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VICO: THE FIRST NEW SCIENCE

The First New Science gives a clear account of Vico's mature philosophy: the belief that certain functions which are necessary for the maintenance of human society and culture, including philosophy, also condition them historically. This challenges the traditional view that philosophy can lay claim to a historically independent viewpoint, thus bringing into question the legitimacy of the claims of universal prescriptive political theories as against the de facto political beliefs of particular historical societies. This is the first of Vico's later major books in which he wrote in Italian in order not merely to expound, but to demonstrate in practice, his conception of the philosophical importance of etymology. This Cambridge Texts edition is the first complete English translation of the 1725 text. Accompanied by a glossary, bibliography, chronology of Vico's life and expository introduction, it makes this important work accessible to students for the first time.

LEON POMPA is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Birmingham. He has published over a hundred articles and books in the fields of philosophy of history, epistemology, the history of philosophy and idealist philosophy. His works include *Vico: a Study of the New Science* (Cambridge, 1977; 2nd edn 1990) and *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico* (Cambridge, 1990). He is also the translator and editor of *Vico: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, 1982).

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The First New Science

EDITED AND TRANSLATED BY
LEON POMPA



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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2002

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Ehrhardt MT 9.5/12 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 38290 4
ISBN 0 521 38726 4

Cambridge University Press
0521382904 - The First New Science
Vico
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

To Antonia and Nicholas

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i> xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
<i>Chronology</i>	xxxix
<i>Editor’s note</i>	xl
<i>Bibliographical note</i>	1
<i>Glossary</i>	lvii
 The First New Science	 1
 Idea of the Work	 4
 BOOK I THE NECESSITY OF THE END AND THE DIFFICULTY OF THE MEANS OF DISCOVERING A NEW SCIENCE	 7
I Reasons for our meditation on this work	9
II Meditation on a New Science	11
III The defect of such a Science if based upon the maxims of the Epicureans and Stoics or the practices advocated by Plato	12
IV This Science is meditated on the basis of the Roman jurisconsults’ idea of the natural law of the gentes	13
V The defect of such a Science if based upon the systems of Grotius, Selden or Pufendorf	14
VI Reasons why this Science has hitherto been lacking among the philosophers and philologists	18

Contents

VII	The necessity, both human and doctrinal, that the origins of this Science be derived from sacred history	20
VIII	The difficulty of discovering the progress or continuity [proper to this Science]	21
IX	[The difficulty of discovering the origins of humanity] from the philosophers	22
X	[The difficulty of discovering the origins of humanity] from the philologists	25
XI	The necessity to seek the principles of the nature of nations by means of a metaphysics raised to contemplate a certain common mind of all the peoples	30
XII	On the idea of a jurisprudence of mankind	31
XIII	The severe difficulties of discovering [the mode of men's first ideas]	32
BOOK II THE PRINCIPLES OF THIS SCIENCE CONCERNING IDEAS		35
[Introduction]		37
I	The first principle of the nations is Providence	38
II	The rule of the world of nations is vulgar wisdom	39
III	The artificer of the world of nations is human will regulated by vulgar wisdom	39
IV	The natural order of human ideas of an eternal justice	40
V	The natural order of human ideas of a universal justice	44
VI	The natural order of gentile human ideas of divinity through which, depending upon whether they have been kept distinct or communicated, the nations are isolated or in communication with one another	45
VII	The natural order of ideas concerning the law of the nations [as it proceeds] through their own religions, laws, languages, marriages, names, arms and governments	48

Contents

Corollary	A practical test comparing [the results of] our reasoned principles with the vulgar tradition that the Law of the Twelve Tables came from Athens	57
VIII	The idea of an ideal eternal history in accordance with which the histories of all nations proceed through time with certain origins and certain continuity	66
IX	The idea of a new critical art	67
X	First: through certain kinds of evidence synchronous with the times in which the gentile nations were born	68
XI	Second: through certain kinds of medals belonging to the first peoples, with which the Universal Flood is demonstrated	69
XII	Third: through physical demonstrations which prove that the first origin of profane history lay in the giants and that profane history is continuous with sacred history	71
XIII	Fourth: by interpreting the fables in the light of physics, it is discovered that the principle of idolatry and divination common to the Latins, Greeks and Egyptians was born at a certain determinate time after the Flood, and that idolatry and divination were born at an earlier time and of a different principle in the East	73
XIV	Fifth: with metaphysical proofs through which it is discovered that the whole theology of the gentiles owes its origins to poetry	75
XV	Through a metaphysics of mankind the great principle of the division of the fields and the first outlines of kingdoms are discovered	76
XVI	The origin of nobility is discovered	79
XVII	The origin of heroism is discovered	81
XVIII	This New Science proceeds through a morality of mankind, from which the limits within which the customs of the nations proceed are discovered	82

Contents

XIX	This New Science proceeds through a politics of mankind, from which it is discovered that the first governments in the state of the families were divine	83
XX	The first fathers in the state of the families are discovered to have been monarchical kings	84
XXI	The first kingdoms in the state of the cities are discovered to have been heroic	85
XXII	The principle of heroic virtue	86
XXIII	The principles of all three forms of republic	87
XXIV	The principles of the first aristocratic republics	87
XXV	The discovery of the first families that include others than just their children	88
XXVI	Determination of the first occupations, usucaptions and mancipation	88
XXVII	The discovery of the first duels or the first private wars	89
XXVIII	The origin of the genealogies and the nobility of the first gentes	90
XXIX	The discovery of the first asylums and of the eternal origins of all states	91
XXX	The discovery of the first clientele and the first outlines of surrender in war	92
XXXI	The discovery of the fiefs of the heroic times	92
XXXII	The point at which the heroic republics were born from the clientele	93
XXXIII	The discovery of the first [forms of] peace and the first tributes in the two oldest agrarian laws, which are the respective sources of natural law and civil law and the joint source of sovereign ownership	94
XXXIV	The discovery of the heroic republics that were uniform among the Latins, Greeks and Asians, and of the different origins of the Roman assemblies	95
XXXV	The discovery of the heroic or aristocratic nature of the Roman kingdom	97

Contents

XXXVI	The discovery of the truth concerning the Law of the Twelve Tables as the basis of the greater part of the law, government and history of Rome	101
XXXVII	The eternal principle of human governments in the free republics and the monarchies	107
XXXVIII	The natural law of the gentes that proceeds in constant uniformity among the nations	107
XXXIX	The discovery of the divine nature of the first natural law of the gentes	108
XL	The principle of the external justice of war	108
XLI	Optimum law as the principle of revenge and the origin of heraldic law	109
XLII	The law of the bond as the origin of obligations and the first outlines of reprisals and slavery	110
XLIII	The religious aspect of the first laws of the nations	111
XLIV	The discovery that heroic law was the second natural law of the gentes	111
XLV	The discovery that ancient Roman law was wholly heroic and the source of Roman virtue and greatness	112
XLVI	The discovery that human law is the final law of the gentes	116
XLVII	A demonstration of the truth of the Christian religion and a criticism of the three systems of Grotius, Selden and Pufendorf	117
XLVIII	The idea of a jurisprudence of mankind that changes through certain sects of times	118
XLVIII [XLIX]	The jurisprudence of the sect of superstitious times	119
XLIX [L]	The discovery of the secrecy of the laws uniform in all the ancient nations	120
L [LI]	A demonstration that the laws were not born of deception	120

Contents

LI [LII]	The jurisprudence of the sect of heroic times in which the origin of the legitimate acts of the Romans is discovered	121
LII [LIII]	The origin of the harsh jurisprudence of the ancients	121
LIII [LIV]	The discovery of the causes of the belief that the Law of the Twelve Tables came from Sparta	123
LIV [LV]	The jurisprudence of the sect of human times and the principle of the benign jurisprudence of the last Romans	124
LV [LVI]	The discovery of the causes of the belief that the Law of the Twelve Tables came from Athens	125
LVI [LVII]	The discovery of the true elements of history	125
LVII [LVIII]	New historical principles of astronomy	126
LVIII [LIX]	The idea of a reasoned chronology of the obscure and fabulous times	127
LIX [LX]	The discovery of new kinds of anachronism and of new principles for their correction	128
LX [LXI]	New historical principles of geography	130
LXI [LXII]	The discovery of the great principle of the propagation of the nations	134
LXII [LXIII]	The discovery of the principle of the colonies and provinces and of Roman, Latin and Italic law	135
LXIII [LXIV]	The discovery of the mode of the overseas heroic colonies	138
LXIV [LXV]	The discovery of the first origin in this Science	141
LXV [LXVI]	The origins of recondite wisdom are discovered to lie within those of vulgar wisdom	142
LXVI [LXVII]	The idea of a civil history of inventions in the sciences, disciplines and arts	143
LXVII [LXVIII]	Determination of the eternal point of the perfect state of the nations	145

Contents

BOOK III THE PRINCIPLES OF THIS SCIENCE CONCERNING LANGUAGE	147
[Introduction]	149
I New principles of mythology and etymology	149
II New principles of poetry	151
III Determination of the birth of the first fable, the origin of idolatry and divination	151
IV The first principle of the divine poetry, i.e. the theology, of the gentiles	152
V The discovery of the principle of the poetic characters that constituted the vocabulary of the first [gentile] nations	153
VI The discovery of the true poetic allegories	155
VII The idea of a natural theogony	156
VIII [The idea of a reasoned chronology proceeding] from the fables of the gods through those of the heroes to the things of certain history, which were necessary as the perpetual causes that influence effects in the known gentile world	156
IX Seven principles of the obscurity of the fables. Principle I: Concerning poetic monsters	158
X Principle II: Concerning metamorphoses	158
XI Principle III: Concerning confusion in the fables	159
XII Principle IV: Concerning changes in the fables	159
XIII Principle V: Concerning the impropriety of the fables that derives from [new] ideas	160
XIV Principle VI: Concerning the impropriety of the fables that derives from [new] words	161
XV Important discoveries concerning the law of war and peace resulting from the foregoing principle of poetry	164
XV [XVI] Principle VII: Concerning the obscurity of the fables: the secrecy of divination	168
XVI [XVII] The principle of the corruption of the fables	168

Contents

XVII [XVIII]	The discovery of three ages of heroic poets up to Homer	170
XVIII [XIX]	A demonstration of the truth of the Christian religion	172
XIX [XX]	How the first legislative wisdom was that of the poets	172
XX [XXI]	Of the divine wisdom and art of Homer	173
XXI [XXII]	How principles of recondite wisdom came to be discovered in the Homeric fables	175
XXII [XXIII]	The mode in which the first language among the nations was born divine	177
XXIII [XXIV]	The mode [of birth] of the first natural languages, i.e. those with natural signification	179
XXIV [XXV]	The mode in which the second language of the nations was born heroic	180
XXV [XXVI]	The mode in which the poetic language that has come down to us was formed	181
XXVI [XXVII]	Further principles of poetic reason	183
XXVII [XXVIII]	The discovery of the true origin of the heroic emblems	185
XXVIII [XXIX]	New principles of the science of blazonry	188
XXIX [XXX]	The new discovery of the origins of the family ensigns	189
XXX [XXXI]	Further origins of military ensigns	194
[XXXII]	The heroic origins of the distinguished Order of the Golden Fleece and the royal blazon of France	196
XXXI [XXXIII]	Further principles of the science of medals	197
XXXII [XXXIV]	The language of arms through which the principles of the natural law of the gentes of the Roman jurisconsults are explained	198
XXXIII [XXXV]	The necessity of the language of arms for understanding barbaric history	204

Contents

XXXIV [XXXVI]	Concerning the third part of poetic language: words of settled meaning	206
XXXV [XXXVII]	The discovery of the common origins of all the articulate languages	207
XXXVI [XXXVIII]	The discovery of the true causes of the Latin language and, by analogy, of all the others	208
XXXVII [XXXIX]	The discovery of the origins of song and verse	213
XXXVIII [XL]	The idea of an etymologicon common to all native languages	216
XXXIX [XLI]	The idea of an etymologicon of words of foreign origin	217
XL [XLII]	The idea of a universal etymologicon for the science of the language of the natural law of the gentes	218
XLI [XLIII]	The idea of a dictionary of mental words common to all nations	220
BOOK IV THE GROUND OF THE PROOFS THAT ESTABLISH THIS SCIENCE		225
BOOK V THE FINAL BOOK		231
[Introduction]	The order of development of the subject matter through which a philosophy of humanity and a universal history of the nations are formed at one and the same time	233
[I]	The uniformity of the course that humanity takes among the nations	234
[II]	The origins of this Science found in two Egyptian antiquities	235
[III]	The origins of this Science found within those of sacred history	236
[IV]	Supplement on antediluvian history	237
[V]	Compendium of the obscure history of the Assyrians, Phoenicians and Egyptians	238

Contents

[VI]	The age of the gods of Greece in which the divine origins of all gentile human institutions are found	238
[VII]	The uniformity of the age of the gods among the ancient gentile nations	254
[VIII]	The age of the Greek heroes	255
[IX]	The uniformity of the age of the heroes among the ancient nations	262
[X]	The age of men	268
	CONCLUSION OF THE WORK	271
	INDEX	275
[I]	Vulgar traditions	277
[II]	General discoveries	287
	<i>Index</i>	291

Acknowledgements

It gives me great pleasure to have the opportunity to record here my great debt to the two scholars and friends who have given me invaluable assistance in preparing this translation. First, I wish to express my extreme gratitude to Professor Andrea Battistini, who graciously gave me permission to draw at will from the footnotes to his edition of Vico's *The First New Science*. In fact, his notes are so comprehensive that I have been able to take by far the greatest number of notes giving information about Vico's sources from them, thus easing my task enormously and preventing any further delay in the publication of this translation. My other debt is to Dr Donato Mansueto, who has devoted a considerable amount of time to discussing with me, via e-mail, a large number of difficult points in Vico's text, helping me to appreciate better some of the many subtleties in it and undoubtedly saving me from some actual mistakes. I remain, of course, completely responsible for all shortcomings in the final text but am grateful to have the opportunity to express here my gratitude for the great assistance I have had from my two expert friends.

I would also like to express my thanks to my wife for her help in proofreading the text.

Introduction

I

One of the main lessons that *The First New Science* teaches in relation to political theory is that any such theory must be located within a science that incorporates both a philosophy and a history of the whole of human nature and human practice. In what follows, I shall begin, therefore, by tracing some key points which led Vico to this conclusion, before discussing some of the issues that arise from the conception he finally reached.

Vico's earliest theoretical writings show that, from the start of his professional career, one of his primary concerns was the relationship between the education of the individual and the interests of society. In the First Oration (1699) he argues that while the goal of education is self-knowledge, this can be reached only by a true understanding of the liberal and scientific arts. The theme re-emerges in the Fourth Oration (1704), where it is extended to the claim that the individual should be educated for the well-being of the state. In the Sixth (1707), Vico focuses on the forms of corruption that we inherit from Adam, specifically inadequacies of language, belief and desire, the remedy for which lies in the development of eloquence, knowledge and virtue. These, again, require a grounding in the liberal and scientific arts.

The Seventh Oration was extended and published as *On the Study Methods of our Time* (1709). Here these themes are elaborated further in a systematic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the ancient and modern methods of approaching all disciplines in the academic curriculum. Vico begins with a brief criticism of Bacon's *On the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, which had, he believed, failed to provide the

Introduction

complete system of knowledge that it promised. The Cartesian critical method comes in for particular criticism, being seen as an obstacle both to eloquence, i.e. wisdom expressed in a language appropriate to the common man, and to an empirical approach in the natural sciences. Vico goes on to admonish the universities to develop all disciplines in accordance with the best of ancient and modern methods in order that their students should be able to acquire eloquence, knowledge and virtue. He does not, however, suggest that this is possible on a democratic basis. The stress that he lays upon the need for the development of eloquence arises precisely because it enables those who can acquire wisdom to persuade those who cannot, the vulgar, to act correctly through feeling rather than through understanding. The overall emphasis is thus on the importance of a correct relationship between the intellectuals and the general populace for the good of society. This emphasis was to re-appear, though with the intellectuals and the populace related in a quite different way, among the conclusions of *The First New Science*. Finally, in a most important section which foreshadows later developments, Vico expounds the virtues that he sees in Roman juridical practice and the history of Roman law. Whereas the Greeks had separated legal theory from legal practice and subsumed it under philosophy, the Romans, he argues, had construed jurisprudence so as to include knowledge of all things, religious and secular, thus pursuing the arts of government and justice through their positive experience of public affairs. The sequence of laws observed in Roman history constituted, therefore, the best of Roman thought embodied in actual practice. Vico's assessment of the importance of the sequence embodied in the development of Roman law was such that, together with the reconstruction of the history of the fabulous period of Greek history, it was to become one of the principal sources, and exemplifications, of the content of the 'ideal eternal history' developed in *The First New Science*.

Vico's next major work, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, was the metaphysical and epistemological part of an intended three-part treatise, the other parts of which were to cover ethics and physics. Though it contains no direct discussion of political theory, two points of importance were carried from it into Vico's later thought. The first is his striking endorsement, as an alternative to the Cartesian theory of knowledge, of the *verum-factum* theory: that the true and the made are identical. At this point, however, the only example that he could offer of human, as distinct from divine, knowledge, on this conception, was geometry. The second is the consequence that he

Introduction

drew from this theory: that to know something requires knowledge of all that is required to make it, i.e. of all its causes. With regard to the *verum-factum* theory itself, Vico never again formulated it specifically in these terms. It is plausible, however, to see a version of it re-appearing in his later claim that the knowledge afforded in *The First New Science* was grounded in ‘the unique truth . . . that the world of gentile nations was certainly made by men . . . and that its principles must therefore be discovered within the nature of the human mind . . . by means of a metaphysics of the human mind’, a mind now considered, however, as the common sense of the nations or of mankind and not merely of intellectuals. With regard to the second point, however, it is quite certain that Vico never abandoned the claim that knowledge consists in knowledge of causes, though the kinds of cause brought forward in his later works were enlarged to cover everything relevant to the nature of their subject matter. This is precisely what he thought that he had achieved in *The First New Science*.

Vico’s next major work, *The Life of Antonio Carafa* (1716), although somewhat of a by-way in the development of his general thought, contains one relevant point. Whereas, in *On the Study Methods of our Time*, he had emphasised the importance of wisdom, virtue and eloquence in training the intellectual to guide the masses, in his biography of Carafa he attributes Carafa’s success to his natural, rather than acquired, shrewdness and suggests that formal culture is likely to hinder rather than to promote effective action. This was not a view that he was to maintain in its generalised form, but it is indicative of a decreasing confidence in the capacity of the intellectual to bring about political well-being by the methods advocated earlier.

At this point it is necessary to turn to the importance of Grotius’s influence on Vico, though this is a highly debated matter. Vico may have known something about Grotius’s doctrines, possibly through discussion, as early as 1708, but as part of his preparation for *The Life of Antonio Carafa*, he had undertaken a thorough reading of *The Law of War and Peace*. In the *Autobiography*, he offers his general assessment of what he had gained from Grotius in the context of a set of comments on his ‘four authors’, i.e. the authors by whom he considers he was most influenced up to the time of, and in connection with, *Universal Right*. The writers mentioned are Francis Bacon, who had seen the need to supplement and correct all knowledge, human and divine, but had failed to derive from this a universal system of law; Tacitus, who had realised the need to inform his

Introduction

more theoretical thought with facts about human nature but had failed to provide a system for understanding these facts; Plato, who had succeeded in devising a truly universal system of philosophy but had failed to confirm this esoteric wisdom by reference to common wisdom; and Grotius, who, unlike the others, had related philosophy and philology in a single system of universal law, including under philology both the history of facts and of the three best-known oldest languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. From all this, Vico says, he saw that he could fulfil what he had aimed at in his Inaugural Orations and *On the Study Methods of our Time*, by relating the philosophy of Plato, in a Christianised form, to a philology which introduced scientific necessity into its account of languages and things. As a result, he believed, the maxims of the academic sages and the practices of the political sages could be brought into accord.

The first fruits of this new conception were the two volumes, *The One Beginning and the One End of Universal Right*, *The Constancy of the Jurist*, and a concluding volume of *Notes and Dissertations*, all of which, following Vico, are usually referred to as *Universal Right*, published between 1720 and 1722. Much of this major work is taken up with discussions of detailed points about the nature and history of natural law, too complex to be summarised here. Its general contents, however, show that Vico was already working on many of the themes, both general and particular, that were to appear in *The First New Science*. Many of his etymological derivations, his interpretations of particular myths and of the nature of the different Roman laws, many aspects of his theory of language, particularly the poetic language of early man – versions of all this and much more appear here for the first time.

An important feature of *Universal Right* in the present context is the influence it reveals of the effect on Vico's political thought of his reading of Grotius, in particular his acceptance of the legitimacy of Grotius's appeal to historical facts as a way of establishing the legitimacy of a universal natural law. First, however, he criticises Grotius for having failed to supply a metaphysical basis for either the authority or the functions of the state. In his own account he begins with an assertion of the necessity to accept the existence of God. Given this, in one line of argument he attempts to establish the legitimacy of the state's authority over the regulation of ownership, freedom and tutelage, the importance of which for a stable civil community he had grasped from his reading of Roman history, by deducing these civil properties from the divine attributes of knowledge,

Introduction

will and power. Although he abandoned the deduction itself in his later works, he retained part of the view upon which it rested: that, like the divine mind, the human mind consisted in knowledge, will and power.

Second, to substantiate the appeal to historical fact as a way of establishing the legitimacy of different historical conceptions of law, he introduces the idea that there is an eternal sequence of the order of things which, because the ideas involved in it are eternal, must be the product of an eternal mind, i.e. God. The sequence mentioned here, which anticipates the ‘ideal eternal history’ of *The First New Science*, is presented as constituting the inner causes of the development of nations from the state of original bestiality of fallen man to one of the highest cultural achievement. From this sequence flows, among many other things, a developing order of political states involving conceptions of law which are barely or only partially rational, until it culminates in a state in which the utilities of life are distributed in accordance with a law embodying the dictates of pure reason. Vico is careful, however, to confine the application of this sequence to the gentile nations. The history of the Hebrews, the followers of the ‘one true God’, takes a different course, though no systematic account of this course is given.

In connection with these claims, he introduces a further distinction between two important concepts, which re-appear in *The First New Science*: the true and the certain. The true is defined initially as the conformity of the mind with God’s order of things. It is, therefore, though Vico does not explicitly say so, an objective epistemological relationship. Later, however, it is also defined as the order of ideas laid down by God, which, as stated above, constitutes the essence of the human world. Thus, it is both metaphysically and epistemologically basic. Similarly, the certain has two aspects. First, it is a state of consciousness which is free from doubt. Though its contents may be far from true, a consciousness of this sort is necessary, especially in primitive societies, to provide a solid basis of belief for communal activity. In this cognitive sense, however, the certain is not just brute consciousness, for the things about which we can be certain can be true or false, thus requiring the operation of *some* form of reason to judge them. Moreover, given the growing knowledge of the causes of things which follows from the claim about an eternal sequence of ideas, the certain can, and eventually will, attain the status of the true. Second, however, Vico uses the concept of the certain to characterise the particular institutions that arise in history from the operation of two

Introduction

other factors. The first is the will of fallen man, which contributes to the creation of institutions that satisfy demands that stem from the corporeal, non-spiritual part of his being. The second is the existence of certain ‘seeds of the true’, the *semi eterni di vero*, which constitute a certain potential for the rationality left within man after the Fall to develop through the eternal sequence of ideas, in order that he can eventually overcome his corrupt nature and reach the stage of pure mind. The rationale for the appeal to historical fact in establishing the legitimacy of the authority of law within the state rests, therefore, on the claim that law is always the embodiment of at least a partial development of reason, and hence shares in the divine.

Third, despite his debt to Grotius’s recognition of the need to establish the legitimacy of universal law by the appeal to historical fact, Vico criticises him, along with others, for having failed to understand the historically conditioned nature of human culture which results from the divine ‘order of things’. Hence the law for the universality of which Grotius had argued was the law of his own day – what Vico calls ‘the law of the philosophers’ – leading him to misunderstand many aspects of Roman law and rendering many of his criticisms of it invalid. What he should have recognised was the universality of the divinely inspired order of things of which the historical phases of law were a part. But, as Vico himself had begun to realise, a demonstration of this would require a comparative empirical investigation of the earliest historically instantiated phases of this order. Hence, as his many new and striking re-interpretations of Homer in later parts of the work reveal, he had begun to realise the need for a systematic canon of interpretation, particularly for the fabulous periods of history, in order to be able to go back to the origins of history and to trace from them the actual historical sequences of cultural, social and political forms through which the development of the different nations has proceeded. The idea that there could be a science for all this is first made explicit in a famous chapter, entitled ‘A New Science is essayed’, in which Vico asserts that philological interpretation must be governed by arguments which presuppose man’s corrupt nature and, on this basis, regulate it with scientific norms. Many of these ideas were to re-appear, albeit in more developed form, in his next published philosophical work, *The Principles of a New Science of the Nature of Nations through which the Principles of a New System of the Natural Law of the Gentes are Discovered* (1725).

Introduction

II

One of the principal aims of *The First New Science* is to discover the causes of social and political stability in order to enable us to identify and correct instabilities should they arise. In the way in which Vico approaches these causes, however, they come forward as part of a wider conception, a science of the nature of nations, which is later described variously as a philosophy and history of humanity, or of human customs or of the natural law of the nations. Before turning to the implications of the work for political philosophy, therefore, it is necessary to form some idea of this wider conception.

The governing idea of the whole work is that, under certain conditions, the history of all nations will develop in accordance with an identical pattern of social, political and cultural change. The reason for this is that they all share the same nature, which develops through the interplay of two different features, which Vico distinguishes as the cause and the occasion of historical development. The ultimate cause of this development is a potential for an increasingly rational understanding of the true nature of things, in particular the nature of justice. Hence the reference to the discovery of the natural law of the gentes or nations in the title of the work. The occasion for the progressive development of this cause is the actualisation of a sequence of desires, beginning with a desire for the necessities of life, followed by a desire for what is useful, then for what is comfortable, and so on, which belongs to man by nature. As a result of the interplay of cause and condition, the legal, social and political conditions of life emerge from an original brutish and almost wholly irrational state to reach an *acme*, or state of perfection, from which they then descend.

This basic hypothesis is clearly related to the idea of the eternal order of things dependent upon an eternal order of ideas of *Universal Right*. It differs from the scheme in *Universal Right*, however, in two important respects. First, Vico has now included the idea, quite common at the time, that the pattern will exhibit both a rise and a fall. Second, he claims that the historical establishment of this pattern will show that the state of perfection can be reached only when certain practical maxims which have been the basis of successful human practice, above all in contributing to the relative stability of their states, can also be demonstrated by the political philosophers. Then not only will political practice and political theory cohere but, should practice begin to depart from these maxims, it can be restored to them through the advice and help of the philosophers.

Introduction

In giving this as the reason for conceiving *The First New Science*, Vico is clearly attempting to fulfil the ambitions with which, as he says in the *Autobiography*, he had first been concerned in the Inaugural Orations, *On the Study Methods of our Time* and *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*.

Vico finds the underlying basis of this pattern in a metaphysics of the human mind, which he describes as ‘a metaphysics . . . raised to contemplate the common sense of mankind as a certain human mind of the nations’.¹ In the way in which this claim is developed, it becomes clear that it is because it is based upon this communal essence of mind that Vico’s Science can claim to be a philosophy of humanity, i.e. human nature.² Since no previous thinker has reached such a conception, he believes, it follows that nobody has been in a position to provide a coherent and defensible basis for the governing ideas, i.e. both the causes and the occasions, used in their interpretations of the nature and history of different nations. Conversely, nobody has yet been in a position to show that history could provide a demonstration that the principles involved in such a metaphysics were the fundamental principles of human nature.

Though the relation that Vico envisages between the philosophy and history of human affairs is circular, the circle is not vicious. Rather it is one of coherence and mutual support. It is worth noting, however, that though it can plausibly be argued that the satisfaction of such a relation may be a necessary condition of the truth of Vico’s claims, whether it can be accepted as a sufficient reason for them, or whether it requires the support of some more fundamental principle, is more contentious. Vico does not, however, provide this metaphysics of human nature with any further support by deriving it, as in *Universal Right*, by deduction from some *a priori* primary truths. Instead he sees it as the universalisation of a developing series of human capacities, i.e. both ideas and volitions, which can be proven to be true of ourselves by relating them, in some way or other, to what we know is fundamental to the existence and continuation of our shared human experience.

The first point to note about the historical sequence which arises from this metaphysics is that it is based upon Vico’s conviction that nothing – customs, languages, social or political institutions – can start initially from some kind of consent or contract. Such a theory, he argues,

¹ *The First New Science*, 40; *The New Science* (1744), 331, 347. Hereafter references to paragraphs in *The First New Science* will be given solely by a paragraph number.

² 23.

Introduction

would require us to attribute implausibly rational powers to primitive man. Instead of rational choice, therefore, his account of early society is given in wholly naturalistic terms. This can be seen with regard to three things that become central to his social and political theory. The first is belief in a provident divinity, a belief which arises without human intent, through the natural workings of the imagination. This alone, he argues, can provide the context of normative belief in which any initial form of society can arise. From this belief comes the second basic institution, the development of legalised marriage, required as an indication of divine approval of human behaviour. This is equally basic because it secures the identity of children and their parents, which is necessary for establishing hereditary fortunes, hereditary claims to political power and the formation of the clans and great ruling families. The third institution is burial of the dead, which, starting from the sheer physical disgust caused by unburied bodies, leads to the development of genealogies, which constitute the first form of history, and, later, to public monuments which commemorate the glories of families and nations. All this, Vico insists, arises from natural, non-rational features of human nature.

The second point to note is the role of certain governing beliefs in the different forms of society in the sequence Vico offers. The sequence itself which, in so far as it deals with anything remotely social, begins with isolated family units, proceeds first to primitive sacerdotal societies. These are the societies of the 'theological' or 'poetic' age, in which everything is governed by the imagined belief that the sky is a god, Jove, who issues commands and warnings to man through thunder and lightning. On this basis idolatry and divination become structural features of these societies which take on their sacerdotal character through the need to placate Jove with sacrifices. Accordingly, law consists in Jove's commands and political power rests with the priests and priestly kings through whose mediation his will is interpreted in the auspices. Next comes the 'heroic' age, the age of the great aristocratic republics, in which political power lies with the leaders of the aristocratic families on the basis of the belief that they are of semi-divine origin and, as such, superior in nature to the bestial plebeians. Finally, however, with the greater development of reason, doubts begin to arise about this semi-divine origin, the plebeians begin to realise that they are equal in nature to the aristocrats, and democracies arise on the basis of belief in the equality of nature of all human beings and of their entitlement to equal status under the law and to participation in social and political decision-making.

Introduction

Vico does not believe, however, that the development of human societies and different political structures on the basis of the interplay between these governing beliefs and the sequence of natural desires is a smooth and easy process. On the contrary, a central component is what would now be called the class war. Holding to his claim that individual man is corrupt, he sees every change in the sequence as involving a contest between those who are favoured by its political structure as embodied in the law and those who suffer from it. Ultimately, however, the increasingly rational governing beliefs will prevail over their less rational predecessors. Throughout the series, therefore, there is a tension between the way things are and the way, more rationally, they ought to be, i.e. between the certain and the true, in the ontological sense explicated in *Universal Right*.

The conviction that in giving this changing series of beliefs he has given the sequence of causes, be they naturalistic or, later, more rational, upon which social, cultural and political development rests, is the basis of Vico's claim that his science contains a philosophy and history of human customs. In perhaps his clearest statement of this conception he describes the philosophical aspect of it as consisting in a linked series of reasons, and the historical aspect as a continuous sequence of facts of humanity which are in conformity with these reasons. Thus, he concludes, his Science comes to be 'an ideal eternal history, in accordance with which the histories of all nations proceed through time'.³

The 'ideal eternal history' is one of the crucial conceptions in *The First New Science*. It is plainly related to the order of eternal ideas, deriving from an eternal mind, i.e. God, which was said to govern the divine order of things in *Universal Right*. There is, however, a major change in that Vico has now subsumed the whole notion of an order of ideas which governs the historical order of things within his concept of a metaphysics of the human mind.

It is clear, therefore, that in developing the 'order of ideas' of *Universal Right* in this way Vico has abandoned the idea that what makes the order eternal is that its author must be God, i.e. the god of Christianity, in favour of the idea that what makes it eternal is that it springs from the nature of man. This does not mean that the Christian God disappears entirely from the philosophical framework of *The First New Science*, for Vico makes frequent references to the Christian God by characterising the generally beneficial nature of the sequence as the outcome or realisation

³ 90.

Introduction

of a providential plan. Yet he realises that he cannot consistently maintain that all societies must rest on belief in *a* god, which must therefore arise from certain *universal* features of human nature, and identify this god with the God of Christianity. His solution, which looks distinctly question-begging, is to propose a different account, barely specified, for Hebrew history and its dependence upon revealed knowledge of the one true God. The crucial question of where this leaves his references to some supra-historical activity by the God of Christianity, as implied in the idea of a providential plan, is, however, too complex to be taken further here.

Three final points about the ‘ideal eternal history’ should be made here. First, although Vico often talks as though its existence is independent of the physical world in which man lives, it is clear that when he applies it he is thinking of it as embodying the causes of human activity in the real world. The necessities and utilities, for example, which provide the occasions for change, are often physical and biological. So, as he insists, his Science must take account of the *whole* of human nature and this includes its relation to all aspects of the physical world.

Second, and partially as a result, Vico does not believe that the histories of all nations will follow the pattern outlined in the ‘ideal eternal history’. For since it outlines a sequence which will obtain in what may be described as normal conditions of the world in which we live, where abnormal causal conditions obtain, as, say, in the case of massive floods or plagues or aggression by other more powerful nations, the history of some nations will not conform to the pattern. Thus in Latium, for example, only Rome, upon which, understandably, he relies heavily, exhibits the full pattern. But where some fail to conform to it, he gives a further causal account why this is so.

Finally, and most noticeably, he never gives a description of the total contents of the ‘ideal eternal history’. This is because, since it consists in the eternal sequence revealed in the evolving history of each nation, its detail is shown in what is common to those histories.

III

Given that one of Vico’s intentions in *The First New Science* is to make a contribution to political theory, book IV, in which he directly addresses this contribution, is often seen as a distinct disappointment. By far the shortest book in the work, it is also, in the eyes of many scholars, the

Introduction

most puzzling. The book mentions two arts which derive from the work as a whole. Although the first, a new critical art, i.e. a canon of rules of interpretation, which has been employed throughout in Vico's historical investigations, is one of his crowning achievements, it need not detain us here. The second, however, is quite different, and refers us back to the original aim of the whole Science. Vico explicitly likens it to a 'diagnostic art', the purpose of which is to enable us to discern the sequence of stages of necessity and utility in the order of human affairs and thus to fulfil the point of the Science: knowledge of the signs of the state of the nations. But the sequence of stages itself is that which has been mentioned frequently before: first, the need for belief in a provident god; next, the need for the institution of legal marriage by which to establish the continuity of families, from which arise so many practices in the structure of civil life, such as the inheritance of property; and, finally, the need for ownership of lands for burial of the dead, which leads to the citizens' pride in the glory of their ancestry, and their wish to give it immortal public expression. Thus the common sense of mankind consists in its grasp of the need to maintain these practices in order not to relapse into the bestiality in which it started. The sequence of stages of the utility of recondite wisdom, i.e. philosophical wisdom, on the other hand, is determined by that of common sense. For the end of philosophical wisdom is to support common sense when it is weakened and to guide it when it goes astray.

But if these pronouncements seem disappointing, this is, to some extent, because they are mere summaries of what Vico has already exhibited, in great detail and throughout the whole work: the indispensable nature of the institutions of religion, marriage and burial of the dead. For what he has shown is not only that they are necessary for the internal cohesion of any society but that, as they change in character in accordance with the slow development of human rationality, in addition to performing these indispensable functions, their effects spread out to have many further effects on institutions that are crucial to the development of social and political structures. A single example, that of ownership and the aristocracy, must suffice to illustrate this point. According to Vico, ownership begins as simple use of the land, common to everybody. Ownership as property arises when those who first occupy the land have their right to occupancy made legitimate through their auspices. For this to become permanent, however, it is necessary to be able to certify hereditary ownership, which can be done only through the genealogies which arise from burial of the dead. When others later enter these lands for food and

Introduction

shelter, they enter lands already legitimately owned and, consequently, can enjoy food and shelter only on the basis of an exchange of work for rural commodities. The owners of the land are thus in a position to build up, with full legal approval, their vast private fortunes which leads to the division between the aristocrats and the plebeians. This will endure in history until the plebeians are in a position to take the auspices and to belong to legally recognised families. At this stage, of course, the whole concept of ownership as such must change. Thus when Vico's claims about the necessity for religion, marriage and burial of the dead are read in the light of his actual account of the ways in which social and political structures change, they become much more illuminating.

Vico's pronouncements about the way in which his basic institutions should be recognised and supported by the philosophers represent the fulfilment of his original thoughts about the role of the intellectual in public life, a wish that is implied by the fact that the whole work is, if not dedicated, at least addressed, to the academies. There is, however, an obvious difference in that, whereas, in his earlier writing, he had enjoined the intellectuals to develop the knowledge and rhetorical capacities necessary to persuade the people to act in ways to which their understanding could not lead them, he now suggests that the people have a grasp of the need to act in certain ways and the task of the intellectual is confined to giving philosophical justification and support for these forms of activity when they are weakened. Thus where philosophical wisdom originally took precedence over common belief, it is now secondary to it.

In these general remarks Vico is also clearly thinking of his criticisms of philosophers who had provided prescriptions that were inimical to the requirement to maintain certain socially cohesive practices: the Epicureans, with their doctrines of the rule of chance in human affairs and pleasure as the guide to individual activity; the Stoics, with their demand for ways of life so harsh as to discourage people from trying to live good lives; and even Plato, with his suggestion that the women of a nation should be held in common, a suggestion which Vico takes to be destructive of the conditions for the education of children within institutionalised family life necessary for social and cultural development.

Nevertheless, it would seem that Vico has little else to say about many of the problems with which political philosophy, including that of some of his chosen opponents, has traditionally been concerned. Indeed, the fact that he does not at this point produce any substantive prescriptions either of a moral nature or about the traditional question of the nature of

Introduction

the best kind of state, has led many to the conclusion that the historicist nature of his science is such as to preclude it from fulfilling its original aim. This raises a number of issues, to which I shall briefly turn.

To deal with the simplest first, Vico's failure to produce general or universal *moral* prescriptions can hardly be a serious criticism. For one of his central themes is that, because of the prevalence of standards determined by common sense, and in virtue of the fact that it is a 'common' sense, most people already know how they ought to live their lives in the societies in which they live. Changes in prescriptive standards of behaviour are therefore, in a sense, part of the developmental ontology of any given historical society. Vico certainly lays great stress on the necessity for people to exercise prudence in their daily lives, i.e. good judgement based upon a wide appreciation of the nature of the factors operative in their situations. But he does not, nor should he, lay down prescriptions for the standards to which they should appeal, for the very fact of the difference in the governing beliefs in the different historical eras in which people live means that there can be no general standards common to all. This is not to say that he is agnostic with regard to the commendation or criticism of different courses of action. But his commendations and criticisms are dependent upon the general norms of correct action, and particularly the conception of equity, that have issued from common sense in different historical situations. Thus, though he emphasises the cruelty of many of the practices and laws, say, of the 'heroes' of the second age, he insists that such practices were appropriate to the mentality and institutional conditions of that age. Hence his judgements about the behaviour of different individuals within these historical societies are always relative to the standards of the society in which they live and not to those of his own society. The behaviour of Penelope's suitors was reprehensible because it is unjust by the standards of the day; that of Ulysses, who frames his promises in such a way that there is an element of deceit in how he achieves his ends, may seem equally reprehensible, but it is not, because in his age it was the letter of the law that he must observe. To say that certain punishments were cruel is to say something with which the people involved in them would have agreed, but to say that they were unjust is not. As Vico points out, Brutus was unhappy with the fate that he meted out to his own two sons, yet he did not dispute the justice of that fate. This is not to deny, of course, that Vico recognises that, from the later standpoint of a person living in a more enlightened age, some of these punishments will seem excessively cruel, but that is an inevitable consequence of the