

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1990

Volume 17 Number 3

- 323 Scott R. Hemmenway Philosophical Apology in the *Theaetetus*
- 347 Theodore A. Sumberg Reading Vico Three Times
- 355 Colleen A. Sheehan Madison's Party Press Essays
- 379 Robert Eden Tocqueville and the Problem of Natural Right
- 389 John C. Koritansky Civil Religion in Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*
- 401 Peter A. Lawler Was Tocqueville a Philosopher?
- 415 Waller R. Newell Zarathustra's Dancing Dialectic
- Discussion*
- 433 Werner J. Dannhouser Leo Strauss as Citizen and Jew
- Review Essay*
- 449 Harvey Burstein Henry M. Rosenthal, *The Consolations of Philosophy*
- Book Reviews*
- 465 Will Morrisey *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays by Leo Strauss*, ed. Hilail Gildin
- 465 *Rebirth of Classical Rationalism: An Introduction to the Thought of Leo Strauss*, ed. Thomas L. Pangle
- 469 William Faulkner, *The De Gaulle Story*

Interpretation

- Editor-in-Chief Hilail Gildin
- General Editors Seth G. Benardete • Charles E. Butterworth • Hilail Gildin • Robert Horwitz (d. 1987) • Howard B. White (d. 1974)
- Consulting Editors Christopher Bruell • Joseph Cropsey • Ernest L. Fortin • John Hallowell • Wilhelm Hennis • Harry V. Jaffa • David Lowenthal • Muhsin Mahdi • Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. • Arnaldo Momigliano (d. 1987) • Michael Oakeshott • Ellis Sandoz • Leo Strauss (d. 1973) • Kenneth W. Thompson
- Editors Wayne Ambler • Maurice Auerbach • Fred Baumann • Michael Blaustein • Patrick Coby • Christopher A. Colmo • Edward J. Erler • Maureen Feder-Marcus • Joseph E. Goldberg • Pamela K. Jensen • Grant B. Mindle • James W. Morris • Will Morrisey • Gerald Proietti • Charles T. Rubin • Leslie G. Rubin • John A. Wettergreen (d. 1989) • Bradford P. Wilson • Hossein Ziai • Michael Zuckert • Catherine Zuckert
- Manuscript Editor Lucia B. Prochnow
- Subscriptions Subscription rates per volume (3 issues):
individuals \$21
libraries and all other institutions \$34
students (five-year limit) \$12
Postage outside U.S.: Canada \$3.50 extra; elsewhere \$4 extra by surface mail (8 weeks or longer) or \$7.50 by air.
Payments: in U.S. dollars AND payable by a financial institution located within the U.S.A. (or the U.S. Postal Service).

CONTRIBUTORS should send THREE clear copies with their name, affiliation of any kind, address with full postal/ZIP code, and telephone number on the title page only; follow *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 13th ed., or manuals based on it; and place references in the text or follow current journal style in printing references.

Composition by Eastern Graphics
Inquires: Patricia D'Allura, Assistant to the Editor,

INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-0904, U.S.A. (718)520-7099

Reading Vico Three Times

THEODORE A. SUMBERG

Asked to comment on Grotius's book on war and peace, Vico (1668–1744) replies that it is not fitting for a Catholic “to adorn with notes the work of a heretical author” (*The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin [Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, Great Seal, 1963.] p. 155.) Such narrow partisanship, alien to the philosophic temper of the man, was probably meant to sit well with official and public opinion. In his *New Science*, Vico claims that the Republic of Geneva, being free and popular, allows considerable freedom in writing (*New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Ithaca and London: 1986, same translators as noted above para. 334. All references to this, the last or 1744 edition, will be to paragraph numbers). The lifetime citizen of Naples knew that it was no Geneva: he had seen the unenlightened despotism of the Austrian monarchy follow that of the Spanish monarchy. He also knew that the vigilant Holy Office had stigmatized three friends, and probably not far from his memory was the harsher fate of Bruno, Galileo, and others. It was not for an obscure professor in the royal university, a family man always pinched to make ends meet, to kick over the traces.

Yet conspicuous and comforting professions of orthodoxy do not tell the whole story. To the book climaxing his lifetime work he gives a title that recalls the *Dialoghi delle Nuove Scienze* of the widely decried Galileo as well as the *New Atlantis* and *Novum Organum* of the well-known heretic Francis Bacon. Moreover, does not an open venture into new science throw some doubt on the value of old science regnant in school and cloister? Some degree of boldness is therefore not to be denied a man writing in a post-Tridentine Italy, anxious center of the Counter-Reformation, which combatted dangerous ideas so vigorously. And yet he got his book published, not in one but in three editions without suffering any kind of persecution or pressure. He was never intimidated; never ridiculed; never forced to recant; never banished; never had his books banned or burned; and never even suffered the widely bandied charge of heresy. How did he do it? Some notes on his more obvious literary devices may help understand this most enigmatic philosopher.

I

In the 1730 edition, Vico informs readers that if they want to understand his book they should read it at least three times because it contains wholly new ideas (*La Scienza Nuova Seconda*, a cura di Fausto Nicolini, Bari: 1942, II, 174, para. 1137). Sharp minds would discover that need by themselves, so why was it necessary to declare it openly? Once published, the book would fall into the hands of ordinary minds since literacy was on the rise almost everywhere in western Europe. Ill at ease with new ideas, ordinary people might turn against Vico in a society traditionally violent against challenges to its central beliefs. Hence his attempt to disarm potential enemies by declaring at the outset that his book is so difficult and disturbing that readers should avoid it. The book's bulk, heavy parade of erudition, and frequent Latinisms might also ward off the danger of widespread reading.

If Vico wanted to discourage the reading of *New Science*, why write it in Italian and not in the Latin of his earlier writings? Three motives come to mind. He probably wanted to regain for Italy the intellectual primacy in Europe it had lost about a century earlier; this patriotic element in Vico will be noted later. The use of Italian might also please authorities looking over his shoulder. Further, like Descartes a century earlier, he wanted to give up the Latin of his teachers (*Discours de la Méthode*, penultimate para.). Latin would remain in the schools while new science, pursued chiefly outside them, would advance through a vernacular enriched with its new concepts.

Since Vico could discourage, not outlaw, reading by the many, he attempted frequently to show that he shares popular sentiments. He expresses safe ideas especially in the early and late paragraphs that casual readers could be trusted to glance at exclusively. One example is the last paragraph of the book (1112):

To sum up, from all that we have set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this Science carries inescapably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise.

Nothing could be more comforting or (to the reflective reader) more questionable since piety is obedient love while wisdom is the search for truth in doubt, not obedience.

The third-from-last paragraph (1110) holds that "our Christian religion" is true and "all the others" false. Nothing disturbing nor very new here either, while "our" creates a bond between the writer and the reader who would probably not notice the completely gratuitous nature of the clear-cut distinction.

In one paragraph (310) Vico narrates the Christian or scriptural view of man's history since Eden, while in others he narrates his very different view: early man starts as a wild beast, frightened, anxious, always in flight in search of food, shelter and safety. "In their monstrous savagery and unbridled bestial freedom . . ." (338)—this is how man begins according to Vico. Only after a

long wretched time does man arrive at the stable peace of civic order, that is, he goes gradually from low to high, not falling from high to low in one dramatic episode, as the Bible reports of man's fall from grace into punishment. Vico's view recalls Machiavelli: ". . . because in the beginning of the world its inhabitants, being few, lived for a time scattered, similar to beasts . . ." (*Discorsi* 1,2). Man was allegedly not made in the image and likeness of God. Of course, Vico does not acknowledge his source either in Machiavelli or in the savage state of nature described by Hobbes.

The second paragraph of the book announces that "the chief business of new science" is to reveal divine providence in human affairs. Not very novel, this assertion is yet repeated countlessly, perhaps to give a pious air to what is not pious. In support of providence, however, Vico criticizes the rival views both of Epicurus (chance or the blind concourse of atoms) and of Zeno and the other Stoics (the inexorable chain of cause and effect). He thus shares, apparently, contemporary Italy's suspicion of these two schools of thought. But he silently joins the camp of Epicurus: in his *Autobiography* Vico stresses the accidents occurring in his life, and if accidents are present in the life of one man they are present in the lives of all men. Yet to avoid an unacceptable association, he avoids generalizing on the inescapable role of accident in human affairs. He prefers to deny in general what he demonstrates in particular.

Vico also notes that many times men serve wide ends while pursuing narrow ones. Seeking merely to gratify their lust, for example, men fall into marriage and the family. To shake off the yoke of laws, free peoples become yoked to monarchs. Vico provides other examples (1108) where the end differs from the initial plan. The cunning of fortune or the cunning of providence? Vico will not disturb those invoking the second, but the careful reader will not overlook the scope of his observation that "men have themselves made this world of nations. . . ."—the "first incontestable principle of our Science" (1108).

II

Vico calls the Stoics the Spinozists of their day—a harsh criticism since Spinoza was ill-regarded in traditional circles in Vico's day. He wants it understood that he shares the common contempt of Spinoza, whom he charges specifically with wanting to create a society of hucksters (335). Probably Vico means that when people lose reverence for God, as understood traditionally, they fall into the merely contractual ties of buying and selling. Vico also separates himself from the views about chance of Epicurus and "his followers", Vico's term for Machiavelli and Hobbes (1109). That damning association, coming conspicuously toward the end of *New Science*, has special visibility and force. In the eyes of the world Vico will stay clear of bad company.

Sometimes he buries such company in silence, as in the case of Bruno,

Campanella, and Telesio. Their complete absence in a book citing hundreds of other writers is no doubt related to the fact that they came under a ban by the Church. The absence of these fellow Neapolitans, not merely fellow Italians, invites attention because of Vico's patriotic pride. This pride pushed him, astonishingly, to refer to the school of Pythagoras as "Italian" (499) though such pride was not strong enough to overcome tactical considerations inducing forgetfulness over immediate predecessors who were unquestionably Italian.

Especially noteworthy is the absence of Telesio in *New Science*, for this fellow Neapolitan was close in spirit to Francis Bacon, whom Vico praises highly—indeed Bacon is the only exception to Vico's careful avoidance of bad company. Bacon is "great alike as philosopher and statesman," Vico claims (499). Perhaps an avowed practitioner of new science could not very well deny the Englishman who pioneered the movement. Besides, the very discreet Lord Chancellor was probably less repugnant to Vico's contemporaries than writers less guarded in expressing new views.

Though on the *Index*, the works of Descartes circulated widely, even in post-Tridentine Italy, and he was in fact the man against whose views many writers measured their own. Much of *New Science* is in fact a quiet dialogue with him, though Vico mentions him only once (without praise) and only his *Dioptrics* (706)—hardly the most incriminating reference possible. But Vico joins hands with Descartes in a comprehensive condemnation of the past, whose ideas he calls "improbabilities, absurdities, contradictions and impossibilities" (163). Vico is rarely so forceful, so the attack invites attention. He really puts it strongly: ". . . all that has so far been written is a tissue of confused memories, of the fancies of a disordered imagination . . ." (330). He adds: "So, for purposes of this inquiry, we must reckon as if there were no books in the world" (330). Vico seems to be burning all past books in order to give science a clean slate.

But there is some irony in giving up all past books. Descartes had pointed out that

as soon as growing up permitted me to give up submission to my teachers, I abandoned entirely the study of letters (*Discours*, op.cit., I, penultimate para.).

In contrast, *New Science* is almost an encyclopedia of past letters—classical letters at any rate. These live for him as for no other previous writer; he is simply bringing to a climax the project of the Renaissance of recovering ancient letters. On this point he rejects Descartes.

As if no book were ever written—Vico does not make an exception of the book containing many books, the Bible. In fact he gives up the common practice at the time of citing it at every turn. Its absence, save for a few references to the Old Testament, is all the more noteworthy amidst countless references to classical fables, laws, histories, customs, religions, philosophies and political experience. For two references to Jesus Christ there are 97 to Jove and one

for Mary against 25 for Juno. Vico's new science will know where to focus attention.

No medieval book exists for Vico either except the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, a figure allegedly emerging from the "barbarism of the twelfth century" (159). Nor does fellow Neapolitan Aquinas exist for Vico. Also absent is Suarez, though Vico shut himself up in his house for a year to study Suarez (*Autobiography*, op.cit., 114). Needless to say, if Vico associated himself with the two masters of scholasticism, he would win the sought-after sympathy of the authorities, but a strong motive, we will see, moves him in this case to give up the tactical advantage of a link with good company.

Some 1112 paragraphs make the last edition of *New Science* a bulky work. Its bulk would not only repel the casual reader but also help its author hide antitraditional meanings ("... it contains two levels of meaning" according to Frederick Vaughan, *The Political Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, The Hague, 1972, XI). No different was the tactic of Montesquieu in his *Spirit of Laws*, published only four years after Vico's last edition. The Frenchman's first words are: "If in the infinite number of things which are in this book . . ." The forest is best hid among countless trees.

III

Your letter was short and in rereading it I made it long: thus Machiavelli to a friend (letter 119 in *Opere a cura di Franco Gaeta*, Milan: 1961, VI, 228). Vico's book is long and in reading it at least three times one makes it short. In essence it is an attempt to liberate natural law from theology. Dazzled by the triumphs of physics and astronomy, Vico seeks the same success in a new exploration of human affairs. He would prepare their *Principia*. For what we know, as Descartes had pointed out, is almost nothing compared to what remains to be known (*Discours*, VI, second para.). Vico shares contemporary exhilaration over the new horizon opened up for science. Faith in science, in its discoveries yet to come, was the central inspiration of his book.

Vico joins three writers—Grotius, Selden, Pufendorf—in seeking to give natural justice a new or scientific orientation. Of course, Vico repeatedly castigates them, both individually and collectively, and even more he openly approves a criticism of them by a Father Nicola Concina (974). A Dominican writer (1687–1756), Concina probably was held in high esteem at the time, and Vico's laudatory citation illustrates his desire to run with good company.

Of the three so-called princes of natural law, Grotius is the superior according to Vico (350). His chief work on war and peace, appearing about a century before *New Science*, had swept through a Europe intrigued especially by the claim that natural law would retain all its validity even if God did not exist (*Prolegomena*, para. 11). Vico acknowledges that the system of Grotius "will

stand even if all knowledge of God be left out of account" (395). Both men surely saw the master implication: if theology is the science of God and if (blasphemously) God can be said not to exist, then theology falls away as the basis of natural law, which can then join hands with science in a new career.

Vico also holds that there are properties of human nature "which not even God can take from man without destroying him" (388). Thus Vico paraphrases the same view of Grotius that the very nature of man is the mother of the law of nature (*Ibid.*, para. 16). The stage is thus set for fresh investigations of human nature. Vico is like a Columbus who comes upon new continents of human experience, including pre-Christian and extra-European. But whatever the continent visited, Vico comes upon the contingent facts of history as the new basis of an edifice henceforth emptied of the fixed and necessary truths of divine revelation.

God is mute, nature is mute, history talks. Replacing theology as authority, history gains new dignity as handmaiden of philosophy, a dignity resting on the belief that the new truths of history will give man the guidance he needs and allegedly never found before. Here is Vico's loyalty to the shift first called for by Machiavelli from moralizing and imaginings to going directly to "the effective truth" of things (*Prince*, 15). Vico does indeed go straight to the concrete and the particular, in endless detail in a large book covering man's experiences in many countries, but the path from what really happened to prescription is not clearly marked off, even for the assiduous reader.

The most important finding of Vico's voyage through history is that human nature has changed since man's original "fierce bestial freedom" (221). The chief change lies in the growth of reason. It is apparently not coeval with man, as was traditionally thought. For the first men were "ignorant of everything" (375), lived like beasts and only after long effort arrived at enough rationality to form commonwealths (629). Being malleable, according to the testimony of history, man can therefore go on to other changes or improvements. The optimism thus implied in Vico's scheme sweetens the sour temperament sometimes attributed to him.

If man's history, newly examined, yields novelties, it also comes upon constants, among them religious faith, contracting solemn marriages, and burial of the dead (333). On constants, Vico points out, "all nations were founded and still preserve themselves" (332). Here is the conservative element in raising natural right onto the new platform of history. A "philosophy of authority" is indeed the natural fruit of new science according to Vico (350). For strict laws are needed to turn man's ferocity, avarice, and ambition to the happiness of ordered society (132). Practically speaking, Vico is no revolutionary.

The need to accommodate himself to time and place would account for his open sympathy for religious faith, but this sympathy also expresses his genuine conviction that such faith is a necessary social bond. "No nation in the world", he points out, "was ever founded on atheism" (518). Nor can a nation preserve

itself in health in the absence of religion, Vico claims in citing Bayle's view to the contrary (334). Faith lacking, we remember, men become nothing but hucksters. But Vico does not explore the question, which is so important for modern man, of how much social force is retained by a religion denied its claim to truth. He does suggest, however, that modern man, bent on "his own pleasure or caprice", is starting to live "like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will" (1106). Vico may be the first philosopher, even antedating Rousseau (1712–78), who is anxious over the consequences of the modernity that he embraces. The most obvious such consequence is the senseless loss of the distinction between liberty and license: " . . . the unchecked liberty of the free peoples, which is the worst of all tyrannies" (1102).

IV

If religion remains as social bond, the need for censorship remains also as social self-defense. But since unfortunately censors are often stupid, wily authors must resort to self-censorship to avoid their brutal manhandling of writings. The three-edition publication of *New Science* in a dark period is therefore a tribute to Vico's self-censorship. He understood his success very well: in the last words of his *Autobiography* he dubs himself "more fortunate than Socrates" because after finishing his work he enjoyed "life, liberty, and honor" The adroit use of liberty avoids the dishonor that leads to loss of life.

Self-defense, though legitimate in a society harsh toward purveyors of dangerous ideas, was not the only concern of Vico. As a responsible citizen he would not hurt fellow citizens by attacking, not openly anyway, their darling ideas. His self-control shows his noble gentleness. However, we should not imagine him always shoulder to shoulder with fellow Neapolitans: knowing himself, he calls himself "a stranger in his own land" (*Autobiography*, op. cit., 132). A philosopher in a "closed society"—can he be anything else?

To defend the truth against public opinion was also Vico's concern. He did not want fellow citizens to thwart his dialogue with fellow philosophers. His reference to "we as philosophers" leaves no doubt as to his view of himself (*New Science*, op.cit., appendix, 1406).

Plato-like, he also distinguishes wisdom and opinion (706) while asserting that philosophy can help but few people (18). Finally, Vico notes in his 1725 edition that the ancient Greek philosophers often concealed their wisdom from the vulgar (*La Scienza Nuova Prima a cura di Fausto Nicolini*, Bari: 1968, 28, para. 39). He too writes for two audiences, since books meant for the few will also be read, or looked at, by the many. The result is much allusive writing, which is how friends and philosophers communicate with each other anyway.