



Comment on Professor Verene's Paper

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Vico's Philosophy of Imagination

Comment on Donald Phillip Verene, 'Vico's Philosophy of Imagination' [VPI], *Social Research* 43 no. 3 (Autumn 1976), 410–26, *ibid.* 426–9; repr. in Giorgio Tagliacozzo and others (eds), *Vico and Contemporary Thought* (London, 1976: Macmillan); here edited and references added by Henry Hardy



Giambattista Vico by Francesco Solimena (detail)

LET ME BEGIN by saying that I found Professor Verene's paper most interesting and, in its essentials, convincing. He stresses, rightly in my opinion, what is of central importance in Vico's thought, namely, Vico's conviction of an inadequacy in the theories of knowledge both of the rationalism and of the empiricism of his day, both that which stems from Descartes and that which derives from Locke, which have dominated philosophy ever since; namely, their inadequacy as accounts of what is involved in the entire field of the humanities – history, criticism, ethics, aesthetics, law or the study of man, especially as a social being. Professor Verene, in my view, correctly identifies Vico's method as involving his doctrine of the imagination – *fantasia* – as a basic human faculty, active both in understanding and in the creation of what is understood.

Furthermore, he brings out the fact that, for Vico, to understand or interpret is to grasp the genesis, through time, of whatever is involved in human understanding and action at any given moment, and that such genesis is a continuous process, causally determined, though not as causality is understood by Hume or Kant. Finally, Professor Verene seems to me right, and indeed original, in distinguishing two senses of Vico's use of *fantasia*: on the one hand, [427] that whereby our primitive ancestors, the *orribili bestioni*, conceived their world timelessly, that is, the world of primitive myth and ritual, and also its successor, the world of heroes, metaphor and epic poetry; and, on the other, the *fantasia* whereby we, living in the age of men, are enabled, though with much mental difficulty and, indeed, agony, to locate these strange worlds in time, to understand them historically, and, by understanding them, to understand ourselves. All that Professor Verene says on this is true and important, even though it leaves at least one central question about Vico's theory of knowledge unanswered.

But before I come to this, I should like to say that one point made by Professor Verene does somewhat puzzle me. In speaking of 'recollective *fantasia*', by which, in his words, '[t]he human world can come to know itself', he says – I use his words again – 'what recollection establishes is a structure of phenomenal ground–consequent relationships through which the origin can be seen in relation to the end'.¹ Now, whatever may be meant by *recollection* – on which our collective knowledge of ourselves through our progress in time may rest – 'ground–consequent relationships' seems an odd phrase to apply to Vico's notion. The relation of ground to consequent is a logical one, one of strict entailment, and belongs to logical or mathematical or metaphysical reasoning as used by Aristotle, or the Stoics, or the Schoolmen, or Descartes, or Leibniz; this is surely very different from, let us say, the genetic connection of thundering, terror-inspiring Jove with the origin of the family, or the connection of the revolts of plebeians against their masters with the origins of written law, legal argument, prose, criticism, democracy, which is part of Vico's account of social development. The imaginative reconstruction of this succession of phases surely does *not* involve the use of the ground–consequent nexus as it is used in, say, geometry or rationalist metaphysics;

¹ VPI 417–18, 418, 425; 419; 420.

'cultural memory', as Professor Verene felicitously calls it,² does not operate by deductive rules. Vico's notion of development is not the logically inexorable exfoliation of some teleologically developing essence, as Aristotle or Leibniz or Hegel conceived it, but a providential sequence, powered, if I may so put it, by the dynamism of desires, passions, needs which feed the creative imagination and generate images, myths, ritual, systems of belief, symbolic forms, social orders, languages, entire cultures – create them and undermine them and supersede them. The *storia ideale eterna*³ is a pattern, yes, but is it a ground–consequent pattern? I may well have misunderstood Professor Verene, but I should be grateful for light on this.

[428] The second equally marginal point about which I do not feel clear is the relationship between what Professor Verene calls 'recollective *fantasia*', which he rightly maintains is at the heart of Vico's entire system, and what he describes as 'the oncoming night of dissolute luxury',⁴ in which men "finally go mad and waste their substance"⁵ – what Vico calls the 'second barbarism', the 'barbarism of reflection',⁶ which characterises the disintegration of a society before its final collapse. It is not clear to me in what way such 'recollection' necessarily, in Vico's view, disintegrates social bonds – does *all* self-consciousness do this? This theory seems to be similar to Schiller's doctrine in his famous essay on sentimental and naive poetry; is it also Vico's? Is the practice of history according to the precepts of the *New Science* one of the causes, or at least a symptom, of inevitable decadence? 'Intelligibility and recollection', says Professor Verene, 'are both in their own ways the heralds of dissolution.'⁷ Is the naive myth-making of barbarism indispensable to the cohesion of human groups? Does Professor Verene see some affinity between Nietzsche's doctrine that it is critical self-consciousness – Socrates – that is the fatal solvent of social solidarity, strength, creativity – between this and Vico's philosophy of history? Despite Vico's strain of Platonism? Does

² VPI 421.

³ 'Ideal eternal history'.

⁴ VPI 425.

⁵ *ibid.*, quoting *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (New York, 1968) (NS), para. 241.

⁶ NS paras 542 etc., 1106.

⁷ VPI 425.

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Vico regard his own work – his own doctrine of the development of historical self-consciousness – as subversion of the social bonds he approves? On this, too, I should like to be enlightened.

Finally, let me come to the central problem of Vico's theory of knowledge. How does what Professor Verene calls the second sense of *fantasia*, or imagination, that which provides the knowledge on which the *New Science* rests – Professor Verene's 'recollective *fantasia*' – how does it work? How do we 'enter',⁸ 'descend into',⁹ the minds of those savage fathers or heroes – our ancestors? How do we reconstruct those wildly unfamiliar worlds where 'thinking' is 'through the body',¹⁰ without some grasp of which we cannot understand history, society, ourselves? On this everything in the *New Science* turns. How does recollective *fantasia* work? Is it individual or collective? Does it work by *analogy* between us and others – between our sophisticated selves and the primitive savages who are declared to be so very different from us? But that way lie the dangers of anachronism, against which Vico utters dire warnings, as Leon Pompa, in his published works, has done well to remind us. Or do we resurrect these remote cultures by using that faculty by which we remember our own childhood, growth, the successive phases of our own changing experience? Yet the parallel between individuals and societies, microcosm and macrocosm, onto [429]genesis and phylogenesis, even if it has suggested fruitful ideas to modern psychologists and anthropologists – is it more than a vivid simile, is it a scientific hypothesis?

Such a notion as racial or cultural memory seems to rest on no more than a dubious personification of societies: Plato's notion of the *polis* as the individual soul writ large is not perhaps one of his happiest inspirations, and is, fortunately, not part of Vico's design. What, if any, is the relation of Vico's 'descent'¹¹ into the cave of the monster Polyphemus or, indeed, into the brighter world of Ulysses to Herder's *Hineinfühlen*¹² – empathy – or the concepts of later German and Italian thinkers who distinguished historical and critical understanding – *Verstehen* – from scientific knowledge? How,

⁸ NS paras 378, 399.

⁹ NS paras 6, 338.

¹⁰ Apparently not a direct quotation from Vico, but cf. NS para. 340.

¹¹ Cf. note 10.

¹² *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* (1774), part 1, *Herder's sämtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Suphan (Berlin, 1877–1913), v 503.

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according to Vico, do we establish that the sense that we make of what he calls the huge surviving fragments of the past – of buildings, customs, texts or recorded ritual – that such sense is based on, and indeed involved in, a *correct* reconstruction of such terrains? How can we be sure that we are right? How do we choose between rival interpretations of history and coherent fictions? How can we be sufficiently sure of the meaning of the symbolic expressions of diverse cultures to be able to perceive the *sensu comune* of all gentile nations?¹³ Vico, so far as I can see, nowhere clearly tells us. Vico's achievement in raising this, the central problem in all subsequent attempts to explain the nature of historical understanding, is perhaps his greatest claim to immortality. His own effort to solve it does not, even now, seem to me to have been discussed adequately. If Professor Verene could tell us how he conceives of this – the working of recollective *fantasia* – he would put us even more deeply in his debt that he has done already.

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¹³ NS para. 142.