

On the way to «Creative Empathy»: the concept of truth as a social community enterprise in G. B. Vico's «New Science».

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1. There is no need to have recourse to sociology and to psychology in order to refute many worthy philosophers, in arguing that philosophical ideas, the history of philosophy, and philosophy itself, cannot be reduced to a chaotic and *impersonal* flux of problems and ideas. As Nietzsche says: «Little by little I have managed to form an idea of what all philosophies up to now have been: they have been the *confessions* of their authors, a kind of *autobiographical memoirs*, without their wishing it, or being aware of this»¹. As Nietzsche shows, besides the categories for analysing the sociology of knowledge, it is useful to take into consideration too the *character factors* of the individual philosophers, as constants determining not only the actual construction of theories but also, and chiefly, their *intelligibility*.

Obviously, this is the case with the Neapolitan philosopher, Giambattista Vico (1668-1744). Without making use of a sociology of philosophy, and even more, in this specific case, of a «psychology of philosophy», the major innovative significance of Vico's philosophy is obscure and quite undecipherable. Consequently, by reference to these analytical categories, I shall attempt to outline Vico's gnoseology.

William James sets out a character profile of philosophers by referring to two basic types, the tender-minded and the tough-minded philosopher². The first type is characterised by what Pascal has described as «un peu d'esprit de finesse», a certain distance from things, a certain priority given to reflective reasoning, and thus a certain epistemological optimism. The tough-minded philosopher, on the other hand, defined by Pascal as «le philosophe avec un peu d'esprit de géométrie», gives a degree of priority to facts over reason, a certain epistemological pessimism, and an element of empiricism, sensism and materialism.

Carl Gustav Jung adopted and developed James's character profile, identifying two basic psychological types: the introverted and the extroverted³. The first type gives a special place to reality, to which it then adjusts its own subjective, mental conditions. The second type favours, always and unvaryingly, its own subjective, mental conditions. These two basic psychological types are in turn integrated with the four main functions

¹ F. Nietzsche, «Beyond good and evil», in *Opere complete*, Milan, ed. G. Colli and M. Montanari, 1965; vol. 6, part. 2, para. 6 (my emphasis).

² Cf. W. James, *Pragmatism. A New Name for some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York, 1907.

³ Cf. C. G. Jung, *Psychologische Typen*, Zurich, 1920.

of the human psyche – thought, emotion, sensation and intuition. Combining the two basic typological categories with the above four functions, we thus obtain eight types of «philosophical character».

	<i>Tender-minded</i>	<i>Tough-minded</i>
	introverted	introverted
thought	thought	thought
	extroverted	extroverted
	introverted	introverted
emotion	emotion	emotion
	extroverted	extroverted
	introverted	introverted
sensation	sensation	sensation
	extroverted	extroverted
	introverted	introverted
intuition	intuition	intuition
	extroverted	extroverted

Clearly, this is not the occasion to make an exhaustive case-study of the proposed typologies. At all events, as regards Vico, we must refer to the left-hand column, which stresses reflective reasoning. Indeed, the basic characteristic of Vico's philosophy is that of the possibility of reading and interpreting the world and ourselves. From this statement of principle, I have tried to proceed to particular classifications. From the standpoint of thought, Vico is more introverted than extroverted. In fact, he sets out from a specific «intellectual construct», what Schumpeter would call an «original vision», to which he consequently tries to apply the external world, facts, and objective ideas. From the standpoint of feeling, on the other hand, he is more extroverted than introverted. In fact he attributes his own evaluation to contact with the external world (history), giving no weight to their own inner worth. However, as regards sensation Vico can strictly be described neither as introverted nor extrovert, and he is indeed neither a theoretical, nor a practical, realist. Finally, as for intuition, Vico is both introverted and extroverted. With the «intuitive introverts», Vico admits the objectivity of facts,

but with the «intuitive introverts» he gives greater weight to the contents of the unconscious, especially the contents of the *collective* unconscious. From a character point of view, therefore, Vico is a tender-minded intuitive, introverted at the rational level, and extroverted at the level of sentiment.

2. Giambattista Vico is thus a «many-faced Janus» who can lead us into error from whatever angle we view him. That is, whatever reading of Vico's philosophy is adopted runs the risk of being taken for the only true one, not realising that this is only one possible reading among others. Indeed, Vico can appear to be anti-cartesian, anti-sensationalist, anti-enlightenment, both idealist and anti-idealist, positivist and anti-positivist, an existentialist, an anti-materialist, an anti-mechanist, a conventionalist, an essentialist, an instrumentalist, etc., although, with the possible exception of the anti-cartesian reading, these labels cannot escape criticism for long. The difficulty in providing a comprehensive and exhaustive reading of Vico's philosophy derives directly from the complexity of his character and this, we shall see, considerably complicates the degree of intelligibility of «his» philosophy.

For example, Benedetto Croce declared himself a follower of Vico and «read» Vico idealistically. Yet if we just quote the formula of *verum ipsum factum*, which is generally the synthetic expression of Vico's criterion of truth, we realise that ultimately Vico's idealism is not very plausible. Indeed, whereas the idealist generally states that knowledge of something is the knowledge of the *model of production* of that something. In addition, the impossibility of an idealistic reading of Vico emerges in the demonstration of the theoretical value of common sense. Vico argues that what a nation, or «all mankind» thinks in common, must thereby have some foundation of truth. Therefore the basis and foundation of «our» truth (or certainty) is «civil consensus», from which a reading of the *verum/factum* directed towards a sociological gnoseology can be derived.

Another example of the uncertain intelligibility of Vico's philosophy is provided by the observation that while Enzo Paci gave an existentialist interpretation of Vico⁴, Roberto Ardigò believed that Vico's criterion of truth anticipated the positivistic criterion⁵ and, I would add, of the neopositivistic criterion, as one associates the *verum/factum* with Wittgenstein's protocol requirements.

One can see a further aspect of the unclear understanding of Vico's philosophy in the different configurations he took on in the post-Hegelian period. «Keine Metaphysik mehr!», «No more metaphysics!» cried the Young Hegelians, fascinated by historical materialism, physicalism, and sociology. In this «Keine Metaphysik mehr!», Vico appears twice, first at Hegel's side as theorist of art, language, myth, religion, morality,

⁴ Cf. E. Paci, *Ingens Sylva*, Milan, 1949.

⁵ R. Ardigò, «Il vero», in *Opere filosofiche*, vol. 5, Padua, 1891, p. 540 ff.

law, politics, and historiography. The other side of Vico is that of precursor of Comte, Spencer, and sociology.

A similar argument, which also shows an imperfect understanding of Vico's philosophy, is that which refers to science. Until 1714, Vico was keenly interested in problems of physics and biology. Therefore, it is probable that he was well informed about contemporary science. Nonetheless, there is a tradition which says that in *Liber physicus* (since lost), Vico expressed a position related to Platonic vitalism (the *Timaeus*). This supports the anti-cartesianism of Vico, his relentless polemic against «Signor Delle Carte», but without considering, however, that the antimaterialism and anti-mechanism he is supposed to profess are outdated for their time, and thus hard for the well-informed Vico to have maintained.

There is one aspect, however, in which Vico's intelligibility seems, apparently, uncontested: the anti-cartesian stand. Vico was certainly not a Cartesian. Basically, this was because Vico, as against Descartes, refused to base the criterion of truth on that of evidence, as well as not setting great store by the great heuristic importance of mathematisation (axiomatisation). Croce said, in this context, and this time with some basis of accuracy: «Only one systematic, profound thinker represented the opposition to abstraction and Cartesianism, the Italian Giambattista Vico, who [...] saw thought as an *ideal history* of reality, immanent in the real history which runs through time. He eliminated the distinctions which made the concept a separate order, and replaced that by levels and instances, which he [...] called 'ideal time'. He saw the epoch as abstract and mathematical, which could be seen rising up as a coming era of philosophical decadence, predicting the results of Descartes anti-historicism (and this prophecy was to come about)»⁶. Here, Croce is incontestable, but it is possible to emphasize that Vico was *anti-cartesian in a profoundly Cartesian sense*. That is, Vico criticized the Cartesian *Cogito* because he believed it inadequate for the construction of science, which was not metahistorical, nor private and individualistic, though to Vico, the *cogito* is immediate presence and pure observation (from this, a critique of existentialism can also be drawn).

These remarks just cite examples, possibly not very conclusive ones, of the «difficult intelligibility» of Vico. As we have seen, this may be related to some extent to his character. Reference to character profile, however, though it points us in a new and possibly fruitful direction as regards the answer to an old, complicated question, does not shed full light on Vico's obscurity. Reference of this kind, in fact, demonstrates that Vico is «obscure» but does not tell us why.

Through the years, Vico's philosophy has seemed peculiarly difficult, given that it has also been interpreted now from one extreme, now from the other, because he never

⁶ B. Croce, *Logica come scienza del concetto puro*, Bari, Laterza, 1905, 9th edn., 1964, p. 311.

clarified his initial theoretical premises. If Vico is anti-sensationalist, anti-idealist, anti-enlightenment, anti-cartesian, etc., ... he can also be seen as anti-everything, as basically he is «anti-Western», «anti-dichotomic». In the field of Western philosophy, Vico can be anything he wants, for the simple reason that he tried to articulate his thought outside Western philosophy, outside the classical Western dichotomies – sensation and reason, fact and value, theory and practise, etc. ...

Nec tecum nec sine te, seems to be Vico's message to Western thought, and this is the real significance of his anti-cartesian critique.

3. Broadly speaking, Vico's problematic is: how, when, and why, did «civility», or civilisation, begin? On the other hand, strictly speaking, Vico's problem lay in «discovering» the «nature of things human», by means of a «rigorous analysis of human thought about human needs or utility in societal life», and for whom «this Science is a history of human ideas, in which it seems we must follow a *metaphysics of the human mind*»⁷. Vico thus is concerned with the *natures*, and not the nature, of things human. The difference is significant. The distance from the Western tradition is established here with great precision – a tradition which had never doubted the *nature* of things human, - either sensation or reason, either matter or spirit, either practise or theory, etc. Hence, to discover these *natures*, Vico proposes a «rigorous analysis» of the motives for which, by necessity or by utility, mankind had arrived at a «societal life».

As we see, Vico's interest lay not in the «nature of man», but the «natures of things human», and not the «human mind». Marx was later to speak of «man in his singularity». Vico was interested in the «mind of men», the «generic being» as it manifested itself (took form) in «societal being», as Karl Popper would say, in the «construction of the structures of the world». This enterprise too belongs outside the formulae of Western Thought, which basically stresses the *singular* nature of human knowledge, as scientific-geometric knowledge of the object, which reaches its highest point first with Descartes and later in Kant's *Critique of pure reason*.

However, Vico's standpoint is different. He makes a clear division between the «natural order» and the «social order», and later preferred to speak of the «sciences of nature» and the «sciences of the intellect» and/or «sciences of culture». Vico says: «Philosophers, until now, having examined divine providence only for the natural order, have portrayed only a part of it [...] but they did not examine the part closest to man, whose nature has this chief characteristic: to be social»⁸.

⁷ G. Vico, *Principii di Scienza nuova*, Milan and Naples, ed. F. Nicolini, Riccardo Ricciardi Editore, 1953; vol. 43, # 347. Cf. too the 3 volume edition (Turin, Einaudi, 1976) which reproduces the whole of volume 43 of the complete works, p. 124 (my emphasis).

⁸ *Ibid.*, # 2, p. 3.

The *new science*, therefore, «should be a reasoned, civil theology of divine providence»⁹ a «history of the ideas, customs and acts of mankind»¹⁰ (this history was later to be called *Kulturgeschichte* by Riehl, Freytag and Burckhardt). The *new science* «seems to have been lacking till now, either because the philosophers have simply not known of it [...] or have only examined it in order of natural phenomena, so that they call metaphysics ‘natural theology’, wherein they study this aspect of God, and support it by means of the physical order observed in the movement of bodies, such as spheres, or the elements, and in the ultimate cause above the other lesser natural phenomena observed»¹¹.

Following these analyses, we arrive at the original meaning of Vico’s polemic against Descartes. We can see relatively clearly that the critique of Descartes’ «reason» (the instrument of demonstrative truth) is the same as that of the critique of the «natural order», or the critique of mathematisation as the *sole criterion of knowledge* (this is where the «critique» becomes a criticism of the dichotomies of Western Thought). Rather than in the «natural order» and its logic, - experimental method – Vico is concerned with the «social order» and its logic, which differs from that of the natural order because the latter derives from (Cartesian) reason, and the former, according to Vico, from *intuition*. Kant later put it: «I was led to think that the examples of mathematics and physics [...] were sufficiently noteworthy, as to reflect on the essential point of the alteration of method [...] and to reproduce it here»¹². This explains relatively easily why Vico can be considered both a positivist (priority of the experimental method), and an anti-positivist (primacy of intuition over reason).

The theoretical completion of the «rigorous analysis of human thoughts», according to Vico, must be sought in a «metaphysics of the human mind». As we shall see, in this context Vico’s philosophy becomes a proper gnoseology. However, this gnoseology is wholly disconnected from expressions like «I know» (the Cartesian *cogito*), and is, rather, linked to «a history of ideas, customs and actions of mankind». This is a gnoseology which develops a «logic history» or better, a *phenomenology of ‘refined’ thought*. Marx was later to elaborate beautifully on Vico’s brilliant insight: «Man, however, is not only a natural being, but rather a *human* natural being [...] because he is a *generic being*. Therefore [...] neither objective nature nor subjective nature is immediately present as equivalent to the human being. And just as everything in nature has to be born, so too man has his birth, *history* [...] History is the real natural history of man»¹³.

⁹ Ibid., # 342, p. 122.

¹⁰ Ibid., # 368, p. 133.

¹¹ Ibid., # 342, p. 122.

¹² I. Kant, *Critica della ragion pura*, Bari, Laterza, 1966, p. 20. Kant adds a note, «This method, imitated by the physicist, consists of [...] seeking the elements of pure reason by means of what can be *confirmed or contradicted by experimental means*» (p. 21).

¹³ K. Marx, «Critica della dialettica e della filosofia hegeliana in generale», in *Opere filosofiche giovanili*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1971, pp. 268-269.

This is essentially Vico's problem, that of producing a «sociological gnoseology» based not on a scientific-geometrical knowledge of the object, but on the historical evolution of evidence of human, social actions. In other words, this is not only, and not mainly, a gnoseology of the «natural being» but also, and mainly, one of the «generic being», of the human species, and not of the individual, as Descartes and Western philosophy in general believed.

At this point, the non-Western nature of Vico's philosophy becomes clear, and with it its problematic intelligibility. In the history of Western philosophy, we find evidence of similar elements in Kant, who is undoubtedly the finest and most acute observer of the Western mind. Thus, in November 1784 (and note: in 1769 Kant said he had «complete clarification», and in 1781 the *Critique of pure reason* was published), Kant wrote a short article in *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, called «Ideas for a universal history from a cosmopolitical viewpoint», whose second point was: «*In man, who is the sole rational creature on earth, natural dispositions, intended for the use of his reason, are only completely developed in the species, not the individual*»¹⁴. Kant would say that (Cartesian) reason is not enough to explain the enormous complexity of the human mind. One must hypothesise something else, as for example a single human knowledge, a knowledge of the «generic being»¹⁵.

Vico himself confirms this reading of his philosophy. In the second volume of *Principi di scienza nuova* Vico rewrites classical gnoseology. We have in #363, «Throughout this book we shall show that whatever the poets first understood within popular knowledge, the philosophers later reconstituted within wisdom; thus the former can explain the senses, and the latter the intellect of the human race»¹⁶.

In this quotation the movement in knowledge from the singular (the *cogito*) to the plural («generic being», «species») comes out clearly. In classical philosophy the senses and the intellect are, taken separately, two basic categories of interpretation. On these, clearly, the whole Western theory of knowledge is based. For the most part, till Kant, this can be seen as either «the theory (of the primacy) of the senses» or as «the theory (of the primacy) of reason». As evidence of this, there is no need even to mention the major distinction which separates Western theories of knowledge – rationalism and empiricism. It is sufficient to illustrate this by referring to the truth criterion, to the Thomist formula *veritas est adequatio rei et intellectus*, whose history most clearly shows the uniformity (Popper would say the *unimportance* of Western philosophies.

¹⁴ I. Kant, «Idee di una storia universale da un punto di vista cosmopolitico», in *Scritti politici*, Turin, UTET, 1965, p. 125.

¹⁵ This controversial (and largely overlooked) point in Western philosophy has recently been discussed by György Markus, *Antropologia marxista*, with my introduction, Naples, Liguori, 1979.

¹⁶ G. Vico, *op. cit.*, # 363, p. 130.

4. However, Vico's point of view is different, The function performed by the senses in classical gnoseologies is now undertaken by poets, in the «history of human ideas». On the other hand, the function performed by reason is now undertaken by philosophers. Certainly, the meaning of this rewriting of traditional gnoseology is by no means clear, but the basic intention of this extract is obvious. It confirms as true, from the standpoint of the «species», what «Aristotle has said of the *particular case of each individual*»¹⁷.

A further example of the radical, and unnoticed, change in Vico's perspective is clear if we consider the importance the philosophy of authority (in the context of the species) takes on (the Cartesian Foucault calls this the «microphysics of power»). This «philosophy» is the first by-product of «the main aspects of the Science». Vico says, in this context: «Thus there begins a new philosophy of authority, which is the other chief aspect of this Science, taking the term 'authority' in its original meaning of 'propriety' [...] wherein there are 'actors', in common Roman justice those who have 'reason to command'»¹⁸.

Just as in Vico's gnoseology the truth and the phenomenon coincide (*verum et factum convertuntur*), in the same way in the reading of his gnoseology, originality and difficulty complement each other. This, we have seen, is partly to be attributed to Vico's character, and partly to the «systemic complexity» (Luhmann) of the critique of Western dichotomies.

At any rate, the controversy about Vico's philosophy centres on a kind of «intellectual confusion» from which he never managed to escape. In the history of Western philosophy, there is a «case» similar to Vico: Kant, with the difference, however, that where Kant tried to systematise the dichotomy of Western thought (sensation and reason), he demonstrated an unparalleled intellectual rigour, but where he tried to transcend traditional dichotomies, he only produced the above-mentioned argument on «Ideas for a universal history from a cosmopolitical standpoint». By contrast, Vico went much further.

Reference to Kant is useful for another set of reflections. Suppose that Kant had not written the *Critique of pure reason*, but only the *Critique of judgement*, in which here and there he included a critique of pure reason. Clearly, in that event, the major difficulty would be that of reconstructing Kant's gnoseology. In fact, this is Vico's case. He «intuited» a new methodology of knowledge, and, without bothering to clarify it from the logical-methodological standpoint (this is Vico's «negligence»), he immediately applied it to the domain of historical knowledge. Croce, in a moment of lucidity often lacking in his reading of Vico, though in all honesty the expression 'logic of history'

¹⁷ G. Vico, *op. cit.*, # 363, p. 130, my emphasis. Vico of course is referring to the famous phrase *nihil est in intellectu quod prius non fuerit in sensu*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, # 386, p. 145.

is his, accurately grasped Vico's «intellectual confusion» (based on character). Croce said: «[...] one should not confuse people by offering everything at once. This, indeed, was the approach of the supreme Giambattista Vico, who included in one book every book, the whole book in every chapter, and often in one page or sentence his whole philosophy and historiography; I, though proud to be called a follower of Vico, see in that didactic process not a model, but a warning»¹⁹.

The formula *verum ipsum factum*, contains a new criterion of scientific knowledge based, as Kant was to say, «on the species, not the individual». However, Vico himself saw this formula unilaterally, in the «historiographic» sense. To continue the above elaboration, Vico's historiography is like Kant's aesthetics, a «realm of application» of general principles, a modest «two plus two», without pretensions of arriving at the difficulty of larger calculation. For example, Vico formulated the *elements*, the *axioms*, the *principles*, the *corollaries* of the new science, and also speculated that, for example, religion, marriage and burial were the three principles of the «beginning of the civilized world». Yet from what «mental categories», and what structures of the «new science» were these principles derived? Was Vico's «new science» a rational reconstruction of Western civilisation, or was the «new science» the methodology of the rational reconstruction of «human ideas»?

It is hard to find in Vico a comprehensive answer to these questions.. Only once did Vico speak of the «new science», rather discouragingly, as «uncertain, shapeless, and obscure»²⁰. However, on one point Vico's philosophy is quite clear, when it postulates an absolute «anti-philosophism» (indeed, we should put it as «an Absolute [...]»). From this point of view, it is impossible to see any basis for an idealistic reading of Vico. Although, as we have seen, all other readings of Vico are to some degree possible, the idealistic one is anti-Vico, not only on account of the *verum/factum*, but even more so for the «Absolute» lack of any primacy for the Idea, whose function would be that of subsuming historical continuity. In addition, when the opportunity occurred, Vico much enjoyed making fun of the metaphysical profundity of «idealisms». In section 92, dealing with archetypal ideas, Vico wrote: «This began with an over-inflated principle – water – perhaps because it was observed that water made pumpkins swell»²¹. When dealing with essences and substances, Vico wrote, no doubt referring to Descartes: «Certainly, Roman heroes felt 'being', very grossly, in 'eating' itself, which must have been the first meaning of 'sum', and later meant the first and the second; even today, our peasants, referring to the fact that a sick person is still alive, say that 'he's still eating'. For 'sum' in the sense of 'being' is highly abstract, and transcends all beings: it is very fluid, in penetrating all beings, very pure, in that it is circumscribed by no being.

¹⁹ B. Croce, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

²⁰ G. Vico, *op. cit.*, # 41, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, # 92, p. 56.

They felt the 'substance', which means 'what is beneath and supports', in their heels, as it is on the soles of his feet that man exists»²².

An example of the correctness of the interpretation of the above can be found in paragraphs 1131-1138, where Vico advises the reader about the best way to «make use of this Science»²³. As regards theoretical understanding, Vico suggests «shedding all corpulence and everything deriving from that which affects our pure mind»²⁴, meaning we should shed the «Cartesian metaphysickings», or the dichotomies which recur throughout Western thought. From the methodical point of view, Vico tells the reader that the «new Science» «reasons by means of a strict geometric method, whereby it passes from the true to the immediately true, and thus draws its conclusions. Hence, you must have acquired the habit of geometrical reasoning, and must thus not open these books at random to read them or skim through them, but learn the lesson from top to bottom. You must watch that the premises be true and well ordered, and not be surprised if almost all the conclusions are amazing [...]; for results are disturbed by fantasy, whilst the premises conformed to pure abstract reason»²⁵.

Further, from the point of view of the simple intelligibility of his study, given that the «new science» «presupposes [...] great and diversified learning, even erudition»²⁶, it is essential to «read» the «science» with «a comprehensive mind, as there is nothing reasoned from this science in which innumerable other elements are not involved, which permit conceptualisation, partly from each one and from all together in this whole: in this alone the whole beauty of a perfect science lies»²⁷. Thus, because the «new Science» «contains all discoveries mainly of different kinds, and many wholly contrary to the belief which, as regards the things analysed, has up to now prevailed»²⁸, a «great acuteness of mind»²⁹ is required. And since «it explains wholly new ideas in their essence»³⁰ it is advisable that the reader read «this volume at least three times»³¹.

5. As Kant was to propose in the first section of the *Critique of pure reason*, so Vico too expounds a «doctrine of elements», «of principles», and of «method» of «generic reason», which, «like blood for the living body, has to flow within and bring to life everything this Science reasons about the common nature of nations»³².

²² Ibid., # 693, p. 323.

²³ Ibid., # 1131, p. 509.

²⁴ Ibid., # 1132, p. 509.

²⁵ Ibid., # 1133, p. 509-510.

²⁶ Ibid., # 1134, p. 510.

²⁷ Ibid., # 1135, p. 510.

²⁸ Ibid., # 1136, p. 510.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., # 1137, p. 510.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., # 119, p. 71.

Vico singles out two basic properties of the human mind. The first involves a radical criticism of the Protagorean principle, defined by Adorno as the «backbone of Western thought», which is «man is the measure of all things, those that are, for what they are, of those that are not, for what they are not». Thus, Vico argues «Man, through the indefinite nature of the human mind, where this falls into ignorance, makes himself the rule of the universe»³³. Kant in turn began the *Critique of pure reason*, in 1781: «Human reason [...] has the particular destiny of being troubled by problems it cannot avoid, because they are posed by the nature of reason itself, but to which this cannot find the solution, as they go beyond any power of human reason»³⁴.

According to Vico, the second property of the human mind is that of *analogy*. «It is another property of the human mind, that where men can form no idea of things distant and unknown, they make an estimate of them from things known to them, and existing»³⁵. Like the first, this property is also seen by Vico in a negative light. Basically, Vico wants to criticise not so much the *scire per causas*, for, as we have seen, in some respects Vico upholds the experimental method, as the «metaphysics of *scire per causas*». Vico's assumption about this line of analysis are surprisingly, opposed to Newton's deterministic mechanism, and anticipate, *more philosophico*, Einsteinian and quantum relativism. The negative reading of the two properties of the human mind is confirmed by these extracts from the *Principles of a new science*: «Those ignorant of the natural causes which produce phenomena, where these cannot even be explained by similar eventualities, attribute to phenomena their own nature, just as the populace says [...] the magnet loves iron»³⁶. The second extract is more important as it has a methodological significance, arguing that the two properties of the human mind «provide the bases for rejecting everything which has been proposed till now regarding the principles of humanity, based on the unlikeliness, ridiculous contradictions, and impossibility of such views»³⁷.

Six axioms are derived from the two properties. The first states: «Philosophy, to be of use to mankind, must raise and put right fallen, weak man, not betray his nature nor abandon him to his corruption»³⁸. That is, philosophy should provide *methods* of explanation and understanding of a universe explored only with difficulty, and not «interpretation» of it, in which Western philosophy is already rich.

The second axiom (Vico's «merit») involves the difference between speculative and practical thought. Whereas «philosophy considers man as he should be»³⁹, «legislation

³³ Ibid., # 120, p. 71. Elsewhere, Vico says « [...] (there is) [...] a property of the human mind undefined, by reason of which, concerning things it does not know, it often believes, in a shapeless manner, more than what they actually are», # 48, p. 36.

³⁴ I. Kant, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁵ G. Vico, *op. cit.*, #122, p. 71.

³⁶ Ibid., #180, p. 84.

³⁷ Ibid., #163, p. 80.

³⁸ Ibid., #129, p. 73.

³⁹ Ibid., #131, p. 73.

considers man as he is»⁴⁰. This second axiom demonstrates to a greater degree the view that Vico's philosophy is basically a gnoseology, even if of a particular kind, even *sui generis*. Indeed, he anticipates a «science of *ideal* truth» and a «science of *real* certainty». The first science provides the lines of analysis, the categories, whence it is possible to «navigate» in «ideal, eternal history», and «discover» the rule which determines «refined history», or the history of mankind. Vico calls this science *philosophy* but it is better to say the «logic of history». The «science of real certainty» is intended to «discover» the certainty of phenomena as they occurred, and Vico calls this *philology*.

The third axiom is: «Things outside their natural state do not adapt and do not endure»⁴¹. In a corollary, he adds, «mankind, from the earliest times, has lived and lives tolerably in society»⁴². This showed, necessarily, that «Vico's problem» was not so much, as he himself believed, that of «whether there is a law in nature and if human nature is sociable»⁴³, but rather if this observation (living «tolerably in society») could take on, and thus establish, an epistemological significance.

The fourth axiom states: «Men who do not know the truth of things strive to reach certainty, because, though not able to satisfy intellect with science, at least will rest on knowledge»⁴⁴. Thus, the faculty which determines scientific knowledge is intellect, and thereby it is possible to classify a judgement as true or false. Where one cannot speak in term of truth (or non-truth) Vico suggests it is best to «strive for the certain». Then, the problem is, how to determine what is *certain*? Vico answers, that it is the special «science we have termed philology»: that is it is determined empirically. Indeed, «philosophy studies reason, when the science of the true derives: philology is concerned with the authority of the human will, whence knowledge of the certain is derived»⁴⁵. There is thus a «science of the true» and a «knowledge of the certain». The «science of the true» is closer to God than man, and here Vico cannot but be a man of his time. The «knowledge of the certain», however, is *our* «science».

Before pursuing this important branch of Vico's gnoseology, an introductory observation is useful. My reservations expressed above regarding Vico's «intellectual disorderliness» are completely well-founded, Starting from the distinction between «true» and «certain», Vico unexpectedly changes the basic argument. No longer is there discussion of «elements of the abstract mind», but of the «theory and practise of historiography». The critic, then, can only reconsider under its real heading what Vico places under the other.

⁴⁰ Ibid., #132, p. 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., #134, p. 74.

⁴² Ibid., #135, p. 74, my emphasis.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., #137, p. 74.

⁴⁵ Ibid., #138, p. 74.

Thus, «Human will, by nature wholly insecure, decides and determines by means of the common sense of men, within human necessity or utility, which are the two sources of natural law of species»⁴⁶. That is, *our* scientific knowledge rests on very fluid bases (as Karl Popper has argued), which are held constant as far as is possible, by common sense, which is the origin of our scientific knowledge (as the «later» Wittgenstein argues). «Common sense», says Vico, «is a judgement based on no reflection, as normally perceived by a whole order, a people, a nation or all mankind»⁴⁷. «Uniform ideas within whole people unknown to each other must have a common criterion of truth»⁴⁸. That is, as Carnap would say, concepts of observation are themselves a scientific domain, though limited in time and space, as well as being, obviously, at a very low level of generality. Just as Carnap proposed moving from observational concepts to those of quantity and measurement, so Vico postulates a logical system to raise common sense to a very high level of generality. «Hence the *mental dictionary* (certainly a Carnap term) is born [...] from which eternal, ideal history is conceived»⁴⁹.

From this it is clear that there are well-founded reasons for reading Vico's philosophy in a logical sense, and it is surprising that a scholar as consistent as Ernst Cassirer should have felt it necessarily to quote Vico only twice in the four volumes of *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der Neuren Zeit*.

Vico continues, however: «There must, in the nature of things, human be *a mental language common to all nations*, which uniformly grasps the substance of feasible things in social life, and explains this with as many different modifications as correspond to the various appearances it can assume»⁵⁰. Weyl certainly put it no better – and it cannot better be expressed – in formulating the concept of «the empty schema of possible sciences»⁵¹ a century later. Alfred Tarski added significant elements in arguing that logic should be seen «as the name of a discipline which analyses the meaning of concepts common to all the sciences, and which establishes the general laws which govern concepts»⁵².

We can express the sixth axiom thus: *verum et factum convertuntur*, or *verum ipsum factum*. «The nature of things in simply their birth at specific times and in specific forms, which are always so, and thus as such, and not otherwise, are things born»⁵³. In some ways, this is the Baconian experimental method. However, in other ways, this is the criterion of truth as praxis, and in others still, the criterion of the «composite

⁴⁶ Ibid., #141, p. 75.

⁴⁷ Ibid., #142, p. 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid., #144, p. 75.

⁴⁹ Ibid., #145, p. 75, my emphasis.

⁵⁰ Ibid., #161, p. 80.

⁵¹ Cf. H. Weyl, «Philosophie der Mathematik und Naturwissenschaft», in *Handbuch der Philosophie*, Berlin, 1927.

⁵² A. Tarski, *Introduction to Logic and to the Methodology of Deductive Science*, New York, 1941, revised 1946, 10th printing 1963, p. XIII, (Italian edn. Milan, Bompiani, 1978, p. 10).

⁵³ Vico, *op. cit.*, # 147, p. 76.

pluralistic formation», of truth, which, borrowing from a Thomist tradition, comes into its own with Hegel, with some post-Hegelian systems (Marxism and sociology) and with relativist and quantum physics⁵⁴.

As we shall see below, Vico's truth criterion provides the «foundations of the certain», whilst taken together the six axiom give us the «foundations of the true», in that they permit the construction of scientific propositions. Both properties and axioms are «general propositions, and establish this Science definitively»⁵⁵. Along with the fore mentioned two properties, Vico identifies three further properties which, taken together, regulate «societal life» and set the «limits of human reason»⁵⁶.

The first of these properties is *curiosity*. Vico says: «Curiosity, the congenital property of man, daughter of ignorance, and which gives birth to science, opening our mind to wonder, provides this custom: wherever it sees an extraordinary effect in nature [...] it immediately asks what that can mean or signify»⁵⁷. This means, to quote Galileo, «The cause is that which, when present, leads to the effect. Now, a ball of lead sinks: in the form of a basin, it does not: I ask the reason why it doesn't»⁵⁸. From this, I believe incontrovertibility, we see the correctness of the reading of the *verum/factum* as triumph of the experimental method.

The second, additional property, is derived from the first original one, and can be put together from these two paragraphs: «The original authors of mankind were involved with an important issue in which they combined the – as I were – *concrete* properties, qualities or relations, and formed from these their poetic orders» ...«So that one can say this first epoch on earth was truly concerned with the first operation of the human mind»⁵⁹. Following the phase in which the «issue» involved a kind of inventory of «sensible things» (phenomena), a second phase occurred (criticism), by way of which we attain the *exactness* of the being and becoming of things. In this second phase, in addition, the possibility exists of achieving real science. This is more accurately the third property (of the additional series). «In human minds», states Vico, first the issue appears, then the critique «as first there is knowledge, then judgement of things. The issue is what makes minds ingenious, just as criticism makes them precise»⁶⁰.

6. I have already dwelt on how it is possible to read Vico's *verum/factum* following three different paths of analysis. We have just seen that the first method concerns the experimental method, and this is so obvious there seems no point in returning to it. From this it follows that the idealist reading of Vico's philosophy loses all foundation

⁵⁴ For the elaboration of these analyses, cf. Markus, *op. cit.*

⁵⁵ Vico, *op. cit.*, # 164, p. 81.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, # 360, p. 128.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, # 189, p. 85.

⁵⁸ G. Galilei, *Opere*, vol. 3, Florence, 1890-1903, p. 27.

⁵⁹ G. Vico, *op. cit.*, #495-6, p. 205, my emphasis.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, # 498, p. 205.

and fails (to simplify: whereas idealists have no doubts about the *ideal* nature of truth, which is only to be contemplated, Vico expounds a position wholly opposed: what is true is what is known and what one can do).

What, on the other hand, defines the other two possible readings of Vico's criterion is a particular «trend» which, from Hegel on, has developed *a latere* of traditional Western thought: relativism. As is well-known, Marx relativises the Hegelian Man and State, while Planck, Heisenberg and Einstein relativised Newton's deterministic mechanism. This «trend» in Western thought is still not epistemologically clear, even though it has produced real states of things, such as the socialist states, and quantum and relativist physics. Now, the «new» criterion of scientific knowledge devised by Vico clearly anticipates this trend, which usually is seen as originating with Hegel and the critique of Hegel. This tendency argues, in this connection, that there is not one, single «realization» of the idea, a single «authentification of the idea» but many «*true aspects*» of the same idea.

Hence, unlike Croce who did so believe, even when proclaiming himself a follower of Vico, we no longer have a Truth, but we do have a more modest «truth» confined to its own domain of application, and which therefore is not called truth, but, for example, exactness (as regards scientific knowledge). That is, the term «truth» no longer has a univocal meaning, related to the unique, but many meanings, a plurality of meanings corresponding to the number of scientific domains (into which this «divine term» (Vico) falls).

There are two paragraphs in the *Principles of the new Science* which support quite incontrovertibly this reading of Vico's truth criterion. «The truth of the laws is a kind of light and splendour illuminated by natural reason, whereby jurists are often used to say *verum est* as synonym for *aequum est*»⁶¹. That is, in the scientific realm of jurisprudence truth corresponds to justice, and here the proposition «this is just», even though «jurists» using a linguistic expression taken from common sense, continue to say «it is true» instead of «it is just».

The second paragraph, by way of illustration, is more coherent, and as usual we have to consider the quotation both in terms of the scientific realm to which Vico was connected, and its meaning in a more general, and indeed gnoseological, framework. Vico states that the definition just examined (#324) is a «*particular proposition*», intended to show «in the particular material of the natural law of peoples» (this is the *particular* scientific domain to which Vico addresses his own gnoseological insights something general, which serves in a logical-methodological sense «to draw conclusions in all matters involved here»⁶².

⁶¹ Ibid., # 324, p. 113.

⁶² Ibid., # 325, p. 113-4.

We find a further example of this in paragraphs 400 and 401, where Vico lays the foundations of «poetic logic». He distinguishes logic from metaphysics for the reason that whereas metaphysics «contemplates thing for all the orders of their being»⁶³, logic is involved with expounding their *meanings*. Consequently, the difference between logic and metaphysics lies in the semantic function which logic develops, whilst metaphysics does not (is this not, in essence, neopositivism's criterion of verification?).

«Logic», says Vico, «[...] first and foremost meant 'fable', transposes into Italian as 'speech' (*favola-favella*), whence 'idea' and 'word' [...] As [...] *verbum* to the Jews meant also 'fact', and to the Greeks also 'thing'»⁶⁴. Logic thus is a metric structure of semantic operations through which we arrive at the «knowledge of the certain», or the «realisation» of the true. In short, through logic we arrive at the formalisation of the states of nature, for which we are now able to create «science» or different «sciences» (this is Tarski).

It seems fitting, at this point, as regards this rather unusual interpretation of Vico's criterion of truth, to quote Vico himself: «One can on no account call into question, that the civil world was certainly made by men, whereby they can, because they must, discover its principles *within the modifications of our own human mind itself*»⁶⁵. This seems to be the deep significance of Vico's philosophy, and the reason why I came to consider it an important stepping stone toward a theory of «creative empathy»⁶⁶.

⁶³ Ibid., # 400, p. 152.

⁶⁴ Ibid., # 401, p. 152-3.

⁶⁵ Ibid., # 321, p. 113, my emphasis.

⁶⁶ Cf. F. Ferrarotti, «Materiali per una teoria dell'empatia creatrice», in *La Critica sociologica*, XLII, n. 165, Primavera 2008, pp. 13-41.