

DISCOURSE ON GIAMBATTISTA VICO'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE QUESTION OF THE ORIGIN OF HUMAN SOCIETY

Michael Sunday Sasa, PhD

Department of Philosophy,
Veritas University, Abuja
fantasy1952@gmail.com

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Abstract

Myths about the origins of the human society have existed in various societies from earliest civilizations. Unfortunately, one characteristic of the European Christian world of the 1600s was the conception of ancient myths primarily as legends, allegories and stories, which was not an object of historical study. Giambattista Vico changed this perception of historians concerning myths by placing them in their proper historical contexts. Rather than viewing myths as eternal stories applicable to all times and places, Vico saw them as reflecting the realities of the societies in which they were created. Vico's novel conceptualization of Greek and Roman myths, separating past and present through his emphasis on historical context and its materiality, provided the boost for new modes of historical thinking. By criticizing the notion of essential and fixed laws, highlighting historical contexts, and emphasizing the need to understand origins and how humans develop through time by their own agency, Vico laid out the entire, embryonic, doctrine of historicism. This paper discourses Vico's philosophy of history in relation to the origin of human society. Recognizing Vico as one of the first modern historians to emphasize the relativity of the human condition to historical context, the paper finds out that placing humans in their historical context makes the past primarily and legitimately accessible through history and other societal sciences. In the final analysis, it concludes that this retrospective assessment of Vico's historical tracing provides useful insights for a programmatic view of human history generally.

Keywords: Giambattista Vico, History, Human Society

Introduction

The thought-provoking approach to the study of history is that which conceptualizes history in terms of changing the consciousness of humankind. Such an approach aims to interpret history by pure intuition and imagination. The 18th-century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico is no doubt one of the first modern historians. Vico made a ratio-historical landmark by undertaking a rational, contextual study of ancient Greek and Roman myths at a time when sacral and classical conceptions of temporality were still widespread. He turned to historicising myths in order to engage with questions in the present. In his

view, myths are reflective of social relations of power and domination; as such, he sought to understand their material realities, emphasising human agency, collective change, and the social construction of language and practices. Pointing to the limits of history, Vico introduced the notion of providence, using mythological figures, in order to intervene in the politics of the present from a subsidiary perspective. Obviously, Vico's postulations paved the way for later thinkers to further develop historicity and modern historiography as well as a range of philosophical ideas, including Romanticism and Marxism. However, some thinkers observe that Vico, even while enunciating new ideas of historicity, also exceeds the limits of history. It is in this light that this study sets out to discourse Giambattista Vico's historical philosophy in the context of the history of the human society.

Background to Vico's Philosophy of History

Vico was a professor of rhetorics. He had great leanings with the classics and was "heavily influenced by both Catholicism and Renaissance humanism" (Bedani 117). Goetsch reports that, "his reading of poetry, classical languages and classical literatures influenced his enduring love affair with Greek and Roman myths" (71). Understandably, Vico had high regards for poetic wisdom, imagination, creativity, and holistic knowledge. This is noticeable in most of his writings, as he shows admiration for myths as reflecting the higher poetic being of humans. According to Adams, "he turned to myths precisely because of the scorn heaped upon it by his contemporaries as an irrational and unscientific source of knowledge" (90). Thus, he tried to salvage it from its cultured despisers. Vico drew this sensibility and love of poetic wisdom from the classicist traditions which, he believed, defined human beings and their history.

Vico derived and projected a belief in the ultimate power of God and the limited power of humans to understand the world, especially its aspects not made by them, notably the natural world made by God, from traditional Catholicism. He accused the Protestant thinkers of being responsible for the new scientific ideas which he classified as "arrogant and hubristic", as they claimed to have total knowledge of the natural world, and the ability to control it. Their approach is tantamount to "making oneself the god of God, thereby denying the God one seeks" (Verene 213). Even though one could surmise that there was a reverential piety in Vico, there was a skepticism about some of the individualist Protestant claims, such as getting rid of all the sacred texts and practices received through sacred tradition. Vico was driven by the desire to mediate between thinkers

across temporalities, and bring the modern to bear in reading the ancients by combining philosophy and philology. Berlin captures this aptly,

Vico did not doubt the view that reason is the crowning achievement of human evolution. He greatly admired some of those ideas, especially those of Protestant figures like Grotius and Bacon. He appreciated the systematic rationality of their ideas, and the importance of new scientific methods in studying humankind. He believed, for instance, that critical judgments should not be passed based only on sense experience, but that philological scientific methods were also necessary (164).

Vico's disagreement, however, was in the Protestant philosophers' emphasis on human nature as fixed and unchanging, as in the natural law theories of Grotius. Rather, Vico believed these theories were built on false premises leading to an inaccurate picture of social reality.

Vico's work on history of humanity is largely a reaction to Cartesianism. The Cartesian method teaches the method of philosophical critique which concentrates on teaching students how to find error and falsity in one's thinking. The emphasis is on critiquing ideas by finding weaknesses in their foundation (*On the Study Methods* ... 13). Vico disagreed with the Cartesian notion that knowledge of the physical world can be obtained through rational scientific study, because he believed this to be the domain of the divine. Avis corroborates this thus: "Descartes has laid down the *cogito ergo sum* as a self-evident truth... To this, Vico opposes another supposedly self-evident truth: we can know only what we have made: the criterion and rule of the true is to have made it" (138).

Additionally, Vico was responding to Locke, Hobbes, Grotius, Descartes, and various other philosophers who saw human nature as unchanging, fixed, and corresponding to the eternal laws in social contract, legal, and scientific theories. He strongly disagreed with their assumptions about human nature and society, believing that the social contract theorists were providing an ahistorical view of society rather than focusing on the origins and development of human nature and human institutions. Even if he was heavily influenced by the classical world view, Vico's criticism of these philosophers was not a reiteration of the classical doctrines, but rather an enunciation of new principles and methods for understanding humankind, which he saw as more rational and scientific.

Vico's Philosophy of History and the Origin of Human Society

The Italian historical philosopher Giambattista Vico developed a theoretical framework for the study of human sciences that exerted a strong influence on human history. He backed the notion of the unity of knowledge about human mind and history, including culture, linguistics, philosophy, philology, psychology, and for the first time proposed a method for their study that he tagged the 'new science'. Giambattista Vico grounds his historical science in the faculty of imagination regulated by basic universal facts about human beings.

Vico was convinced that he had discovered a new method for understanding the social world of humans, and what was needed was to introduce new scientific ideas into the study of history. Thus in his *New Science* Vico adopted the method of studying humans as historical beings, placing them in their historical context, and examining their origins and development as social beings (Barnouw 99). This is in tone with the reality that humans developed through time in different ways in different localities; and the only way to study this was to study the stories they told about themselves. The importance of stories or myths for Vico comes from his poetic background, unlike Descartes, who ridiculed poetry and poetic wisdom; "these stories would yield truths about their lives, ideas, practices and institutions" (Vico 28-29). Also, he (Vico) argues that ancient civilizations such as the Greeks may be understood primarily via their stories or mythologies. In other words, the myths can be decoded as 'early histories', yielding a reading of the Greek's socially constructed world. According to Vico himself, "First, fables must have contained civil truths, and must therefore have been the histories of the first peoples" (31). Here, Vico is clearly positioning myths as truths made by humans, rather than divine truths. However, for Greeks, the myths were their reality, and they did not distinguish between the world of 'history' and the world of 'myth'. For Vico, since humans make their own history, they can also understand the past through human reason. To quote him; "for the first indubitable principle has been certainly made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the thing also narrates them" (62-63). Apparently, it was Vico's intention to find the material reality behind the myths. In other words, the myths ought to be understood as truth-tales in themselves; there has to be a rational and material explanation, suitable to their social and historical context. In this connection, the origins of civilization lie in the attempt by commoners or plebeians to gain access to privileged parts of the cities.

In his *New Science*, Vico classifies human history into three epochs, a classification which Danesi believes is structured after the ancient Egyptians, viz, the Age of Gods, the Age of Heroes, and the Age of Men. In the age of gods, poetic wisdom is very strong. Again, there is an aristocracy of fathers who know how to control themselves and others through religion. In the age of heroes, the *famuli* transform from being simple slaves to plebeians who want some of the privileges of the rulers. The theological poets transform into heroes. These heroes show their strength by fighting each other as illustrated in Homer. However, for Vico, the most important conflict is not between the heroes but between the heroes and the plebeians fighting for their own privileges. In the age of humans, divine providence orchestrates the class wars so that the heroes inadvertently undermine themselves by conceding certain powers to the plebeians. The plebeians are able to build these concessions in order to advance a new way of thinking. Vico asserts that the first two ages were essentially poetic, and 'lacked reflection'. In his view, "ancient people create gods due to a fear of the unknown; Greeks had gods to the number of 30,000 as they made everything a deity including stones, springs, plants, rocks, etc" (102), which indicated a childlike imagination. In essence, these ancient people were like children who could not form "intelligible class concepts of things", and so ended up relying on the imagination (32). He holds that "Children are best at imitating, and poetry is nothing but imitation; hence, early people were the children of the human race" (Vico, *On the Study Methods...* 33).

Vico faulted the *Universal Law* for its failure to portray clearly the origin of society. It is the desire to grasp that origin that prompted Vico to develop a new critical art to reveal the thought pattern of the most ancient humans. This art rested on recognizing two conceits: the Conceit of Nations and the Conceit of Scholars. In the conceit of nations every nation thinks it is the oldest in the world and that all other nations derived their wisdom from them (Vico 125). Because one nation does not understand the origin of others, it assumes all other nations learned from it. This conceit prevents nations from realizing that every nation actually had its own independent origin. On the other hand, the conceit of scholars is that scholars tend to assume that everyone thinks in the same way that contemporary scholars do (127). This conceit has kept scholars from understanding both ancient mythology and ancient jurisprudence. By assuming the ancients thought the same way as moderns do, the scholars assume that ancient mythology is simply bad science and superstition. What the modern

scholars fail to grasp is that the ancients actually were solving different problems in a radically different mental framework. The ancients were doing what they found to be useful; however, their way of thinking indicated radically different ideas of what was necessary and how to get it (De Mas and Houck 88).

In order to overcome the prejudice of the conceit of scholars, Vico created a new “metaphysical art of criticism” (348), which goes beyond the philological art of criticism which simply verifies the authenticity of particular facts. The new art distinguishes the truth in history from the accidental by grasping the manner in which the first humans thought. The art reveals the way the first humans thought, which Vico calls ‘poetic wisdom’. Vico uses the term wisdom to emphasize that this way of thinking has its own truth or validity that contemporary conceptual thinkers do not recognize. It is poetic because it is marked by imaginative creativity rather than discursive analysis. Vico holds that poetic wisdom is fundamentally different from modern wisdom. The fundamental difference between the two is that modern wisdom uses reflection to create concepts while the poetic wisdom does not reflect but spontaneously generates imaginative universals (Rosnow 42).

Vico places his new critical art in the context of a more general method for his *New Science*. He describes three different types of proofs that will be employed by the new science: 1) theological proofs which witness the movement of divine providence; 2) philosophical proofs which are based on the uniformity of poetic wisdom; and 3) philological proofs which recognize certain elements of history. These proofs rely more on recognizing the way in which ideas have to fit together to reveal hidden or divine patterns. The method consists in attaining truth by imaginatively linking diverse elements together to reveal the order of human history. It is this method that leads to the conceptulising of the “Ideal Eternal History”. For Vico, the ideal eternal history is the perfect course through which all nations pass. In practice, each nation travels through it slightly differently. He analyses this ideal eternal history most beautifully in the following words: “Men first felt necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance” (241). Clearly the history of Rome is again Vico’s primary model for the ideal eternal history.

Vico suggests that the first humans must have had minds that resembled children. So, when they first started to use language, rather than naming objects

conceptually, they imitated those objects with mute gestures and monosyllabic cries. Thus, when the thunder struck, the first people imitated the shaking of the sky and shouted the interjection *pa* (father) thereby creating the first word (448). Two axioms could be responsible for such a supposition. The first is that first language would be a combination of mute gestures and rudimentary, monosyllabic words (225). The second is that “Children excel in imitation; we observe that they generally amuse themselves by imitating whatever they are able to apprehend” (215). This is connected to Vico’s notion that people grasp what they do not understand by relating it to something familiar. In the case of children, they use their powerful imaginations to understand things by copying their movements.

He identifies three basic principles of history: religion, marriage and burial, which lie at the core of social existence. He posits that before human society there were giants roaming the earth who had no ability to check their violent passions. Eventually, a thunder strike occurred that was so violent it caused some of the giants to stop their passionate wanderings. These giants felt a fear that was unique because unlike a natural danger, it was produced by a cause the giants did not recognize (377). Since the giants did not understand the cause of the fear, other than the sky, they took what they knew (which was their own passion) and attributed it to a giant who lived in the sky. This gave birth to Jove, the first imaginative universal.

It was as a result of this perceived terror that giants felt shame for the first time. Specifically, they were ashamed about copulating randomly and openly. In the words of Vico, “So it came about that each of them would drag one woman into his cave and would keep her there in perpetual company for the rest of their lives (504).” This created the second imaginative universal, Juno. It also caused the giants to settle down in a particular area. They saw the need to keep this area clean so they began to bury their dead. Apparently, this account of the origin of humanity is peculiar. Nevertheless, Vico finds the account satisfying because it does not place any rational decision making at the origin of society. And he had succeeded in idealizing a society which did not develop in a social contract but in the spontaneous checking of passions that produces poetic wisdom.

Evaluation Vico's Notion of History and the Origin of Human Society

From the foregoing discourse, it is obvious that Vico developed a remarkable theory of the imagination, which led to an account of myth based on ritual and imitation that would resemble some twentieth century anthropological theories. He also developed an account of the development of human institutions that contrasts sharply with his contemporaries in social contract theory. Vico's account centered on the class struggle that prefigures nineteenth and twentieth century discussions. Vico's contention is that human societies ought to be understood in the context of their historicity. This line of thought places history in the most legitimate and rational pedestal to view myths as well as the past more generally. For him, "historical understanding is a form of cognition, a primary mode of perceiving the truth about reality, and one vastly superior to mathematics and the exact sciences" (Tagliacozzo 175). It is the opinion of Vico that history is a portrayal of the distinctiveness and uniqueness of cultures as well as their differentiating criterion. History here plays the role of a non-judgmental umpire and makes no claims to absolute truths.

Vico saw myths as reflecting the social reality of the times in which they were created rather than as stories (whether religious, moral, allegorical or entertaining), the prevailing view at the time. Vico, despite his sensitivity to ancient myths and their beauty, and the fact that many of his ideas were still rooted in the classical traditions of Europe, could not view myths as anything but tales reflecting the peoples of a time gone by; rewriting them would be to re-inhabit them in ways that would not be conducive to the new ideas he was laying out, which assumed a separation of past and present by privileging historical context and the questioning of 'eternal' truths.

Even though Vico believed that Greek myths belonged in the realm of fantasy, he regarded their poetic imagination as admirable. He was interested in the little details of the past, and the distinctive characteristics of each age. For him, "Peoples have acquired diverse natures and cultural characteristics through being exposed to different climates which have in turn influenced customs and even languages" (35). However, while Vico deconstructs these myths in order to expose their materiality, he also bemoans the fact that people in his time lack the poetic imagination to recreate such myths, which reflect the fantastic and the supernatural, and elicit a sense of awe, wonder and fear. He considers his own

time as based on Reason, and therefore enlightened, but he believes too much civilization leads to decay of the system.

There is no question that his work is difficult to grasp. Vico's style is challenging. Further, he is heavily influenced by a number of traditions that many philosophers may find unfamiliar: the natural law tradition of thinkers like Grotius; the Roman rhetorical tradition of authors like Quintilian; and the current science and anthropology of his day. Nevertheless, Vico's theories on culture, language, politics and religion are deeply insightful and have excited the imaginations of those who have read him.

Vico's conception of myths as primary objects of historical study situated in a distinct historical context that could be viewed in totality affected many parts of the world, including the non-western societies to which these ideas travelled through various means. Some scholars have even classified Vico as a post-modernist. Avis has called him a 'renegade Cartesian', arguing that Vico "initiated the historicist school in Europe that centred on the notion of *Verstehen*, running from Herder through Dilthey to Collingwood" (158). Obviously, the historicity that Vico articulated in response to his contemporaries' ideas about essential human history and fixed scientific laws provided ample insights for post-Cartesian critics, ranging from Marxists to post-modernists.

In historicizing human society, Vico retained an obvious tension between asserting and undermining a religious perspective. Placing humans in their historical context makes the past primarily and legitimately accessible through history and other societal sciences. Conversely, Vico being the traditional Catholic that he was, ended up undermining the eternal religious truths on which traditional Catholicism was based by introducing a historical perspective. As Crease observes, "Catholicism, or any religion for that matter, could not remain the same once it came under the historical gaze" (85). Unfortunately, Vico unintentionally contributed to the boosting of skepticism about which he was so hesitant.

In addition, his postulation of the ideal eternal history has been contentious and debatable over the years. One of the major debates is whether it is a circle or a spiral. Those who suggest that it is a spiral hold that each time a nation goes through the ideal eternal history, it improves. Those who suggest it is a circle hold that each cycle of the ideal eternal history really does reduce it back to its

beginning. Bayer comments here that “unfortunately, this appears to be an instance where Vico had to remain silent because, had he tried to resolve the issue, he would have had to make some sort of comment on the relation of the church to society which he was not prepared to do” (49). As a result, the debate about how best to read the ideal eternal history continues.

It is not questionable that Vico’s critique of ahistorical thought has prompted many critical historians to grapple with the possibility of collapsing the past and present in a harmonious interpretation. In the course of his critique of the Cartesian fixated schemes, Vico provided historicity as an alternative that emphasised development, change, and process (Costelloe 199). In doing so, he introduced new notions of temporality that gave the past some unique characteristics that separated it from the present. Bedani asserts that “in this view, the past was a time gone by that could be regarded either with scorn, as did those who believed in notions of progress, or a tinge of nostalgia and a sense of loss, as did Vico and others influenced by his thinking” (103).

Conclusion

Giambattista Vico historicised the past in order to question the essentialisms of his time. He was interested in uncovering the origins of humanity as well as certain ideas and practices. By rationalising myths, he attempted to uncover what these myths could say about relations of dominance and control as well as dissent. In the process, he pointed to the constantly changing nature of human society and the capacity for collective human agency to effect change. Because of his primordial postulations and towering influence on the field, Vico has been variously endorsed as father of the philosophy of history. As seen from the discourse, Vico was the first to take seriously the possibility that people had essentially different representation of thought in different historical epochs. Vico charted a course of history that presented the structure of change in thought pattern as dependnent on change over time. To illustrate the difference between modern thought and ancient thought, Vico developed a remarkable theory of the imagination. Interestingly, he made a departure from the Cartesian atomistic view of the time by boldly constructing the foundational beginnings of a secular philosophy of history. Surely, his work marked a new vista in man’s quest to understand and grapple with the past as it influences the present. His work forms a major landmark in the evolution and general outlook of modern history.

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