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978-0-521-38871-9 - Vico: A Study of the 'New Science', Second Edition

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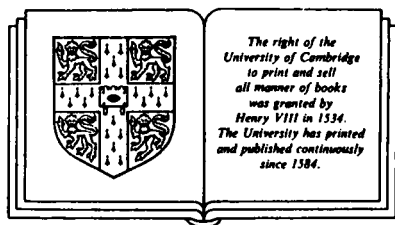
# VICO

## *A Study of the 'New Science'*

SECOND EDITION

LEON POMPA

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**To Carol**

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## PREFACE

This book is intended both to offer an interpretation of the main theories in Vico's *Scienza Nuova* and to serve as an analytic introduction to its text. When the first edition was published in 1975, there had already been a considerable re-awakening of interest in Vico's thought. Nevertheless, as was noted at the time, in the two centuries since the appearance of the *Scienza Nuova*, there had not been a single analytic commentary or monograph devoted exclusively to it, i.e. a monograph which attempted, on the basis of a close examination of the text, to locate and analyse the philosophical foundations of Vico's thought and to show that, despite the many obscurities, digressions and eccentricities, not to mention outright mistakes, which it contains, his great 'science' was more than a series of brilliant *aperçus* spread over a variety of essentially disconnected subjects.

It was not the case, however, that there had been no earlier attempts to establish the fundamental philosophical tenets which underlay and were brought together in the *Scienza Nuova*. A number of such works already existed. In Italy there was, in general, a division between an essentially quasi-Hegelian approach and a Catholic tradition of interpretation. Unquestionably the most important of either kind was Benedetto Croce's pioneering volume, *La Filosofia Di Giambattista Vico*. First published in 1911 and fairly continuously reprinted since then, this consolidated the late nineteenth-century idealist interpretation of Vico and became the most influential reading for nearly half a century. The alternative Catholic viewpoint was most fully developed in an excellent, though somewhat neglected, monograph by F. Amerio, *Introduzione allo Studio di G. B. Vico*, published in 1947. This is still, in my view, the most comprehensive and philosophi-

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cally interesting statement of the Catholic interpretation of Vico. Outside Italy, however, philosophical interest in Vico in the twentieth century was extremely limited until T. G. Bergin and Max H. Fisch produced their translations of Vico's Autobiography in 1944 and then of the *Scienza Nuova* in 1948. From that point onwards, interest in English-speaking countries quickened considerably. Fisch himself had written a most illuminating account of Vico's thought in the Introduction to the translation of the Autobiography and, more recently, Sir Isaiah Berlin had given a series of lectures at the Italian Institute in London, which were published under the title 'The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico' in *Art and Ideas in Eighteenth-Century Italy* in 1960. Beyond this, however, there had also been very considerable research, primarily on the part of Italian scholars, into the historical and cultural context within which Vico wrote, the most important fruits of which were probably Fausto Nicolini's various historical essays, culminating in his massive *Commento Storico alla Seconda 'Scienza Nuova'* in 1949–50, and Nicola Badaloni's equally erudite *Introduzione a G. B. Vico* of 1961. But these were only some of many historically orientated enquiries which had been appearing in Italy, since Croce's first volume had had such a powerful impact upon Vico research.

Nevertheless, where the present volume differed from these works and where, I believe, it was unique, is that it was the first to attempt to lay bare the philosophical foundations of the *Scienza Nuova* by a systematic analysis of the text, in which particular attention was paid to the relation of the various parts to the whole, i.e. of the relationship between Vico's treatment of its particular subject matters to the body of philosophical theory, extending from epistemology and metaphysics to questions of methodology, upon which, as he constantly, if somewhat obscurely, insisted, the whole 'science' rested. Despite all the research which had been done upon the *Scienza Nuova* the problem, as I perceived it, was that it was still very difficult to gain any clear ideas as to what in the work was philosophically fundamental and what was less so, what was philosophical or theoretical, in some or other sense, as against what was empirical, what was concerned with principles of interpretation as against what was concerned with principles of verification and how, if at all, these distinctions operated in connection with the concept of a single science.

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The present study differed from those which had preceded it, therefore, in that it was the first to be devoted exclusively to an analysis of the text of the *Scienza Nuova*, with the aim of ascertaining the body of theory which gave coherence to its structure as a whole. It was not suggested, nor would it have been possible without writing a book of much greater length, that it could cover the total contents of the *Scienza Nuova*. In any case this seemed unwise. For not only was it explicitly intended as an introduction, but I felt that, in striking out in a relatively new direction, there was a very real possibility of mistakes of judgement and of balance on my part. My hope was that other scholars who detected these might also go on to correct them, thus leading to a better understanding of what Vico was doing than I had achieved.

Since then there has been an enormous increase in Vico studies, some idea of the extent of which can be gathered by even the most cursory glance through the many bibliographies of books and articles on him or on themes to which his work is directly relevant. Covering, as it does, almost everything pertinent to understanding his thought, including continued detailed study of his historical and cultural context, analytic research into the thinkers by whom he was influenced, the nature and course of the development of his own thought and the effect which his ideas have had upon later thinkers, it would not be possible here to give an account of the various trends and changes of interest and emphasis to be discerned in it. The results have, however, undoubtedly been of great importance in helping to appreciate Vico's conception of the particular subject matters which are discussed in the *Scienza Nuova* and his contribution to our own understanding of these subjects as such. Thus his contribution to our conceptions of historical and comparative linguistics, of cultural and social anthropology, of developmental psychology, of social and political theory and of culture and of history have been increasingly clarified and appreciated. Experts in these various fields, who have no reason to interest themselves in Vico as a thinker in his own right, have consequently found themselves increasingly drawn to his work, both for the stimulus which it can give to their own thought and for the light which it can help to throw upon the historical development of their own discipline.

There remains, nevertheless, one peculiarity in this general trend



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towards a greater appreciation of Vico as a thinker. Although he may now be discussed in relation to many more diverse areas of knowledge than was previously the case, it is still frequent to find him either omitted in histories of philosophy or, at best, alluded to as an eccentric figure of little intrinsic interest. This, indeed, was the position when the first edition of this work was published and it is little altered today. The concentration of studies upon Vico's contribution to various non-philosophical areas of thought has done little to increase recognition of his merits as a philosopher. Nor is this too surprising. For in the midst of this large and varied body of research, there has been one notable omission: continued enquiry into the nature of the philosophical basis of the different doctrines within the *Scienza Nuova*, to which, correctly or incorrectly, Vico ascribed the over-all coherence which he claimed for it.

This generalisation is, of course, subject to certain reservations. It is certainly not the case that there has been no work done upon this aspect of Vico's thought. But this has tended to fall into two categories. On the one hand there has been a fairly large number of relatively brief essays, which both recognise the importance of philosophy in Vico's work and offer accounts of how he conceived of philosophy. But these are frequently too short to be able to provide, by argument and the assessment of evidence, an analysis of the implications of the conception in question for an understanding of the *Scienza Nuova*, taken as the synthesis of various subject matters which it is undoubtedly intended to be. Whatever the individual merits of these often conflicting interpretations, there is little doubt that their main over-all effect has been to increase, rather than to diminish, the confusion which exists with regard to the character of Vico's philosophical enterprise.

On the other hand, there has also been a very much smaller number of studies which have engaged with this central problem and which have done so at sufficient length and with sufficient comprehensiveness as to make it possible to evaluate them critically in the light of their implications for the relationship between the philosophical basis of the *Scienza Nuova* as a whole and its component parts. To a greater or lesser extent, it must be said, these studies approach the work in a different way from that developed here. In particular, they lay much greater stress than I have upon the importance of Vico's debt to the

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juridical and rhetorical traditions which arose from the work of his humanist predecessors and much less upon his claim to have produced a 'science', in the sense in which I have interpreted that here. It is, indeed, frequently thought that the approach which I have taken, in which Vico is treated as trying to provide the philosophical foundations of a 'science', in some fairly rigorous sense of the word, is incompatible with thinking of what he has produced as a humanist conception of the philosophical foundations of history. I am far from persuaded that this is so and I have, therefore, in the present edition, included an extra chapter, analysing Vico's conception of the principles which govern the development of law. My aim there is to show that there is no incompatibility in thinking that Vico wished to produce and apply an account of the philosophical foundations of a rigorous science of history and that he also wished to allow that the techniques of rhetorical argument, both in everyday life and also in such specialised areas as law, could play a constitutive role in the historical development of man. Since the account of the principles which determine the development of law has implications for other related concepts, notably those of providence, of the barbarism of reflection and of the cyclical theory of history, I have taken advantage of the opportunity thus offered to extend the analysis of these beyond the account offered in the first edition of this book. None of this additional discussion, however, leads me to believe that there is an incompatibility between the *philosophical* conception of a rigorous science of man's historical development, which is the ultimate aim that I ascribe to Vico, and acknowledgement of an important place for rhetoric as an essential component in the processes whereby, according to that science, historical development takes place.

Whether or not this is correct, however, I remain unpersuaded that one can make much sense of many parts of the *Scienza Nuova* unless considerable weight is placed upon his explicit claim to have produced a science. The word 'science', of course, can have various meanings, especially as used in the Latin and Italian of Vico's day. On the one hand, it could be used to indicate knowledge in little more than an everyday sense. On the other, it could signify a coherent and structured body of knowledge, presupposing a variety of principles operating at different, related levels of enquiry, supplied with its own methods for applying these principles to its subject matter, and deriving claims

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to certainty from the consistency and comprehensiveness of the results which, in virtue of these features, it can produce. This would be the sort of meaning which it would have had, for example, for Descartes, although his specific account of the source and nature of these principles and of our mode of access to them was very different from Vico's. The *Scienza Nuova*, I believe, is intended to provide both the philosophical principles for, and also to be an exemplification of, a science of this sort, and unless it is understood in this sense many parts of it will remain wholly opaque or eccentrically irrelevant. Consequently, I have added a further chapter, discussing three recent works in which it is not considered to be a science of this sort, and have tried to demonstrate the difficulties which are engendered if alternative conceptions of a science are adopted.

Apart, therefore, from the inclusion of additional material, the main justification for issuing a second edition of this monograph is two-fold. Firstly, it is still the only work which is devoted almost exclusively to an interpretation of the *Scienza Nuova*, developed by means of a considerable amount of textual analysis, on the basis of which it seeks to establish the philosophical grounds for the coherence which Vico claimed for the whole work. Thus, irrespective of whether or not the reader agrees with its conclusions, or even its general line of argument, it provides a reasonably comprehensive guide to the main theoretical problems to which the text gives rise and with which alternative interpretations should be expected to contend. Secondly, it accepts and tries to explain Vico's claim to have produced a science, in some fairly rigorous sense. It is thus to be distinguished from more recent interpretations which present him as essentially an exponent, albeit a most distinguished one, of modes of thought which could arise only within the humanist tradition. For reasons to be given later, this seems to me to be, at best, a half-truth which, when given too much prominence, is liable to issue in partial and misleading interpretations of the *Scienza Nuova*.

I have already, in an earlier article, 'Vico's Science' (*History and Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1, pp. 49–83), analysed Vico's conception of a science. I am grateful to the editors of *History and Theory*, Wesleyan University, for permission to re-use some of the material contained in that article, particularly in chapter 16. Since writing it, however, my view of Vico's theory of knowledge has been modified in one

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important respect, a modification which took place in the course of thinking about the interpretation put forward by Sir Isaiah Berlin. The interpretation which I offer in chapters 15 and 16 is by no means identical with that suggested by Berlin. I there present several reasons why I am not able to accept his view exactly in the way in which he has formulated it, and these are developed further in the concluding chapter of this new edition. Nevertheless, I have benefited both by a study of what he has written and by a series of stimulating conversations which I have had with him on the subject, for all of which I wish to express my gratitude to him. I welcome also the opportunity to express my great debt to my friend the late Professor W. H. Walsh, who read the entire first edition in manuscript and made innumerable suggestions, without which it would be more unsatisfactory than it now is. Amongst others who have helped me, I thank Dr G. E. Davie and Dr Giorgio Tagliacozzo, both of whom have encouraged me with much kindness. I wish also to thank my wife, who gave me considerable help in preparing the translations from *De Antiquissima* which appear in chapter 7, and Miss Margaret Paterson, who typed out the manuscript from my handwritten copy.

By permission of Cornell University Press, I have quoted extensively from the splendid translation of the third (1744) *Scienza Nuova*, by T. G. Bergin and M. H. Fisch (*The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, copyright © by Cornell University Press, revised and published, Ithaca, 1968). The numbered references to the *Scienza Nuova* refer to the system of numbered paragraphs used in this translation and in the edition of the *Scienza Nuova* given in *Giambattista Vico: Opere* edited by F. Nicolini, Riccardo Ricciardi, Milan 1953. For translations from Vico's earlier works given in the additional two chapters, I have used my own *Vico: Selected Writings*, details of which are given in the Bibliography.

*Birmingham 1988*

L.P.