is that the attribution of such insight is incompatible with recognition of the 'simple and rough' nature of primitive man. Cf. 27. Hence, he consistently argues for law beginning in the customs of such men. Cf. 20.

² The reference here is to Bayle, who had maintained the possibility of a society of atheists. Cf. 476. The apparently limited nature of the point which Vico contests conceals a much larger issue. For Bayle had argued that it would be impossible to understand the history of societies which had no beliefs in common. Vico accepted this claim but was therefore concerned to show that there could be no societies with no beliefs in common, since all were based upon religion. This position is fortified by his further claim that there could be no societies without the institutions of marriage and burial of the dead. Cf. 10.

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9. This curiosity, which is forbidden by nature, for [such knowledge of the future] belongs to a God who is an infinite and eternal mind, precipitated the fall of the two great originators of mankind. Accordingly God both founded the true religion of the Hebrews upon worship of His infinite and eternal Providence and punished the first authors of the human race for their desire to know the future, thus condemning the whole race to toil, pain and death. Whence the false religions all rose from idolatry, i.e. from the worship of imaginary deities, falsely believed to be bodies with supernatural force, who give succour to men in their final afflictions. Idolatry shared her birth with that of divination, which was a vain science of the future, through which men believed that the gods sent them certain sensory warnings. Yet this vain science, in which the vulgar wisdom of all the gentile nations must have begun, hides two great principles of truth: first, that there is a divine Providence which governs human affairs; second, that men possess freedom of the will, through which, if they so choose, they can escape that which, without their foreseeing it, would otherwise befall them. It follows from this second truth that men can choose to live in justice, a common sense that is confirmed by the common desire men naturally have for laws when they are not moved otherwise by the passion of some self-interest.
10. This, and no other, is certainly the human nature whose practices, always and everywhere, have been governed by these three common senses of mankind: firstly, that Providence exists; secondly, that certain children be bred by certain women with whom they share at least the principles of a common civil religion, in order that they be brought up by their fathers and mothers in a single spirit and in conformity with the laws and religions amidst which they were born; and thirdly, that the dead should be buried.³ Hence not only has there never been a nation of atheists in the world, but neither has there been a nation in which women did not adopt the public religion of their husbands. And if there has never been a nation that lived in total nakedness, even less has there been one in which people practised canine or shameless venery in the presence of others or indulged it, like beasts, only in stray matings. Nor, finally, has any nation, no matter how barbaric, ever left the corpses of its members to rot

³ These three conditions provide the basic hypothesis of the whole of the New Science, which Vico later claims to have proved. Cf. 526.

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unburied on the ground, for this would be a nefarious state, i.e. one that sins against the common nature of men. Hence, to avoid falling into such a state, the nations protect their native religions with inviolable ceremonies, celebrating marriage and burial, above all other human institutions, with elaborate rites and solemnities. This is the vulgar wisdom of mankind, which began in religions and laws and reached its perfection and completion in the sciences, disciplines and arts.

[Chapter] II
 Meditation on a New Science

11. But though the sciences, disciplines and arts have all been directed towards the perfection and regulation of man's faculties, none of them has yet contained a meditation upon certain origins of the humanity of nations, from which, beyond doubt, they themselves all arose. Nor, starting from such origins, have they established a certain ἀκμή [*acme*], or state of perfection, with which to measure the stages through which the humanity of nations must proceed and the limits within which, like all else mortal, it must terminate. Had they done so they would have gained scientific apprehension of the practices through which the humanity of a nation, as it rises, can reach this perfect state, and those through which, when it declines from this state, it can return to it anew.⁴ The only possible form that this state could take would be that in which the nations stand fast on certain maxims, both demonstrated by immutable reasons and practised in their common customs, so that the recondite wisdom of the philosophers would aid and support the vulgar wisdom of nations and, in this way, the distinguished members of the academies be in agreement with the sages of the republics. Thus the science of civil things, divine and human, i.e. of religion and law, which constitute a theology and morality of command acquired through habit, would be supported by the science of natural things, divine and human, which constitute a theology and morality of reason,

⁴This substantial hypothesis is part of the methodological basis for Vico's claim that this is a 'new' science. What makes it new is not that the histories of nations exhibit this sequence, which was common to many writers in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, and is repeated frequently by Vico, but the claim that it can be shown that nations proceed through the sequence because, given certain conditions, they must do so, i.e. because, as Vico's Science will demonstrate, the sequence is necessary.

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acquired through reasoning.⁵ Hence, a life beyond such maxims would be the true [state of] error, i.e. of wandering, of man and beast alike.

[Chapter] III
 The defect of such a Science if based upon
 the maxims of the Epicureans and Stoics
 or the practices advocated by Plato

12. But, following paths that were not merely different from but quite opposed to one other, the Epicureans and the Stoics unfortunately set themselves at a distance from, and abandoned, vulgar wisdom. For the Epicureans taught that chance rules blindly over human affairs; that the human soul dies with the body; that, since only body exists, the bodily senses must regulate the passions through pleasure; and that utility, which changes by the hour, is the rule of justice. The Stoics, on the contrary, decreed that everything, including human will, is dragged along by a fatal necessity. True, they conceded a temporal life to the soul after death, but, though they preached that there is an eternal and immutable justice and that honesty should be the norm of human actions, their desire to render human nature wholly insensitive to the passions would annihilate it completely; while their maxim, harder by far than iron, that all sins are equal, and therefore that it is as sinful to beat a slave even slightly in excess of his deserts as it is to kill one's father,⁶ would drive men to despair of the possibility of exercising their virtue. Hence, the Epicureans, with their ever-varying utility, would destroy the first and most important foundation of this science, the immutability of the natural law of the gentes; and the Stoics, with their iron severity, would dismiss the benign interpretation [of law], in which interests and punishments are adjusted in accordance with the three celebrated categories of fault. So closely, then, do these sects of philosophers agree with the principles of Roman jurisprudence, that one uproots its most important maxim, and the other denies its most important practice!
13. The divine Plato alone meditated on a recondite wisdom through which man would be regulated in accordance with maxims taken from

⁵ Despite the apparent parallelism between sound practice acquired through habit, i.e. training, and philosophical wisdom, by insisting that by demonstrable maxims philosophy should support sound practice, Vico is giving priority to the role of practice in the development and maintenance of the humanity of a nation.

⁶ The morality of this is raised by Plato in *Euthyphro*.

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the vulgar wisdom of religion and the law. Wholly committed both to Providence and the immortality of the human soul, he located virtue in moderation of the passions and taught that it was the proper duty of a philosopher to live in conformity with the laws, even where, for some reason, they had become excessively harsh. His model here was that which his master, Socrates, gave with his own life, when, despite his innocence, he chose to accept his punishment and drink the hemlock because he had been condemned as guilty.⁷ Yet even Plato lost sight of Providence when, through an error common to the human mind, whereby it measures the relatively unknown nature of others in accordance with itself, he raised the barbaric and rough origins of gentile humanity to the perfect state of his own exalted, divine and recondite knowledge, whereas he ought, on the contrary, to have descended from his 'ideas' and sunk down to those origins. Thus, through a scholarly error, in which he has been followed to the present day, it became necessary for him to prove that the first authors of gentile humanity were sages, replete in a recondite wisdom, whereas, since they came from races of impious and uncultured men, such as those of Ham and Japhet must once have been, they could only have been huge beasts, wholly bewildered and ferocious. And, as a result of this erudite error, instead of meditating upon an eternal republic and the laws of an eternal justice, on the basis of which Providence ordained the world of nations and governs it through the common needs of mankind itself, Plato meditated on an ideal state and an equally ideal justice, wherein not only would the nations not be ruled and led by the common sense of the whole of mankind but, alas, be required to distort and abandon it. As, for example, in the case of that [rule of] justice enjoined in his *Republic*:⁸ that women should be [held in] common.

[Chapter] IV

This Science is meditated on the basis
 of the Roman jurisconsults' idea of the
 natural law of the gentes

14. In the light of the foregoing, what is now required is the science of the natural law of the gentes which the Roman jurisconsults defined, exactly as they received it from their predecessors, as 'the law ordained

⁷ See Plato's *Phaedo*.

⁸ Plato, *Republic*, V, 457d.