



Reply to Hans Aarsleff

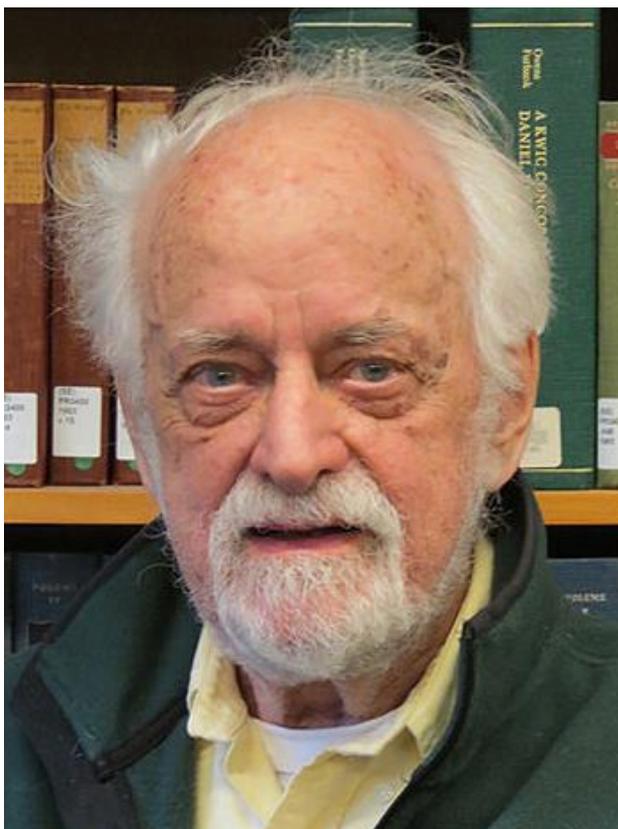
Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, so that it is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Reply to Hans Aarsleff

Reply to Hans Aarsleff, 'Vico and Berlin',¹ *London Review of Books*, 5–18 November 1981, 7–8; letter, 3–16 June 1982, 5



Hans Aarsleff by John Logan

[7a] PROFESSOR AARSLEFF kindly sent me a copy of his article before publication; his courtesy enables me to provide an immediate rejoinder. I read it with mounting astonishment. Since I know Professor Aarsleff to be an erudite and scrupulous scholar, I find it difficult to understand what moved him to protest so vehemently that Vico's view of language, which lies at the heart of his system, is wholly lacking in originality. I can only surmise that, irritated by the

¹ In the same issue, 6–7. See also IB's letter of 12 October 1981 to Karl Miller, editor of the *LRB*, available [online](#).

sudden appearance in the main path of the Enlightenment of this unwelcome intruder, with his unscientific etymological theories and the value put on them by his admirers, Professor Aarsleff simply wants him out of the way. The claims (which Professor Aarsleff regards as totally hollow) advanced by most students of Vico's ideas, and indeed by himself, for regarding him as a boldly original thinker spring from the belief that no one before him had said that it was only the study of the evolution of language, myth, ritual and other social institutions that made it possible to reconstruct in some degree of concrete detail the mentalities and outlooks of primitive societies and to trace the patterns of their development, stage by stage. This could, in Vico's view, be achieved by examining men's attitudes to God, nature, one another, and in particular their self-images as these are embodied in social institutions, especially in forms of language and of religious and artistic self-expression, connected in his mind with class conflict and social tension: these institutions provided the most vivid and accessible evidence of cultural growth. Vico stressed that his method of imaginative insight into what the world must have looked like to men, especially in early times, who wrote, spoke, worshipped, fought, dispensed justice, created works of art in specific ways, differed in principle from the methods commonly employed by natural scientists and those influenced by them in his own time.

Most students of Vico believe that his method of investigation entailed a novel approach in many fields – the theory of knowledge, aesthetics, jurisprudence, education, the study of antiquities, and, of course, anthropology and linguistics; but above all, that it was this shift in perspective that led to the idea of a culture as the expression of a developing and all-pervading *Volksggeist* (Aarsleff quaintly traces the origin of this concept to Condillac), for which the methods of the Cartesians and Lockeans of Vico's time did not seem to him adequate. Professor Aarsleff maintains that this approach, so far from being original, consists of ideas widespread in the seventeenth century, and commonplaces at that; that so far from being an innovator's, Vico's central ideas are a mere echo of the utterances of far greater thinkers – Leibniz, Locke, Mersenne and so on. It follows that only crass ignorance of the thought of the seventeenth century – after all, one of the most intensively studied periods in the history of Western philosophy – could have misled us all so grossly, from [7b] Croce and Dilthey and Collingwood (writers not

generally thought of as ignorant of this field of knowledge) to the ever-growing number of students of the Neapolitan thinker, especially in Italy, whose work fills the Vico bibliographies as well as the ‘fat volumes of papers’ on him, of which Professor Aarsleff speaks with such evident annoyance. Professor Harold Fisch, the doyen of Vichian scholarship in English-speaking countries, whom Professor Aarsleff holds particularly responsible for inflating Vico’s transatlantic reputation, is well able to stand up for himself: but it is against myself, by my own confession his respectful follower, that the main attack is made. On this, I have the following comments.

Even if Professor Aarsleff’s principal arguments were valid, this would still not prove Vico’s lack of originality. It could be said of Marx that every one of his central ideas can be found in earlier writings – indeed, Elie Halévy went so far as to call him somewhere (I do not know how seriously) ‘a gifted pupil of Hodgskin’.² All Marx’s ideas may indeed have been anticipated – all, that is, save the whole, the transforming synthesis. A contemporary scholar, no less learned than Professor Aarsleff, is reported to have remarked, ‘We do not need Hume’, because all Hume’s notions could be compounded out of the ideas of earlier sceptics. Originality is a contestable concept; most theorists have forerunners. A great deal of work has been done on Vico’s antecedents, especially by Italian scholars – Croce, Badaloni, Corsano, Cantelli and many others. Indeed, I have myself attempted to contribute to this topic, and suggested that some of the most important influences on Vico (apart from those he cites himself) are to be found among the French Protestant jurists of the sixteenth century, of whom Professor Aarsleff says nothing. But, be that as it may, the notion that a thinker, or a vision of nature or of human society, can be dissolved into a collection of isolated antecedent elements, and is therefore ‘not needed’, is obviously absurd. Few among the great

² [In their *The History of Trade Unionism* (London and New York, 1894), 147, Sidney and Beatrice Webb call Marx ‘Hodgskin’s illustrious disciple’; at the beginning of his preface to *Thomas Hodgskin (1787–1869)* (Paris, 1903), 1, Halévy quotes this as ‘Le disciple illustre de Thomas Hodgskin’. He seems perfectly serious, but adds that Marx had many other masters.]

thinkers after the Greeks would survive this test. ‘Small change for a napoleon’ – a nineteenth-century gold coin – ‘is not a napoleon.’³

However, Vico does not require this defence, sufficient as it is. The doctrines of Leibniz, or Locke, or Mersenne (not, curiously enough, Hobbes, whose influence Vico does acknowledge), cited by Professor Aarsleff as evidence that Vico was a mere copyist, do not, it seems to me, sustain any part of his conclusion. Let me come to his detailed charges more or less in his own order.

1. He complains that I take Goethe ‘severely to task for finding Vico’s *New Science* a sibylline vision’. [7c] This is not so. I did suggest that Goethe wrote about him but never troubled to read him. His letter speaks of visions of the future⁴ in the *New Science*, when there is little prophecy, only a cyclical theory of history, in any of the writings. But Goethe is in good company: Professor Aarsleff is walking through open doors when he denies that Vico had any influence in the eighteenth century. Indeed, in my book I went a good deal further, and wondered who read him, then or now. Professor R. T. Clark did attempt to establish a link between Herder and Vico via Cesarotti’s writings, and I believe that a connection can be established via Calepio and Bodmer, but there is no proof that Herder had so much as heard of Vico when he first formulated his own historicist doctrines in the early 1770s. Vico remained virtually unknown outside Italy, despite a handful of isolated references elsewhere, until Jules Michelet made him famous in 1824–5.⁵ [7d] His influence in England was negligible or non-existent – on this point I am inclined to agree with René Wellek (cited in evidence against me by Professor Aarsleff) and not with Fisch. The words of Ballanche (which I used as an epigraph to my essay), that Vico’s fate was that he ‘rises from his tomb when he has nothing more to teach’, for the Germans had done it all – are sadly true. Professor Aarsleff’s assertions that I believe, or have said, the opposite of this are groundless.

³ [Untraced; but cf. Engels to W. Borgius in Breslau, 25 January 1894: ‘in the absence of a Napoleon, someone else would have taken his place’, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London, New York and Moscow, 1975–2004), vol. 50, 266.]

⁴ [TCE 140, quoting Goethe’s *Italienische Reise*; a diary rather than a letter.]

⁵ [He first discovered Vico in 1824, and published a French translation of the *New Science* in 1827.]

2. Now to Professor Aarsleff's central contention: that Vico's ideas about the evolution of linguistic forms, which do, indeed, occupy a central place in his argument, are nothing more than so many seventeenth-century 'commonplaces'. That Leibniz took a lifelong interest in language, especially as it relates to logic, is well known. That, like Vico, he was interested in the affinity of languages, did not think them all to originate in Sweden, and wrote more than one thousand pages on the subject, I take on trust from Professor Aarsleff, who has probably read more words written by Leibniz than any living man. But I have yet to learn that Leibniz or Locke, or anyone in the seventeenth century, expounded an anthropological [8a] doctrine according to which the evolution of successive *Weltanschauungen* of primitive or 'heroic' (e.g. Homeric) societies is accurately reflected in changes in the forms of language, the study of which is therefore an indispensable instrument in determining the path of this evolution.

Vico asks, and I know of no one who asked such pointed questions before him, how sentences (which may well become poetic diction in classical Roman verse) like *Jovis omnia plena*⁶ – 'everything is full of Jove' – who is at once the sky and the father of the Olympian gods – can possibly have originated. Poseidon is both a bearded deity and all the seas of the world, Cybele is an enormous woman and also the whole earth. These are words and images which, Vico remarks, have little meaning for us, but evidently once expressed a vision of the world to those who first naturally spoke in this manner: what, then, can this vision have been? What kind of society was it to which such expressions made sense? Was this discussed by those from whom Professor Aarsleff's 'commonplaces' were said to flow – Leibniz or Locke, Spinoza or the Fellows of the Royal Society? Yet it is this in Vico that so deeply fascinated Erich Auerbach, one of the great literary scholars of our time. Of this, Professor Aarsleff says not a word. Yet it is in asking questions such as these, and in suggesting how solutions might be obtained (however fancifully at times), that Vico's originality and genius lie. This is very different from observing that languages differ, that metaphors derive from earlier reports of sense experience, or that customs vary among men – as Leibniz and Locke and their eighteenth-century successors, especially Montesquieu, declared.

⁶ Vergil, *Eclagues* 3. 60.

These reflections may well, for all I know, have grown to be commonplaces by the eighteenth century, but what Vico said was clearly far more revolutionary.

3. Professor Aarsleff rightly asserts that Vico maintained that only he who had made a thing can truly know it: therefore God, who made the external world, alone can know it, as we, who have not made it, cannot. He then, no doubt correctly, tells us that seventeenth-century thinkers – Bishop Wilkins, for example, and Mersenne – had said this before Vico. If Professor Aarsleff were to look again at my essay, he would find that (following men more learned than I am) I trace this doctrine, not to the seventeenth century, but rather further back – to Augustine, for example. This doctrine may well have become a ‘commonplace’ by the thirteenth century. Indeed, Croce supposes Vico to have derived it from Aquinas, and, then again, perhaps from Sanchez three centuries later; Vico evidently did not need the famous Warden of Wadham, Wilkins, to tell him this. Vico’s originality consists, not in reaffirming the traditional distinction between knowledge of the man-made and that of the ‘natural’, but in declaring that mathematics, as a man-made set of rules, was not a body of objective knowledge, whencesoever derived – Platonic ideas, or the natural light, or intuitive insight into the unalterable structure of reality, or the attributes of the physical world – but was a set of arbitrary rules, applicable to, but not derived from, the observation of the real world.

Leibniz was only the most gifted and famous of those who in his century took mathematics to be a system of relationships of ideas that embodied certain eternal truths according to which the phenomena of nature are governed. The conventionalist theory of mathematics (even though Buffon and Berkeley and perhaps others may have adumbrated something of this kind against the metaphysical realists of their time) became a really live issue only in this century. I do not know enough about the history of mathematical thought to be certain that some sceptic had not anticipated Vico in this view: but clearly no seventeenth-century rationalist could possibly have held it. Professor Aarsleff’s statements about what some nineteenth-century thinkers believed, or thought they believed, about the relationship of mathematics to physical reality, seem to me to be totally irrelevant. Vico was not, of course, the first to distinguish a priori from empirical, or certain from probable,

judgements: these were indeed ancient ‘commonplaces’, and neither I nor, so far as I know, [8b] anyone else has ever described Vico’s acceptance of them as ‘momentous’. Once more, Professor Aarsleff seems to me to be barking up the wrong tree. The point is that, for Vico, mathematics does not, as it does for Plato or seventeenth-century rationalists, give true knowledge of some realm, whether of physical nature or of the world of essences: it is more akin to a game, where the correct application of arbitrary rules ensures validity, but gives no information about anything. Even Kronecker, more than a hundred years later, did not say that the whole of mathematics is *Menschenwerk*.⁷ Vico’s notion that myth, legend and metaphor are doors to the past cannot owe much to Locke’s very general remark about the relationship of abstract ideas to sense, but probably goes back to the sixteenth century – to Bodin and the Neapolitans, of whom Badaloni has written in so illuminating a fashion. Unlike James Mill on Kant, I simply do not see what it is that Professor Aarsleff would be at.

An even bolder move by Vico was to transfer the distinction of man-made versus natural from mathematics to a field where knowledge about the world *was* obtainable – to the empirical sphere of human history, which men, since they have made it, can, according to him, know better than they do the external world, which they have not created. The meaning and validity of this doctrine has been disputed ever since. Suffice it to say that the concept of *Verstehen*, of understanding versus knowledge, which is much discussed at present, depends upon a particular interpretation of it. Vico’s view is consciously opposed to Descartes’s notorious contempt for history as a field of intellectual endeavour: this was certainly not dreamt of in Wilkins’s or Mersenne’s philosophies. Of this, there is nothing in Professor Aarsleff’s strictures against either Vico or myself: yet it is the heart of the entire matter. It is one of the philosophical discoveries (I cannot think why he believes that I allow discoveries only in the natural sciences) on which Vico’s reputation rests.

4. I did, indeed, express the belief that the possibility of a logically perfect language, which was obviously a chimera for Vico, occurs from time to time in the history of scientific rationalism. Professor Aarsleff informs the reader that ‘Nothing could be further from the

⁷ ‘The work of man’.

truth.’ These are hard words. Does Professor Aarsleff really believe that Leibniz (who thought well of Wilkins and other contemporary authors of schemes for a universal language) was not all his life haunted by the ideas originally adumbrated in *De arte combinatoria*, which he wrote in his extreme youth, and then in the *characteristica universalis*, of which he said, ‘Telescopes and microscopes have not been so useful to the eye as this instrument would be in adding to the capacity of thought’⁸ – so that controversies between rational men on scientific issues could easily be settled by those involved if they sat down with a pencil and slate and said to each other: ‘Let us calculate?’⁹

The *characteristica universalis* was intended to be a system that would mirror the basic structure of the world of which a priori knowledge could be obtained. In 1714 Leibniz still seems to have believed in it as a kind of general algebra that would give directions to reason; it could not correct errors of fact, but would guarantee the validity of reasoning, being a kind of alphabet of rational thought accessible to rational men everywhere. This idea may be visionary, but it is difficult to believe that it had no effect at all on Leibniz’s most famous commentator, Bertrand Russell, and his logical atomism, and so perhaps on Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Does Professor Aarsleff truly believe that this idea is not echoed in Condillac’s words, ‘to study a science is to do nothing else than to learn a well-made [by which he meant logically constructed] language’,¹⁰ or that his disciple Turgot was not echoing this with his ‘the relation of language to philosophy is similar to the application of mathematics to physics’?¹¹ Condorcet did not think too well of Condillac, yet he, in his turn, wrote an *Essai d’une Langue Universelle*

⁸ Leibniz to Oldenburg, included in the editor’s introduction to ‘Scientia generalis: characteristica’, *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, ed. C. I. Gerhardt (Berlin, 1875–90), vii 14; trans. in Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* (Cambridge, 1900), 169.

⁹ ‘Vorarbeiten der allgemeinen Charakteristik’, *ibid.* 200; Russell 170.

¹⁰ ‘Observations sur les méthodes que nous avons trouvées’: ‘La Langue des calculs’ (published posthumously in 1798), book 1, chapter 16, *Oeuvres philosophiques de Condillac*, ed. Georges Le Roy (Paris, 1947–51), ii 469, col. 1, lines 15–17.

¹¹ [Presumably a free translation of ‘le langage ressemble, par rapport à la métaphysique, à l’application que l’on fait de la géométrie à la physique’, ‘Plan du second Discours sur les progrès de l’esprit humain’, *Plan de deux Discours sur l’Histoire Universelle* (c.1751), *Oeuvres de Turgot*, ed. Gustave Schelle (Paris, 1913–23), i 312.]

– a language which he intended to be one of the cleansing weapons against the accumulated ignorance, superstition, irrationality and obscurantism of cen[8c]turies, and which, for that very reason, was duly attacked by the Catholic reactionaries.

Professor Aarsleff accuses me of saying that the intention was to substitute artificial language for the natural languages of the world. I did not, of course, say this: the logically perfect language was to serve as an instrument of communication between rational men seeking to discover truth about the nature of things by means of scientific analysis. The dispute between those who believed that the basic method used in the pursuit of knowledge was quantitative (*Calculamus!* was Condorcet's enlightened and brave, but wildly over-simple Leibnizian motto)¹² and those who maintained that this left out the qualitative, imponderable, at times inexpressible aspects of experience, which all men live by – this battle had been joined in the seventeenth century, was fought vigorously towards the end of the eighteenth and indeed continues in our own time.

5. Professor Aarsleff tells us that one of the greatest champions of the qualitative approach, Herder, in his famous essay on the origins of language, was so deeply influenced by Condillac that he was taken to task for this by his mentor Hamann. It is my turn to speak of something as being very far from the truth. Herder did, indeed, incur the displeasure of Hamann, not for following Condillac (he did not), but for not declaring language to be a miraculous gift from God. In a famous controversy about language in the eighteenth century, Rousseau, who believed language to be a human invention, and Condillac, who thought it was a natural development from the cries of animals, were ranged against Süßmilch, who maintained that language was a gift conferred on Adam by a special act of the creator. Herder tried to occupy a middle ground. He denied both that language was an invention and that it had animal origins, but maintained that the very essence of being a man was virtually identical with a capacity for the use of language. The development of language was part and parcel of human development as such: there was therefore no real problem of its specific origin. This was a position with which Goethe concurred.

¹² [I have not found this motto in Condorcet's works, but it does represent his attitude; cf. note 9 above on Leibniz's use of the word.]

But it was clearly not good enough for Hamann, and under pressure from him, Herder had to recant (but later returned to his heresy).

There is no question of the influence of Condillac here. In his essay, Herder describes Condillac's theory of language as 'empty' since, according to him, 'words were formed because words existed before men existed'.¹³ There is no point in following 'the thread of this interpreter any further, since it is completely broken'.¹⁴ Its only consequence was to lead Rousseau to his own equally fallacious hypothesis – for, according to Herder, there is no continuity between animals and human beings, but a clean break.

Still further from the facts is Professor Aarsleff's assertion that my belief, found only 'in the older literature', that Hamann was Herder's teacher, is 'unfounded'. Of this, I really do not know what to make. The best evidence for Herder's discipleship is in his letters to Hamann. If Professor Aarsleff had read these letters with the attention that he has devoted to Leibniz or Wilkins, he would have found that Herder, a proud and prickly man who stood aside from most of his contemporaries, venerated among them Hamann and him alone. Herder, unlike Hamann, was not an enemy but a critic of the French Enlightenment, and freely admitted his great debt to it. He took an interest in, and used the findings of, the natural sciences of his day – this aspect of his work is enlarged upon, and, if anything, overstressed, in my essay. But to deny that he owed Hamann the central ideas whose development in his own unique fashion created his name and influence is eccentric. His conviction that all human activity, and especially art, religion and custom, are rooted in the life of particular societies, not in individuals or mankind at large, and that they function primarily as means of communication; his populism, with its occasional nationalistic tinge; and, finally, his pluralism of changing values, which went with his detestation of French universalism, dogmatic neoclassicism, materialistic utilitarianism – all this is derived principally (for better or for worse) from the Magus of the North. His letters leave **[8d]** no doubt that this is what he himself regarded as his greatest debt. He spoke of Hamann as an oriental sage whose disciples were happy to receive morsels that fell from his table. Why Professor Aarsleff chooses to deny this, or at least to doubt it, puzzles me almost more than anything else in

¹³ 'Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache' (Berlin, 1772), 28, 27.

¹⁴ *ibid.* (28).

his peculiar article. As for Condillac, he may have been the inspirer of the sociolinguistic surveys made by French *savants* in 1790 and 1800, but it seems to me that the growing knowledge in France of Celtic, Norse, Persian and Indian literatures and customs, and, by 1800, the *retour d'Égypte*, are sufficient to account for the conception of languages as a means of understanding cultures, without benefit of Vico or Herder.

If Professor Aarsleff can believe that Michelet, who, towards the end of his life, wrote, 'I had no master but Vico. His principle of living force, of *humanity creating itself*, made both my book and my teaching',¹⁵ would have caught fire from the *obiter dicta* or the linguistic theories of Leibniz, Locke, Condillac or their followers, he is capable of believing anything. One last-minute concession I am ready to make him. He complains that I call Vico the founder of the German historical school. I should have called him its unjustly ignored anticipator. Most of its members had most probably never heard of him. When Vico's theories about Homer came to the notice of the Homeric scholar F. A. Wolf, and Vico's writings on early Rome to that of the great Roman historian Niebuhr, these eminent men were not pleased. *Pereant qui ante nos nostra dixerunt*. At least Vico, whatever his other anxieties, had no cause, *pace* Professor Aarsleff, to feel this particular form of resentment.

6. Finally, let me say this. I could understand it if Professor Aarsleff had argued that I have drawn the line between the Enlightenment and its critics – the creators of the *Geisteswissenschaften* – too sharply. I should have disagreed, but might have been impelled to reexamine my formulation of the dichotomy. But this attempt to play down Vico's importance goes very much further. It says a good deal for the vitality of Vico's ideas that, after two and a half centuries, a particular interpretation of them can still stir so much passionate feeling, if only of acute exasperation, in a serious scholar's breast. Nothing in Professor Aarsleff's article causes me to modify my views: and I suspect that nothing I have said will have any effect on him.

¹⁵ Preface of 1869 to *L'Histoire de France*: Jules Michelet, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Viallaneix (Paris, 1971–87), iv 14.

REPLY TO HANS AARSLEFF

Aarsleff replied in the issue of 3–16 June 1982 (p. 5), which also carried this further response from IB on the same page:

I see nothing in Professor Aarsleff's latest reproof that requires me to retreat on any issue raised in it, whether of substance or of detail: but then his ideas and those of others whom he cites, both about the degree and the kinds of influence of earlier on later thinkers, seem to me wholly implausible (his account of the influence of Hamann on Herder, or of Vico on Michelet, seems to me particularly perverse). I will not continue to bandy texts with my opponent, if only out of regard for your own and your readers' time and patience; indeed, it is polemics of this kind that brought much medieval erudition first into contempt and then into justified oblivion. Professor Aarsleff says that my knowledge is inadequate to the task I set myself. This may be so, although nothing he has said so far seems to me to bear it out. What it does call to mind is Whitehead's pertinent observation about scholars 'who know so much and understand so little'.¹⁶ Professor Aarsleff's two philippics seem to me to be excellent illustrations of this sad truth.

© Isaiah Berlin 1981

**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 26 April 2023
Revised 27 April 2023**

¹⁶ [Untraced. Possibly a misremembering of 'A merely well-informed man is the most useless bore on God's earth': 'The Aims of Education' (the 1916 presidential address to the Mathematical Association of England), in A. N. Whitehead, *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* (London, 1929), 1.]