



## **On Vico**

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## On Vico

Reply to Perez Zagorin, 'Vico's Theory of Knowledge: A Critique' [*Philosophical Quarterly* 34 no. 134 (January 1984), 15–30], *Philosophical Quarterly* 35 no. 140 (July 1985), 281–90; abstract in the *Philosopher's Index* 19 no. 4 (1985), 74b



*Perez Zagorin (1920–2009)*

### ABSTRACT

The article is a response to Professor Zagorin's essay on Vico in a previous number of the *Philosophical Quarterly*. My principal theses were: (1) that there is no evidence in Locke's writings for Professor Zagorin's assertion that Locke was one of the anticipators of Vico's views that man understands only what he makes and that therefore moral and political principles and values are not objective; (2) that Vico drew a sharp distinction between the methods of the natural sciences and those of the humanities, and that Professor Zagorin's view that for Vico his 'new science' was a science in the sense of the natural sciences of Vico's time is mistaken, since the central thesis of Vico's entire work rests on the distinction between our knowledge of the external world and that of human thought, feeling and activity.

IN HIS ARTICLE 'Vico's Theory of Knowledge: A Critique', in the *Philosophical Quarterly* of January 1984, 15–30, Professor Perez Zagorin (hereinafter referred to as 'Z') advances various criticisms of the account of Vico's views contained in my book *Vico and Herder*

(London, 1976). I propose to reply to them in the order in which they occur, rather than the order of their importance.

1. Z 16. I nowhere say that historical knowledge is, in my view, superior to scientific knowledge, only that Vico thought this.<sup>1</sup> So, too, later in his article,<sup>2</sup> Z asserts that I take Vico's 'species of self-knowledge' to be superior to natural knowledge. This is not so; I take them only to be different from each other. To know what something is, is one thing; to know what someone is *at*, is another. Men's purposive behaviour sometimes can (to use my critic's term) be 'divine[d]'. Trees and stones do not, we believe, entertain beliefs, perform acts or pursue goals to be 'divined'. Types of knowledge differ; I do not claim that either is superior to the other.

2. Z 17. Z describes Vico's writings as 'chaotic, unclear, and incoherent'. In general, I agree with him. But I do not accept that Vico's accounts of the True Homer, or the nature of barbarous or heroic epochs, do not (as he asserts) follow from his epistemology. I am not clear about the precise logical force of 'follows'; but I certainly think that these accounts are closely bound up with Vico's general conception of how we can acquire knowledge of the human past. I agree that *verum ipsum factum* is the basis of Vico's theory of knowledge, and that, as Z puts it, it 'underlies' the central ideas of the *Scienza nuova*.<sup>3</sup> Oddly enough, Vico does not explicitly mention this doctrine in that, his major work: it remains buried in the *De antiquissima* and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere in Vico's earlier writings.

3. Z 20. (a) Z, like Croce, traces back anticipations of what he calls [after James Tully (Z 17)] Vico's 'maker's knowledge' to Aquinas and the Italian Renaissance; but surely it is older – at least as old as Augustine. It is repeated in the strong version given it by Vico in the writings of the physician and sceptic Francisco Sanchez (in the late sixteenth century).

<sup>1</sup> TCE 58–62, 161–3 [IB's references to VH have been replaced throughout by references to TCE].

<sup>2</sup> Z 26–7.

<sup>3</sup> Hereinafter SN, referred to by paragraph no. in the form 'SN 349' (see TCE xxv–xxvii).

(b) At this point we come to a more serious disagreement, namely, what Z regards as an anticipation of Vico's notion of 'maker's knowledge' in Locke's *Essay*. In Z's view, Locke considered demonstrative knowledge to be derived from men's own free invention – his arrangement of words or symbols, as in mathematics or 'civil [282] philosophy',<sup>4</sup> similar to that advanced by Hobbes; and Z thinks it odd that nobody has so far noticed this. He also thinks that Locke applied this principle to moral knowledge, which he regarded as demonstrative (as indeed he did) for this very reason. This does not appear to me to be the case. I am not very knowledgeable about Locke, but I have looked at all the passages in the *Essay* to which Z refers, and cannot find anything (save one ambiguous phrase) to support his view.

(i) The first passage is *Essay* 3. 9. 15–17 [references to Locke's *Essay* are by book, chapter and section]. Locke says here no more than that (in the case of nominal essences) words can only mean whatever we choose to make them mean – and that if we make it plain how we are choosing to use them, i.e. define our terms properly, it may well turn out that there are fewer differences between various views than might appear at first sight. One of Locke's best-known examples is our definition of 'gold'; the fact that it is yellow, ductile etc. will follow from the inclusion of these properties in our definition of that metal; if the definitions of gold differ, so will that which they entail. This seems unexceptionable, and no more than a warning that what may seem differences of views about reality may turn out to be merely verbal differences. So far, nothing particularly relevant to Vico (or Hobbes) seems to me to follow.

(ii) Next comes 4. 4. 4–9. This states that 'simple [sc. complex?] ideas' correspond as 'archetypes' – something in nature, e.g. 'whiteness', 'bitterness' etc. – but that 'complex ideas' are combinations of simple ideas which (save for that of 'substance') can be made freely by us, and since they are not intended to refer to, or represent, anything outside themselves, are themselves 'archetypes'. Since the complex ideas do not 'represent' real things, they cannot turn out to be false: like definitions, such combinations are our own creation. If 'things' in the outside world happen to

<sup>4</sup> [A term used by Hobbes but not by Locke.]

‘conform’<sup>5</sup> to such complex ideas, they will turn out to be true (‘certain’) of them. But this is obviously a contingent fact. Hence mathematics is certain knowledge, since it is knowledge only of our own ‘ideas’, and holds of things in nature only if they ‘agree with [a man’s] own ideas’. How can we tell whether they do so ‘agree’, or in Locke’s words that the ideas ‘have real existence in matter’? Locke does not, so far as I can see, tell us. Whether any given complexes do or do not have ‘real existence’ consequently remains hypothetical; we cannot demonstrate or be certain of this. The doctrine that mathematical propositions are our own free creation, and not transcripts of relations in the external world, goes back at least to Nicholas Cusanus, who is a real forerunner of Vico, as indeed I noted in my book.<sup>6</sup>

(iii) Next in order are *ibid.*, sections 7–9.<sup>7</sup> Here we come to Locke’s curious doctrine that moral knowledge is as demonstrative as that of mathematics, because, according to Z, ‘the moral domain itself is of the mind’s own *making* and is *constituted* [my italics: IB] by the names, definitions, and ideas attached to our moral actions’ (21). For Locke, the words in the realm of morality are indeed ‘made’<sup>8</sup> by us as we please; but what about ‘the ideas’ which they signify? These ideas do not, it is true, represent for him objects in nature: they are ‘archetypes’ themselves. But the ‘simple ideas’ of which such ‘ideas of reflection’ are said to be compounded, are, according to Locke, certainly not ‘made’ by us: simple ideas are given, not made; that is why we cannot make up and compound moral *ideas* as we please, only names. Locke makes this quite [283] clear: he says that one can call ‘the idea of taking from others, without their consent, what their honest industry has possessed them of’ by the name of justice, but this will be a mistake, for the things which agree with this idea will be the ‘same things [...] as if you called it injustice’; hence your calling it justice will depart from common sense and ‘breed [...] disorder’.

<sup>5</sup> In the sections IB specifies, Locke uses only ‘conformity’ and ‘conformable’.

<sup>6</sup> TCE 50/1.

<sup>7</sup> [These sections are among those referred to in (ii). It seems that IB intends us to understand that he is now considering the contribution of some of these same sections to his new topic: moral knowledge.]

<sup>8</sup> [Presumably a reference to Locke’s claim in section 9 that ‘our own moral ideas’ are ‘of our own making’.]

Locke's ideas of moral rules are, in any case, confused. In different parts of the *Essay* he declared them to be (a) ordained by God; (b) men's reason working by the light of nature, which establishes truths from which moral rules can be deduced; (c) ordained by nature; (d) dictated by requirements of utility. These beliefs can scarcely all be reconciled, save by assuming that the bases of morality, however derived, are laid down for us by the Christian faith which was at the centre of his outlook, and so are anything but our own free creations: still less are they verbal constructs. The relevant point is that Locke cannot possibly hold that 'the domain of morality [...] is the product of language'.<sup>9</sup> Locke is clear that simple ideas cannot be either 'created' ('made') or destroyed by the mind (section 4). Nor can their 'agreements' and 'disagreements' be 'made' by us (section 7). These are given: 'The mind can neither make nor destroy them'.<sup>10</sup> These simple ideas, 'materials of all our knowledge, are suggested and furnished to the mind only by those two ways above-mentioned, viz. sensation and reflection' (2. 2. 2). The bricks of which moral propositions are built are presumably 'ideas of reflection' (2. 6. 2); and 'congruity' and 'incongruity' of ideas put together by us are not in our power to create or undo. That, too, is given. 'The precise real essence of the things moral words stand for may be perfectly known; and so the congruity and incongruity of the things themselves be certainly discovered; in which consists perfect knowledge' (3. 11. 16). What are these 'things'? Moral ideas which are not made or destroyed by the mind: they may have no archetypes outside themselves, but they are not created by us. If Yolton, as Z tells us (I regret that I have not his book to hand) does not see Locke's morality as 'maker's knowledge', he is surely right.<sup>11</sup> We can, for Locke, manipulate words as we like: but the 'ideas' which they are intended to signify have an independent mental reality of their own; and their agreements and disagreements, on which our entire fabric of knowledge in all spheres, according to Locke, must depend, are not 'made' or 'constituted' by the human mind. But for Vico – in the realms of mathematics, art, and those of religion, myth, symbolic

<sup>9</sup> Z 23, lines 1–2.

<sup>10</sup> Contents list, 2. 2. 2–3.

<sup>11</sup> John W. Yolton, *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding: A Selective Commentary on the 'Essay'* (Cambridge, 1970), chapter 7, 'Moral Concepts and Moral Principles'.

representations and the like, men in some measure do indeed ‘make’ them – they are *facta* – man-made, as the real world is made by God alone. The ambiguous passage in the *Essay* to which I referred above occurs in 4. 4. 9, where Locke does speak of ‘moral ideas [...] of our own making and naming’.<sup>12</sup> Naming, yes. But making? This seems totally inconsistent with everything else he says about ideas, here and elsewhere; for if we could really ‘make’ ideas as we pleased, what could Locke mean by their ‘agreements and disagreements’ which are not of our making (4. 4. 9)? ‘Murder deserves death’, Locke tells us (4. 4. 8), whether murders occur or not; but the relationship of ‘death’ to ‘murder’, i.e. that of being deserved, is not created by us. The ‘agreement’ or ‘congruity’ of these ideas, whether simple or complex, is objective: use of words cannot alter it. This epistemology is absent from, and alien to, Vico’s vision of human experience. So [284] much for Vico and Locke, with whose views, in contrast to those of Bacon and Hobbes, Vico felt no affinity.

4. Z 22. Why, Z asks, did not Hobbes or Locke, like Vico, think of history as being like mathematics or ‘civil philosophy’? Z answers this himself: because for them history – facts and events – is not deducible from ‘definitions, deductions, and conclusions derived from the connections of names’. Nor was it so for Vico. Mathematics may be the paradigm of *factum*: but it gives us no information about reality. History plainly claims to do so: the creativity involved in Vico’s conception of cultural growth or change is not confined to ‘definitions, deductions, and conclusions’ derived from a deliberately invented technical language without any fixed relationship to the real world. The idea that there is some sense in which men can be said to create their own history is absent from Hobbes and Locke, as it is from Descartes or Spinoza (the situation is less clear with regard to Leibniz). For Vico, human history is neither a succession of events independent of men’s constructive ability, nor a rule-governed deductive system (as it must be for God who made it: but not for us); it is more like a process of continuous, partly conscious, partly unconscious, partly purposive, partly Providence- or nature-conditioned creation.

<sup>12</sup> Only in the contents list.

5. Z 23. Vico's 'civil world' is, of course, not constituted by definitions – it does, indeed, as Z says, consist of an 'indefinite variety of facts' – but to say this is not to deny that it is a *factum* for Vico: creation, for him, consists of activities and institutions that embody and promote them; of which language is only one, albeit an essential, element. Vico views all that makes up social patterns – cultures, indeed – as so many varieties of 'making'; doing and making are not (as they are by Aristotle) distinguished by him; ways of behaviour, legal and economic relationships (including the words which are involved either in awareness of such activities or as elements in the activities themselves), myths, ritual (verbal and non-verbal), the entire imaginative vision of reality, however embodied, expressed, conveyed – is, in Vico's sense, *factum*: the central role of *fantasia* in his account of how we come by discovery of the past is unintelligible unless this is recognised. *Factum* is all that is made by men (or by *mens*, whatever he may mean by it), and not merely conventional systems of symbols or words. Wittgenstein (whom Z mentions in this connection), so far as he is relevant here at all, is so only because he thought that rule-governed language is interlinked with ways of life: interlinked but not identical; it is not the whole of social or individual life. Human efforts to understand and act upon reality, human purposes, ambitions, motives, hopes, frustrations, are not themselves, for Vico or, so far as I know, anyone else, identical with specific verbal rules or definitions, however deeply these are involved in their generation.

6. Z 24. For this reason, when (e. g. at SN 349) Vico says that no one can be more certain of history than he who makes it, the sense in which it is said is similar to that of Marx when he declared that man makes his own history (even if 'not out of whole cloth')<sup>13</sup> – makes his history as he does not make the sun or the moon. The only analogy between this kind of 'making' and the activity of mathematics is that both involve the use of imaginative activity. Certainly Vico does not mean (Z wonders about this) that history is literally made by the mind of the historian: that would be too much, I think, even for Croce.

<sup>13</sup> His words are 'nicht aus freien Stücken' ('not just as they please'): *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), chapter 1, 2nd paragraph; cf. KM 130/1.



[285] 7. Z 25. Z may well ask what Vico means when he speaks of history as something which a man can understand by viewing the *modificazi-oni* of his own *mens*. He rightly thinks this to be unclear. *Mens* has been variously interpreted as universal mind, a Hegelian *Geist*; as a Jungian ‘collective unconscious’; as what is common to the outlooks of all men (*sensus communis*); as the minds of men, as I should like to think, save that there is undeniably an element of Christian Neoplatonism in Vico, which tends towards the idea of a universal divine spirit – a *mens* in which finite spirits seek to have their being. Whatever Vico means by *mens* – the creative principle of the human world – it is clear that without mental activity on the historian’s part, in particular of his *fantasia*, the interpretation of such *facta* as those who fill the ‘vast imagination’ of the ‘first men’<sup>14</sup> (to the recovery of which Vico says that he devoted some twenty years of agonising labour) could not have been converted into anything even approaching the *verum* which he thinks he has managed to establish. This is so because what has been made by minds (or ‘mind’) is always, in his view, capable of being grasped by other minds by inspecting their own *modificazioni*. Is the method that of analytical reasoning or of imagining? Is it based on his reliance on the parallel between phylogenesis and ontogenesis, on the notion that humanity could be conceived as a vast single individual (as Pascal once described it)? Or is it based on the parallel between what a grown man can remember of his own childhood, adolescence, youth, and his grasp of the succession of the epochs of human cultures? How does Vico think that we penetrate or reconstruct primitive mentalities, or, indeed, any part of the cultural past? He never makes this clear, yet his entire treatise depends on his faith in such a capacity on our part – to establish *verum* because it is *factum*, generated by the minds and imaginations of our ancestors. What exactly is the process referred to by such words as *entrare* or *discendere*, which he uses to describe our path to the understanding of what went on in the minds of men of the *orribili bestioni* from whom we are all descended? And indeed, how does, for example, Professor Malinowski or Professor Geertz find out the ways in which Trobriand Islanders, or Arabs in North Africa, or Balinese, perceive and interpret the world to themselves? What was Burckhardt doing

<sup>14</sup> SN 378; cf. 402.

or supposing himself to be doing? Or the scholars of the Warburg Institute? These are genuine problems to which I tried to explain Vico's answer, an interpretation which Z finds so inadequate. What I wish to maintain, however, is that his emphasis on Vico's alleged search for causal explanations, if 'cause' is what either Galileo and Descartes, or Hume, or their followers, have meant by it, is incorrect.

This brings me to the central disagreement between Z and myself – about Vico's conception of historical causality, and consequently about his method of historical enquiry. Vico does, of course, speak of historical knowledge as knowledge *per causas*. Z clearly thinks that Vico meant by *causae* what classical natural science meant by causality, as Descartes or Hume or Mill or Einstein conceived of it, or at any rate something very similar to this. I disagree. The most reliable method of discovering what his terminology means to a thinker is to examine his actual use of the terms. Vico enunciates as his central principle of enquiry that 'Theories must start from the point where the matter starts whereof they treat' (SN 314, 394). His application of this rule – as his examples show – is clearly not that of a search for causes in the common scientific (or for most of us, everyday) sense of the word. The [286] bulk of SN consists of an attempt to describe ways in which human beings, particularly in remote ages or lands, tend to conceive, use their imaginations, to understand and interpret the natural and social worlds in which they find themselves, and to express their visions of these worlds in modes of behaviour, social, legal, religious and the like, and embody them in monuments, institutions, forms of speech and writing, myths, fables, which shape their concepts and beliefs. What cost him 'a good twenty years' (NS 338) of painful labour was the elaboration of a method whereby he thought he had succeeded in answering such novel questions as what their worlds must have looked like to creatures who created the words, invented the mythical creatures, wrote the poetry that are so unfamiliar to him and his contemporaries. What, he wants to know, must have been the vision of reality of men whose minds were filled with notions of such creatures as, for example, a winged horse, or, stranger still, of Neptune, who is at once a marine deity and all the seas of the earth, or Cybele, who is both the earth and a woman, mother of giants (SN 402, 549), or Jove, father of the gods and at the same time the thundering sky (SN 379)? These – to us – incoherent entities he calls

*l'impossibile credibile* (SN 383); yet he is clear that these are the concepts, images, indeed categories in which these 'savage monsters' thought and wrote. If we are to grasp what our ancestors were at, we must seek to 'enter the vast imagination of those first men', even though it is 'beyond our power' to do this (SN 378–9).

What has this 'entering' or 'descending to' these savage minds to do with what Z calls historical causality? If in the course of tracing 'the history of the things signified by the words' (SN 354) we conjecture (though Vico plainly thought that his 'new science' could attain to much greater certainty) that the evolution of, for instance, *lex* through *ilex*, *aquilex*, *legumen*, *legere* (SN 240, 249) is the direct linguistic expression (not evidence) of the passage of men from 'forests, then huts, thence villages, next cities, finally academies' (SN 239), this search for origins *per causas*, however fanciful as etymology, is not a formulation by Vico of the kind of causal hypotheses advanced in the physics of his time; all this is pretty remote from anything Descartes or Galileo or Newton were doing or supposed they were doing. Indeed, Vico explicitly tell us (SN 374) that we must proceed not by looking for evidence outside our minds, but do 'as the metaphysicians do' who look 'in the modifications of their own minds – of him who meditates'.

This invitation to phenomenological self-inspection – the tracing of the *modificazioni* of the active thinker's (maker's) own mind as a clue to the *modificazioni* of the phases of collective human experience (or perhaps of some universal mind, however this is to be understood) is not, whatever else it might be, a plea for the application of the causal laws of chemists or astronomers, whether of Vico's times or of our own. If causality in the Cartesian sense is what, in Z's opinion, Vico is anxious not to withdraw from as part of his new way of discovering the human past, then his great attack on Descartes for holding up his method, which in Vico's view applies only to things *extra nos*, as the paradigm of all true knowledge, becomes unintelligible. If the causal principles which apply to human history are identical with those which apply to things in physical space, then what does the claim to originality, the great new discovery of which Vico was so proud, amount to? Z accuses me of imputing dualism to Vico (29). I do. I cannot see what else he – and all his followers and allies, from Cuoco and Michelet to [287] Dilthey, Croce, Joyce and his contemporary interpreters (save Nicola Badaloni) – took his *idée maîtresse* to be. Z will therefore not

be surprised if I say that his statement that Vico ‘insisted on the centrality of causal explanation in the structure of knowledge’ (30), taking ‘cause’ in its usual sense, seems to me to run against the entire thrust and purpose and method of SN, and, of course, of the *De antiquissima*, and of virtually all Vico’s theoretical writings after he rebelled against Descartes.

Vico’s use of *causae* seems to me to have rather more in common with the conception of cause of Aristotle and the Aristotelian tradition of the late middle ages than with that of the new thinkers who overthrew it in the seventeenth century. Aristotle’s ‘efficient causes’, which are productive, not mere antecedents in time, but bound by logical ties to their consequences, are more akin to Vico’s stages of the workings of the human mind – imagination, *fantasia*, question-answering, myth-creating, language-moulding, conception-generating faculties – than any notions of cause in the philosophies of science which have determined the meaning of the term ever since. So, too, perhaps, is Aristotle’s idea of a ‘formal’ cause.

There is also Vico’s avowedly Platonic – in fact, Neoplatonic – inspiration to be taken into account. Vico’s *causae* are active; they are generative sources, which, since they are meant to account for progressive growth of the outlooks, habits, conceptions, ways of living of human societies, for the development of stages of social consciousness – he is not writing about natural objects, which are *extra nos* – constitute, not surprisingly, a vitalistic approach, probably due, in the first instance, to the early influence upon him of the Epicurean ideas of growth of Lucretius. The tracing of these *causae* is not dissimilar to the later theories of spiritual development of, for instance, Lessing and Herder. In this connection, it is worth noting that even in his very amateurish efforts (*pax* Nicolini’s uncritical admiration) to construct a theory of physics (in opposition, of course, to that of Descartes), he speaks of causation by dynamic centres of force or energy – reminiscent of Leibniz – which provides further evidence of the general trend of his deeply anti-mechanistic thought.

It may also be that, given Vico’s deep involvement in legal thought – his absorbed interest in the history of Roman law and its social implications – there is an element of the legal sense of *causae*, the unravelling of a chain of motives, impulses, actions, and their impact on human relationships, which constitutes the heart of

arguments in courts of law, which seek to give a plausible account of individual or social circumstances, purposes, the development of a given situation to the point at which the relevant legal issues arises. That resembles Vico's hypotheses about how this or that human custom or formula, or collision between social classes, or style of poetic or religious expression, arose. Knowledge *per causas* is for Vico the reconstruction of the historical past, usually remote, but sometimes recent, as it is practised by scholars, anthropologists, lawyers, detectives, historians of religion, of jurisprudence, manners, politics, society, art – for which he thinks he has provided an infallible method. It is not in the least like the technique by which one can establish that metals expand when heated, or the way in which movements of the planets are regulated.

The assumption that Vico's *causae* are Cartesian or Newtonian seems to me to cause Z to reject my view that mutual understanding, on which successful communication rests, is for Vico a form of knowledge *per causas*.<sup>15</sup> Yet it is so, because to mean something is for Vico a kind of making. All human activities are forms of making for him. When we understand not only the explicit statements of others, but also the feelings that inform and shape them and are expressed in them (if only half consciously) – fears, hopes, the sense of awe, lust for admiration, and so on – these are for Vico forms of knowledge *per causas* – imaginative insight into the springs of human conduct, the 'causal' acts constituted by speech, or acts of worship or propitiation, or gestures, which we can grasp in so far as we are actors, 'causers', ourselves. That is why what Z calls my 'doubtful elaboration' of 'Vico's theory of historical knowledge' (27) nevertheless seems to me correct; indeed, what Z calls our 'divin[ing of] each other's minds' is a clear instance of *verum et factum convertuntur*, not open to Z's objections.

8. Z 26–7. It is this, in my view erroneous, conception of Vico's notion of causal activity that leads Z to say that my account of Vico's empathy does not fit the kind of causal knowledge that he attributes to him. Indeed it does not. I can only repeat that wherever one looks in SN (or Vico's other writings) – say SN 338, 347, 374 – one finds that he meant by knowledge *per causas* recognition of the kind of causing that is involved in making; and development of ideas and

<sup>15</sup> TCE 8–9.

outlooks is for Vico always a making. The account of the growth, the origin, the *nascimento* of a people, an institution, a custom, a usage, verbal or other – is for him a tracing, *per causas*, the very paradigm of explanation.

For Descartes or Galileo, causal laws are rationally grasped, timeless, necessary connections of events or facts in nature, not wholly identical with, perhaps, but similar to, mathematical necessities. For Hume and Mill or Russell they are de facto regularities: systems of unvarying conjunctions, successions, functional correlations, and all the other categories of classical physics, ultimately testable by the senses and by experiment. Would Z be prepared to maintain that the *storia dell'umane idee* in SN 347 depends on the perception of the timeless generalisations – either the quasi-mathematical laws of physics, or the *de facto* uniformities of Hume or the other concepts of the scientifically-minded determinists of our own 'glorious age'? Vico is not interested in *l'histoire événementielle*, what for historians are causally connected successions of events, or the successes or failures of influential individuals; nor in the Braudelian analysis of the workings of geographical, demographic and other impersonal factors.

He does, in other contexts, develop his own physical theories, which were not destined to earn respect as contributions to knowledge: but these, fortunately, play no part in SN. In this treatise he set himself to trace the succession of civilisations, conceived in terms of the means used (i.e. made, in his sense of making) by human communities for self-awareness and self-expression – linguistic forms, myths, images, religious rites and the like, which seemed to him to be elements in the total outlooks, *Weltanschauungen*, of successive societies. Z says correctly that Vico did not want to deprive history of its character as causal knowledge. But since Vico's *causae*, if I am right, are processes of being brought about, made to exist, conscious or unconscious, his method turns out to be akin to what since Hegel and Husserl has been called 'phenomenological': in particular, examination and description of highly specific [289] visions and categories and concepts evolved, in the course of generations, by human groups as thinking, feeling, active beings – self-images, forms of self-expression – in fact, what historians of culture, or art, religion, ideas, have always tried to reconstruct.

9. Z 27, note 3. I am charged with distinguishing four types of knowledge in Vico.<sup>16</sup> The charge is justified. My distinctions are based on the types of approaches that Vico in fact uses in *De antiquissima*, in the *Diritto universale* and in SN. They are not meant as a summary of the distinctions that he himself drew, namely between investigation which culminates in *verum*, and that which cannot get beyond *certum*.

10. Z 28. There remains the status of the *storia ideale eterna* and the historical cycles. This for Vico rests neither on any sort of causal hypothesis, nor is it the result of psychohistorical reconstruction, but it is the foundation of the entire *New Science*. Vico's idea of cycles, commonplace enough after Plato, Polybius, Machiavelli and others, is for him evidently a Platonic pattern, the eternal central law governing human affairs, revealed by, but not an (ultimately empirical) generalisation of data derived from, the study of history. It is for him an a priori truth, as irrefutable as certainty of the existence of the world, of the soul, of God himself (from whom, indeed, the supreme law of history emanates). The logical status of this infallible insight is obscure to me; whatever it may be, it is not related to our knowledge of the world of nature or the causal laws by which it is governed. Nor does it seem to be part of men's 'maker's knowledge' (of which scarcely anything is said in SN), since here God alone is the maker.

11. Finally, I should like to make it clear that I am, of course, not unaware of Vico's many shortcomings – not merely of presentation, but of substance, in particular of the central thesis of 'maker's knowledge'. A great deal in the *New Science* and in Vico's other writings is implausible or ill-argued: the foundations and principles of the *New Science* remain opaque. The terminology is too greatly *sui generis* to be continuously intelligible, at any rate to me. Great as my admiration for Vico's original genius is, I am not a Vichian, as Croce, Collingwood, Nicolini and even the more critical Pompa and Verene may be said to be. I do not fully understand what the *storia ideale eterna* could be; nor what exactly is meant by *mens*. I do not know how he believed that he had reconciled the mysterious ways of Providence with the freedom of the individual will, which he

<sup>16</sup> TCE 159–60.

contrasts with the determinism of the Stoics and the belief in randomness of the Epicureans. Nor do I believe (no matter how illuminating and even convincing Vico's insights often are) that *verum* is attainable, to the extent that it is, save by rational methods – hypothetical-deductive or experimental – and even then, in human affairs, very imperfectly indeed. I cannot explain why he ignored art (as opposed to myth) as a case of creative *fantasia*, a form of human self-expression as basic as ritual or language or the cravings of the primitive *bestioni*. I see little plausibility, *pace* Nietzsche, in the theory of eternal cycles.

Above all, Vico's central thesis is open to radical objection. In what sense, one may ask, can men be said to make their own history? Who can ignore the obvious effects of environment, of physical, biological, mental factors on human character and behaviour? What of the effect on human lives of the unintended consequences of their actions, a factor which [290] Vico himself emphasises so strongly in his doctrine of Providence, which uses some of men's most barbarous activities to produce unforeseen consequences which work for their benefit?

All this, and more, is so. Vico exaggerates. He was given to ludicrous fancies. But with the possible exception of Aristotle and Locke, virtually all the great original thinkers – Plato, the Stoics, the Epicureans, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Russell – exaggerated greatly; else they would never have cracked the cake of custom, the received ideas of their time. So, too, Vico. By turning attention to the role of how societies saw (and felt) their condition, and by providing examples of how later men could come to understand this, he seems to me to have been the principal anticipator of the entire province of attainable self-knowledge, so richly developed by cultural historians, *Kunstforscher*, literary critics, social anthropologists as well as imaginative writers – poets and novelists – not to mention ideologues of all kinds. As for Vico's notion of his central topic – the variety of human cultures – I cannot, perhaps, do better than quote the Czech writer Milan Kundera's words in a recent article: 'The identity of a people and of a civilisation is reflected and concentrated in what has been created



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by the mind – in what is known as “culture”.<sup>17</sup> Perhaps this is the *mente* at the heart of Vico’s highly unscientific *New Science*.

Voltaire is commonly accounted as the father of cultural history. Vico’s real service is to have understood what a culture is, as Voltaire, despite his proclamation of its importance, did not. One of Voltaire’s greatest achievements, as Peter Gay has pointed out, lies in the sphere of practice. By his mocking laughter he probably did more than anyone to undermine the obscurantism, fanaticism, irrational dogmatism and barbarous cruelties of his time. But it is his obscure contemporary Giambattista Vico who understood better what it is that men live by.

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<sup>17</sup> Milan Kundera, ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’, trans. Edmund White, *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, 33b.