

## 1

*The structure of the 'Scienza Nuova'*

One of the main reasons for the failure of Vico's *Scienza Nuova* to establish itself as a widely read philosophical work is the sheer obscurity of the text. One source of this obscurity lies in the fact that in his great work Vico tried to do two things without always explicitly distinguishing them from each other: to reconstruct the histories of some of the principal ancient nations known to him; and to give some account of the main philosophical and theoretical presuppositions involved in this reconstruction. Vico was, nevertheless, fully aware of the distinction between these two tasks and this is clearly enough reflected in the structure of the text. A short account of the latter is therefore a useful way to begin this discussion of the *Scienza Nuova*, since it will serve to give both a preliminary idea of the contents and also some first idea of what Vico took himself to be doing and how he hoped to do it.

The *Scienza Nuova* consists of an Introduction, five Books, and a Conclusion. The Introduction takes the form of some comments upon an allegorical picture which constitutes the frontispiece. These comments are so condensed that it is to be doubted that it can ever have succeeded, as was evidently intended, in giving a clear idea of the contents of the work to a new reader.

Book I is sub-titled *Establishment of Principles*, and commences with a Chronological Table. Here Vico sets out in seven different columns the leading events and dates of Hebrew, Chaldean, Scythian, Phoenician, Egyptian, Greek and Roman history. In effect he offers the schematic outlines of seven separate histories.

The Chronological Table is followed by Section 1, which consists of a series of notes and comments upon the proposed scheme. These

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show that Vico realised that the account he was offering differed from some of the leading interpretations of the day, both in detail and in principle. In matters of detail what he is concerned to dispute are questions related to the dating and interpretation of specific events. Behind this, however, there lies a fundamental conceptual issue. For certain of Vico's opponents while exhibiting differences among themselves on particular historical points, shared one common assumption: that the growth of civilised practices in the world was a consequence of the fact that the various nations of the world had had a single historical origin. The accounts offered were thus all varieties of the transmission theory of civilisation, involving explanations which were exclusively causal in kind.

The historical scheme which Vico put forward as an alternative to these accounts involves the entirely different assumption that the parallel growths of civilised practices in different historical nations were a consequence not of some common historical origin but of a common essential nature. On this view, the nature of a nation is such that if the various historical nations were left to develop without external interference, they would necessarily develop certain common characteristics in their social, economic and cultural conditions at correspondent points of their histories.

Vico recognised that it was a consequence of this different conception that certain things which on the transmission theory were explained in one way would have to receive an entirely different kind of explanation. The rest of his notes in this section indicate briefly some points which are claimed to invalidate his opponents' common thesis and support his own alternative. These points are, however, almost exclusively historiographical in character, i.e. they are concerned with the question how well or how badly the two kinds of theory are supported by the available historical evidence.

In Section II, entitled 'Elements', the discussion moves to a different level. In conclusion to the historical notes, and as a prelude to the introduction of the 'Elements', Vico makes a remark of considerable significance:

It can be seen from our discussion in these Notes that all that has come down to us from the ancient gentile nations for the times covered by this Table is most uncertain. So that in all this we have entered as it were into a no man's land where the rule of law obtains that 'the first occupant acquires title'

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*(occupanti conceduntur)*. We trust therefore that we shall offend no man's right if we reason differently and at times in direct opposition to the opinions which have been held up to now concerning the principles of the humanity of the nations. By so doing we shall reduce them to scientific principles, by which the facts of history may be assigned to their first origins, on which they rest and by which they are reconciled. For until now they seem to have no common foundation or continuous sequence or coherence among themselves.<sup>1</sup>

The point to be noted here is Vico's claim that his reasoning will differ from those of other historians by its utilisation of a 'scientific' account of the 'principles of the humanity of nations'. These scientific principles will make possible the resolution of certain difficulties concerning the origins of ancient nations and, equally importantly, will allow the facts to be set forth in continuous and mutually coherent sequences. In short, the claim is that a certain set of scientific principles is going to make possible a kind of historical account superior to those of contemporary historians.

This quotation reveals that Vico had grasped the distinction between historical interpretations and the various kinds of principles which support historical interpretations. His account of these principles is now set out in Section II, which opens with another remark of significance:

In order to give form to the materials hereinbefore set in order in the Chronological Table, we now propose the following axioms, both philosophical and philological, including a few reasonable and proper postulates and some clarified definitions. And just as the blood does in our animate bodies, so will these elements course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations.<sup>2</sup>

The Elements, of which there are various kinds, are thus claimed to be responsible for giving the historical accounts their 'form'. This again shows clearly Vico's grasp of the difference between the content of a given historical account and the philosophical presuppositions responsible for making it the kind of account it is.

Section II consists of one hundred and fourteen Elements, in which Vico sets out the main general presuppositions involved in his account and tries to show that they must be involved in any

<sup>1</sup> The third *Scienza Nuova* (hereafter *S.N.*) 118.<sup>2</sup> *S.N.* 119.

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acceptable account. These fall roughly into three classes.<sup>1</sup> First, there is a group of philosophical principles, of which the most important constitute a theory of knowledge and a theory about the social and historical nature of the causes of human activities, i.e. a metaphysical theory. Next comes a group of sociological or, more properly, historico-sociological, theories. Finally there is a group of theories and recommendations for the reform of historiographical method. Apart from these there are also a number of places in which Vico repeats and expands the historical accounts and points which belong, properly speaking, to the previous section.

Vico does not himself explicitly distinguish his Elements into these three groups. He does, however, divide them into two groups, the first twenty-two (plus Element CVI)<sup>2</sup> which are said to be 'general' and to provide the foundation for the whole science and the other ninety-one which are 'particular' and provide 'more specific bases for the various matters it treats of'.<sup>3</sup> It will be shown that what Vico here calls 'general' are the elements concerned with the philosophical or non-empirical aspects of his work. They thus cover the first and third groups of the above classification. The 'particular' Elements are those concerned with its empirical aspects and thus cover both its historico-sociological theories and its historical claims.

Sections III and IV, which complete Book I, are concerned partly with elaborating further the various things which it will be necessary to do if historical accounts are to be constructed in the way Vico suggests and partly with a more detailed enquiry into the verification conditions for such accounts. Sections II–IV thus constitute the main part of Vico's theoretical account of the nature of his task and the way in which he proposes to solve the problems it poses. They will accordingly form the central area of discussion of the present study.

Book II, sub-titled *Poetic Wisdom*, is an account of the main features of what Vico calls the 'poetic' mode of life, i.e. the first stage of social life through which, according to Vico's thesis concerning their common nature, the history of all (independent) nations must pass. It constitutes, in fact, a part of their common nature. It is called

<sup>1</sup> In presenting the contents of the Elements in this way I shall assume distinctions which, in the rest of this analysis, it will be my task to justify.

<sup>2</sup> S.N. 314–15.

<sup>3</sup> S.N. 164.

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'poetic' because its institutions are the product of men whose response to their environment is dictated by their largely imaginative and non-rational mentality.

The account Vico gives is long and often perplexing. This is partly because he attempts simultaneously to do two things: to analyse the internal features of such a society (e.g. by showing how the existence of a professional caste of priests is a necessary consequence of a certain understanding of religion in a certain institutional context), and to show that all, or nearly all, known nations have exhibited such a phase in their history. The book has therefore both sociological and historical aspects: sociological in that it tries to show that given certain conditions of society and culture certain others must follow; and historical in that it seeks to establish, on the basis of historical evidence, that in the past these conditions have been instantiated.

The apparent conflation of these two tasks in one account, which occurs in this book more than anywhere else in the *Scienza Nuova*, has led to considerable perplexity over whether what Vico is producing is sociological or historical in character.<sup>1</sup> It will be argued later, however, that Vico's 'scientific' approach to history required that the establishment of historical accounts be based upon the interpretation of evidence in accordance with determinate historico-sociological theories, while the establishment of the latter depends upon their successful involvement in such interpretations. Vico's simultaneous pursuit of the two kinds of enquiry is not an indication of the conflation of two different kinds of thing but of his understanding of the mutual relevance of two equally necessary kinds of enquiry for his science. Once this claim is accepted the question of what Vico is doing in different parts of Book II largely resolves itself.

Book III, *Discovery of the True Homer*, contains a detailed discussion of Vico's claim that the Homeric writings were not the creation of a single author but were the inventions of the rhapsodes, living in different parts of Greece and at different times in Greek history, calling upon beliefs common to themselves and their audience for the contents of their tales. This material is included in the *Scienza Nuova* primarily as a demonstration of the proper use of a body of historical

<sup>1</sup> B. Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. by R. G. Collingwood (London 1913), chapter III.

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evidence, a use made possible only by Vico's whole conception of a science.

Book iv, *The Course the Nations Run*, consists in a very schematised account of the main phases of the 'ideal eternal history', i.e. of the stages of birth, development and ultimate decline through which the histories of all nations must pass if left to develop freely. It thus represents Vico's historico-sociological theories in the most abstract way possible, though even here not without some reference to certain historical facts claimed as instantiations of them. The emphasis is, nevertheless, on the theories themselves rather than on the facts.

Book v, *The Recourse of Human Institutions which the Nations Take When They Rise Again*, consists of a series of relatively brief indications about how later history, e.g. the Dark Ages and early feudal times in Europe, should be interpreted in the light of these same theories. Here, however, the emphasis is on the illumination which the historical events themselves receive when thus treated rather than on the theories involved in such treatment.

From this brief account of the structure of the *Scienza Nuova* it would appear that Vico's work is largely concerned with the questions how to understand and establish the truth in human history. It will be argued in what follows that this is the correct way in which to approach Vico's thought and that many difficulties of interpretation can be resolved if Vico's preoccupation with these problems is kept well to the fore of attention. Starting from a set of purely historical problems, Vico shows that any answer to them involves philosophical theories about the nature of knowledge and of human affairs, and determinate historico-sociological theories about the conditions which determine the occurrence of the various possible kinds of human institutions. Setting out his theories in both these areas he defends them by reference to their different functions in a science whose object is to make possible the most illuminating and best verified interpretations of historical evidence, i.e. interpretations which satisfy criteria laid down in Vico's epistemological theory. On this view, history and sociology can be proper objects of knowledge only when conceived in such a way as to bring mutual support to each other, while the task of metaphysics is to explicate the basic categories which will allow this to be done.

## 2

*Critique of current historiography*

Vico's initial task in the *Scienza Nuova* is that of supporting what is, in effect, a series of particular, if wide-ranging, historical theses. One of the main historiographical problems of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was that of explaining certain institutional and cultural similarities which appeared to obtain both among the ancient nations of the civilised world and the more primitive nations of the contemporary world. The existence of such similarities was supported by appeal to an ever-increasing amount of evidence, drawn from historical documents and from tales brought back by the explorers and missionaries who were in touch with contemporary primitives. A certain number of historians had attempted to explain these similarities by reference to some historical origin which these nations had in common. Historical dispute therefore tended to be about the details of such an account, centering upon such issues as which country had first developed the institutions of civilised life and by what historical route they had travelled to the other nations which shared them. Vico's position in this debate involved a radical conceptual departure for, while not disputing that there were facts here to be explained, he wanted to offer an explanation of an entirely different kind, resting upon the concept of a common historical nature and not that of a common historical origin. Thus on his view the similarities in institution and culture to be found in the histories of different nations were a consequence of some more fundamental identity of nature.

In the 'Elements' Vico does not attack his opponents on historical grounds. This is done elsewhere, in the notes on the Chronological Table, and throughout Book II, where his positive account of the

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institutions proper to the poetic mode of life is given concurrently with a critique of the historical absurdities which, he alleges, follow from the kind of view his opponents wish to adopt. Instead of such an historical dispute, in the 'Elements' he produces an account of the inadequate philosophical conceptions and methodological procedures upon which these interpretations are founded.

He begins, in the first group of four Elements, with an account of the inadequacies of his opponents' methodological procedures. Instead of formulating a proper method for the critical interpretation of historical evidence most historians have simply relied on something akin to their native common sense to guide them in their accounts. But, Vico claims, the ways in which human thought characteristically and naturally operates cannot provide an acceptable basis for the interpretation of historical evidence and they must be corrected by the application of a sound critical method.

The first of these natural but unsatisfactory ways in which human thought operates is stated in Element I: 'Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of all things.'<sup>1</sup> This, it is said, explains how it is that rumours become increasingly distorted the further they are removed in time and place from the events they purport to relate.<sup>2</sup> Vico's point is that in each retelling of the original event it is reinterpreted and embellished along the lines indicated by the general principle. The effect of this is to render traditional accounts of events, which are in some cases the historian's primary source of data, *per se* untrustworthy. They cannot, as some historians have thought, be accepted as though they were the products of some tradition of objective reporting.

A second general characteristic of human thinking is stated in Element II: 'Whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things they judge them by what is familiar and at hand.'<sup>3</sup> This tendency leads to two kinds of error to which historians themselves are naturally prone. First there is the 'conceit of nations', i.e. an inclination to adopt one's national point of view and to write history in the light of this. Vico believed that this tendency explained the disagreements among his opponents about which country should be credited with the original creation of civilised life. An historian prone

<sup>1</sup> S.N. 120.<sup>2</sup> S.N. 121.<sup>3</sup> S.N. 122.



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to this error would naturally believe that his own nation 'before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world'.<sup>1</sup> In effect he would lack an impartial or objective viewpoint.

The second error is the 'conceit of scholars', the tendency to believe that all contemporary knowledge has always been known. Vico claims that this belief had led historians to attribute to former ages the possession of knowledge which could only obtain in their own age. It therefore explains how historians have come to believe in 'the matchless wisdom of the ancients... It further condemns as impertinent all the mystic meanings with which the Egyptian hieroglyphs are endowed by the scholars and the philosophical allegories which they have read into the Greek fables.'<sup>2</sup>

What Vico is here drawing attention to is the sheer unhistorical character of many accounts of the past. They are lacking in any sense of what Sir Isaiah Berlin has called 'historical perspective', i.e. any recognition that at different times in the past men's mental and intellectual abilities have varied widely and that the sorts of knowledge that could be formulated and used in one age could not be formulated and used in another.

The manner in which Vico understood these rather general complaints is best seen from the way he applies them when trying to refute his opponents' views on particular historical points. In general he appeals to the conceit of nations rather less than to the conceit of scholars. This is because the former is used mainly in the *Scienza Nuova* to explain examples of faulty chronology. For example, Vico uses it to dispute the datings of historical events, and the interpretations of world history to which these datings were central, to be found in the works of Marsham, Spencer and van Heurn. These historians had accepted at its face value the Alexandrian academicians' claim that the first civilisation was Egyptian and that ancient history was to be seen as the spreading of civilised practices from Egypt to the rest of the world.<sup>3</sup> They had failed to realise that these Egyptian writers themselves suffered from the conceit of nations and so ought to be treated with caution and in the light of a properly developed critical method.<sup>4</sup> In a similar way Justin (*Historiarum Philippicarum Libri*

<sup>1</sup> S.N. 125.<sup>2</sup> S.N. 128.<sup>3</sup> S.N. 44-7.<sup>4</sup> S.N. 46, 126.

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XLIV 1.1.3) had accepted a Scythian (Russian) tradition that their civilisation predated that of Egypt and had made this claim central to his account of ancient history.<sup>1</sup> Of ancient historians Vico finds only Flavius Josephus in his *Against Appion* free from this error.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the principle is applied by Vico mainly in discussions of chronological matters should not be taken to imply that its importance is confined solely to such questions. Vico applied the principle primarily in this area because in the early eighteenth century little progress had been made in establishing an objective chronology for the events of ancient history. Devoid of any help whatsoever from the physical sciences historians had to rely entirely on literary remains and ancient traditions for the construction of their chronological schemes.

The general point involved in Vico's principle is, however, of much greater importance and wider application than this. The historians he castigates, Marsham, Spencer, Justin, had failed to realise that their sources, the great literary remains of the past, were not the products of impartial, objective observers, whose reports conformed to scientific norms of accuracy. They were the products of men or, in the case of traditions, of generations of men, to whom it was the most natural thing in the world to adopt a partial and prejudiced viewpoint and incorporate this unblushingly into their accounts of the past.

It is not Vico's intention to suggest that the presence of such a viewpoint is something which renders these accounts and traditions useless as historical evidence. It necessitates, however, that if they are to be of use to the historian they must be subjected to a rigorous scientific criticism which, by elucidating the viewpoint from which they have been written, will open the way to the ultimate recovery of the truths they embody.<sup>3</sup>

In making this point Vico was not thinking of viewpoints reflecting the personal or idiosyncratic prejudices of their authors. He intended it to apply to the general conceptual scheme and system of knowledge and beliefs which a writer or teller of tales holds by virtue of belonging to a given historical society. The conceptual scheme used and the things known and believed by, for example, a group of

<sup>1</sup> S.N. 48.<sup>2</sup> S.N. 126.<sup>3</sup> This is the function of what Vico calls his 'metaphysical art of criticism' (S.N. 348) which is discussed below, pp. 99–103.