Vichian normative political theory: history and human nature

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Abstract
The following paper offers a reconstruction of Vichian ideas in order to offer a substantial and significant contribution to debates over political legitimacy in the current climate of political liberalism and the problem of the universalisation or objectivity of liberal values. The two, Vichian, axes of a normative social thesis would be characterised as the claim that a society, characterised as a web of meanings, values and concepts, is legitimate if (1) it can justify its institutions and practices to its own members in terms of publicly shared values; and (2) can also demonstrate that the institutions and practices do not violate the basic needs which ground the invention of all human societies.

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1| The relevance of Vico

What I propose in the following paper is a reconstruction of Vico’s normative political theory. I call it a reconstruction in order to avoid the unnecessary entanglements of the deeper interpretative claim that this reading is consistent with Vico’s own ideas. Such an investigation, if undoubtedly interesting, would have to decide to what extent Vico is merely doing political sociology and to what extent he is involved in normative political science and also whether what will be claimed below coheres with the accepted interpretations of his thought or show where these others have erred. And such questions are better suited to a different intellectual forum. In talking of a reconstruction rather than an interpretation, I am freed to discuss what, in his writings, is most pertinent and salient to contemporary political philosophy. For Vichian thought, I contend, can make a substantial and significant contribution to debates over political legitimacy in the current climate of a confused and unsure liberalism; that is, the problem of the universalisation or objectivity of liberal values.

The main attraction of liberalism is its secular nature. Not only is it agnostic and indifferent to the supposed authority of religion, it also systematically ignores the putative normative commitments that arise from one’s history, culture and tradition in order to prescribe universal values for all men, at all times and in all places. And these values ground the legitimacy of institutions and laws: when the citizen asks why he or she ought to obey his or her government or obey a specific law, certain values belonging to public culture can be offered to justify the policy or action and these values embody substantive commitments. Liberalism’s supposed advantage over other political theories, especially in its traditional form, is clearly seen by the fact that the grounding political theory will support and promote the public values since they coincide; that is, laws are to
be justified by those values which our society finds rational (liberty, equality) because these values are either objectively true (realism), the most rational (coherentism) or the most reasonable (constructivism) and not just because they belong to the public political culture. If human beings are able to use their reason free from coercion, then they would accept the political values of liberalism as true and its vision of society as just and fair. These political values are universal moral values which exist independently of any particular society and can measure the justness of a particular institution, policy or practice. Religion, history and culture are a hindrance to free reasoning and ought to be removed from rational political debate.

However, such a robust statement of liberalism is contemporarily rare. The most vociferous opponents of liberalism’s claim to universal legitimacy are adherents of the social thesis, which include Aristotelian naturalists, Hegelians, communitarians, conservatives and postmodern theorists. (MacIntyre, 1985; Hegel, 1991; Taylor, 1977; Sandel, 1998; Walzer, 1987; Burke, 1987; Foucault, 1989) The social thesis can be descriptively characterised as the claim that the individual subject is only who he (or she) is by virtue of the society and tradition which brought him into being and which maintains and promotes his identity. The values he holds dear and which justify political institutions and arrangements are themselves products of, rather than the basis for, his community. In other words, reason giving is a social activity internal to a specific community or way of life. Put like this, the social thesis is a purely descriptive sociological claim and is to be proven true or false by empirical research.

The social thesis questions the claim that liberal values are universal. Like all values, it seems to contend, they are legitimate only for those agents brought up in a liberal tradition. Here, though, the adherents of the social thesis all go their separate ways: postmodernists would hold that this is a merely descriptive claim and that is the best one can hope for (Foucault, 1989); some communitarians would claim that this error
distorts our moral and interpersonal relations and society ought to be based on other values (MacIntyre, 1985); and conservatives would hold that liberal values are not justified in the terms that liberalism supposes, but due to the history and tradition which brought them into being (Burke, 1987; Hegel, 1991; Taylor, 1977). What interests me most strongly in this discussion is that there exists a problem for adherents of the social thesis who pursue any normative agenda, a problem which faces the most conservative forms of communitarianism through to the most radical forms of postmodernism; a problem which calls into question their worth as “critique” and the value of them as a basis for the evaluation of current political and social systems.

If the social thesis is merely a descriptive sociological claim, then critique becomes nothing more than a game and resistance is nothing more than a Nietzschean transvaluation of values (without the celebration of the new value of the aesthetic or the creative). The values of liberty, et al reflect only linguistic systems or power structures which dominate our way of thinking which is itself no more than an historical contingency. Postmodern or contextualist critiques simply state that the values of public political culture are justified in so far as they belong to the tradition or way of life. And different ways of life will have different values. However, this makes the ground of political critique or resistance impossible: if there are no independent, objective values from which one can judge the basic structure of society or its particular laws, how is legitimate resistance or civil disobedience possible? How can one judge the practices of other societies as immoral or unethical? And though such questions may seem misplaced when one seeks to decide how one ought to live in abstract terms, certain social practices demand an evaluative response; practices as extreme as female circumcision and human sacrifice as well as those as subtle as the distribution of group and gender rights. One needs to be able to normatively say that it ought to be thus and so, not just that it is thus and so.
Alternatively, if the social thesis expresses normative commitments, then one can say that such and such a society does (or does not) make worthwhile and valuable lives possible or instantiates certain worthwhile values. But such normative commitments will have to be justified by an appeal to a metaphysical system, whether this be an account of human nature (MacIntyre, 1985; Taylor, 1977); or the idea of rational history (Hegel, 1991). Yet, any such metaphysical system will be controversial and it would be a dangerous basis on which to build resistance to a political order unless one were assured of either its objective truth or, at least, homogeneous agreement amongst fellow citizens. Oddly, it seems, the vociferous critiques of the metaphysical foundations of liberalism are grounded in a far more controversial metaphysical system.

In this paper, I wish to interrogate whether it is possible to take a normative version of the social thesis seriously without relying on a controversial metaphysical doctrine. I shall concentrate on the problem of political legitimacy that confronts any thinker who is committed to the social thesis: if one denies the universal point of view and rejects the idea of values prior to and independent of society, it is difficult to imagine how the laws, policies and institutions of the state can be legitimated to the individual and such a stance seemingly leaves no moral space for protest and disobedience in the face of one's own values nor the possibility of a social critique of others' values and institutions. However, one possibility resides in Vico's attempt to write a new science for historical studies taking seriously the assumption that knowledge is, at bottom, an historical, expressivist and pragmatist phenomenon. By demonstrating that Vico offers a sociology consistent with the social thesis, I hope to show how his thought both requires and makes possible a normative element; that is a communitarian account of political reflection derived from Vico's historicism and his critique of social contract theory which avoids the charges of irrationalism and conservatism often put to adherents of the social thesis.
2| The basic postulations of Vico’s philosophical position

There are explicit counter-enlightenment features at the heart of Vico’s enterprise which puts his account immediately at odds with liberalism. First, he rejects the epistemological priority of first-person experience and, second, he dismisses the erroneous idea of ethical universality. If one generalises the grounding assumptions of liberalism as the notions of a universal, transparent knowing subject (the individual agent is in the best position to describe what he wants and why he wants it) and the doctrine of moral universalism, then Vico’s attack on Cartesian epistemology and the ethical theories of natural law and social contract clearly illustrate his opposition to the prevalent rationalism of his time. Yet he simultaneously sought to offer a new way of knowing (science) for the study of history, society and politics. The fundamental claim made by Vico in the pages of the New Science is that, contrary to the “new critical philosophy” of Cartesianism, history (or philology as Vico was to term it) and the study of societal change (ideal eternal history) is a science with its own principles and methods. Implicitly, his claim is more robust: historical knowledge is privileged over and above the other sciences.

As I have earlier stressed, this paper proposes a reconstruction of Vichian thought and so I shall begin by listing, at the risk of anachronism, the major aspects of his philosophical position characterised in contemporary language with only minimal referential support. The significant features are: (1) the rejection of metaphysical realism; (2) epistemic anti-realism; and (3) moral anti-realism. And it is these three features which ground the theoretical commitment to the social thesis.

(1) The first claim I want to make about Vico is that he rejects metaphysical realism and the correspondence theory of truth. Vico’s opposition to the Cartesianism of his own time was not an expression of anti-scientism but the implicit embodiment of a central distinction between two orders of knowledge: la vera (the intelligible) and il certo
The Cartesians had adopted one method and if a discipline could not be rendered intelligible following a simple, deductive, rationalist approach, then it was not to be considered a branch of knowledge. Yet any approach that posits immediacy and transparency as the dual criteria of knowledge poses a problem for Vico who had recognised that the proper and rigorous investigation of historical documents (myth, primitive religions and first-hand accounts) demanded that the inquirer put aside his immediate grasp of the words and concepts encountered in these documents. It would be an error to assume that the witnesses of the time would be using language and concepts in a way identical with the immediate use that the historian would understand.

So, in the discourse of history, the aim is not the clarity of certainty but the ideal of intelligibility.

And this movement away from immediacy to intelligibility was grounded in a very pre-modern understanding of *cause*. Insofar as the knowing subject produces something, he can know the “causes” of it. “Causes” is to be understood in a broader sense than the modern scientific over-determination of it as the cause-effect relationship. Vico tells us that “… if the truth is what is made, to prove [the truth] by means of causes is the same as to effect [it].” (AWI 64) For Vico, cause includes form and matter in physics, purpose in ethics, teleology in metaphysics, and, most notably, explanation in geometry whereby if a conclusion is deduced from a syllogism, the two premises “cause” the conclusion. (Caporali, 1992, 58-59) To explain something is to give a full account of it in terms of all the axes of causes, and this account, even if not a modern cause-effect relationship, causes it to be the case.

A full explanation, that is the making intelligible of a phenomenon or object rather than immediately knowing it, requires the full description of its causes and this is only possible with a certain subset of phenomena. Vico holds that only those things which are created by man can be rendered intelligible through the articulation of their
causes. Thus, mathematical knowledge and geometry can be known with certainty because the system, concepts and connections between them were invented and not discovered. And, more fundamentally as we shall see, they were invented for a reason. As Vico would put it at the beginning of his intellectual odyssey: “We demonstrate geometrical truths because we make them; if we could demonstrate physical things we would make them.” (MCS, p. 41) Thus, the human is able to render mathematics and geometry intelligible, but not physics because nature was not made by man so a full set of causes (most notably, the purpose) is always going to be beyond his or her ken.

(2) Vico is an anti-realist about knowledge claims and, more specifically, epistemic assertions are an expression of an historical worldview and their truth is measured by whether they cohere or not with the foundational categories of that worldview. The exact nature of his anti-realism is not, however, explicit and seems to be an expressivism when we talk about humans in historically young ages, growing into a pragmatism and, finally, when knowledge takes on the semblance of rationality in the later stages of civilisation, his anti-realism consists in a coherentist position. His anti-realism is grounded in the verum-factum principle or the theory of maker’s knowledge which identifies knowing with making. The assumption of the verum-factum principle clearly sets Vico’s position in opposition to Descartes’s rationalist project. Physics is an imperfect knowledge because the full lists of causes, which, for Vico, must include the “why” and the ultimate explanation, is just not available to the human mind since it was not created by human activity. Vico clearly distinguishes between what is intelligible (deductions derived from artificial concepts forming a coherent system of meaning) and what can only be described (things which are not made by man: nature, matter, et cetera). The division of knowledge into two distinct orders severely challenges Descartes’ rationalist assumption that human reason is adapted and adequate to accurately represent reality in epistemological terms, since the very basis of such a system – mathematical,
geometrical and analytical truths – requires that truths discovered by reason inhere in reality. Vico stated openly that reason does not discover such truths, but invents them. What the human being can know certainly is not what corresponds or is, in some way, related to an independent reality, but instead what is consistent with and coheres with those invented, seemingly axiomatic concepts which make knowledge possible.

The invented concepts and categories that make a phenomenon intelligible are not transcendental or universal, but historical and history is the science which will give the inquirer a full explanation of the wherefore of the categories by which a certain agent experiences and articulates the world. Vico identifies the concepts of human knowledge as historical and arbitrary expressions of an emotional relationship between the human being and the world. Knowledge is made possible by categories that are produced by a specific social and cultural tradition.

Vico proposes a particular human faculty, that of ingenuity. Ingenuity is the power to create “imaginative universals”, that is the faculty of the human mind that creates concepts which make experience possible. And these concepts are intelligible in the sense that they express the necessary desire on the part of human beings to order the world which faces them in response to fear and need. So, the purposes of a worldview, embodied in a people’s myths, metaphysics and ethics, can be known. A people produces its worldview through an expression of mythopoeic creation and such a system of knowledge is, at first, pragmatic: the world is ordered to facilitate the satisfaction of desires, to overcome the insecurities of fear and shame and such an ordering gives rise to new behaviours, roles and concepts. (NS1 ¶24)

However, imaginative universals should not be equated with rational concepts; they are the possibility of knowledge because they express the first man’s expression of fear and shame in the face of the world. Man’s initial relationship to reality is emotional and not epistemological. The sophisticated reason we celebrate today has its roots in
myth and poetry as the first attempt to explain the world and gain dominance over reality. So, knowledge is, at base, pragmatic: the world is ordered to facilitate the satisfaction of interests (most notably, firstly, to eliminate fear and, secondly, shame) and this ordering gives rise to new values, motivations and aims. The primitive expressions of the first human beings originated the “credible impossible”, or the invented, social realm of knowledge. For Vico, ingenuity and imagination create “credible impossibles”, or open up the possibility to attempt a description of reality which is necessarily beyond the ken of the human. Once in place, pragmatism gives way to coherentism and men's reason tries to systematise and refine these basic concepts into a total representation of reality.

Knowledge is produced by myth and sophisticated reason has its origin in the institutions and history which gave rise to its concepts and lexicon. If we forget the historical becoming of concepts, we commit the “conceit of scholars” where the mind judges what is unknown to it in terms of what is familiar. Such unreflective, immediate epistemic grasp of a phenomenon leads to inaccurate and approximate knowledge of the beliefs, ideas and desires of historically and culturally different human beings. Hence, the need for philology or an historical account of the emergence of meaning. Truth does not describe some metaphysical reality, but rather the way of life that makes knowledge and ethics possible.

(3) Not surprisingly, Vico is also a moral anti-realist and, for him, ethical assertions are expressions of values and obligations determined by the social structure one inhabits. The rationality of moral statements amounts to, once more, their coherence or incoherence within the systems of social meanings, values and norms. The discourse of history and specific knowledge of civil institutions can be rendered intelligible, in a way that physics never can, because the grounding concepts that structure such knowledge have an origin in the minds of humans, their passions and their
needs.

Vico’s general criticism of natural law theory is consistent with his claim that there is a non-rational birth to human society. He attacks the ahistorical account of natural law and its idea of universal law accessible to all rational beings. (His criticism is directly aimed at Epicurus, Plato, Selden, Pufendorf and Grotius, and indirectly at Hobbes.) It is a mistake to think that the laws of the thinkers’ own time can be adequate for earlier ages. So any political system which is derived from a set of principles concerning the immutable nature of the human being is erroneous because there is no such essence of the human being. The human being as subject of law and morality is created and produced by those institutions, ideas and conceptions of the good found in his time and not externally in some platonic or scientific realm. The metaphysical error – "the conceit of scholars" – by which philosophers project their own constitution on the past and assume that men of different societies and epochs are basically the same has infected work in political and moral theory form the Epicureans and the Stoics to theories of natural law. (NS\textsuperscript{1} ¶¶12-20; NS\textsuperscript{3} ¶¶120-131, 309-329)

However, Vico’s principal target is social contract theorists who make three cardinal errors: one, they assume that men in the past thought using the same concepts and desired the same ends as we do: “For the philosophers have meditated upon a human nature already civilised by the religions and laws, in which, and only in which, philosophers originated;”. (NS\textsuperscript{1} ¶23) Two, the theorists claim that civilisation began with a contract, yet contract making requires advanced and sophisticated social practices. In order to make a contract, a whole host of institutional and moral practices must already be in place. And, three, the theorists are unable to distinguish what is common to all men and what is contingent to this particular social embodiment of the human being. To make natural law prior to and the basis of customary law is to turn things upside down: laws partly arise from the particularities and contingencies of the origins of society and
find their basis in the barbarism of peoples. Natural law is nothing but the sophistication and refinement of customary law, but one must never forget its ‘lowly’ origin in order to fully understand it. (NS\textsuperscript{1} \S19-22) In other words, the enquirer take laws and conventions that were invented and are produced by society as the foundation of society and therefore turn the proper explanation on its head. (NS\textsuperscript{3} \S122, 127, 666, 668)

In summary, then, the laws of society arise from the emotions and from custom and not from reason. The understanding of one’s world and also one’s roles and responsibilities is a product of culture and history. And both epistemic and moral assertions are either expressions of an emotional relationship with one’s surroundings or meaningful only if they cohere with the concepts that develop from this primordial ground. Such a characterisation of Vico’s thought replicates and theoretically reinforces the principal claim of the social thesis. However, even though Vico rejects the knowing subject which is central to modern epistemology and also moral universalism derived from the rationality of man, he does not commit himself to a hopeless and self-refuting relativistic position. Already, there is minimal rationality: both epistemic assertions and moral assertions are true if they cohere with the categories of a specific society and its central values, meanings and norms. Knowledge is still possible, but one needs a new science and a new method in order to achieve it. All the sciences, disciplines of knowledge and arts have arisen from the social existence of the human being, but that does not mean that one cannot understand their causes or explain them. They were made by humans and hence we can offer a full explanation of the why and how of the existence of our epistemological, metaphysical and ethical doctrines as long as we remember that they do not correspond to reality, but are, in fact, made possible by the social institutions, practices and languages which gave birth to them. Vico’s aim is to identify those constraints and the form that such societies take. One ought not to look for universal values or a universal account of human nature, but universal requirements
for a group of human beings to be characterised as a society. And these universal requirements will delineate the form, rather than the substance, that knowledge and ethics will take. It is this formal universality at the ground of all human endeavour, knowledge and creation which makes possible political, ethical and epistemological systems and may offer a possibility to ground normative commitments consistent with the social thesis.

3| The philological-philosophical method

Vico’s New Science is the postulation of the principles of proper historical enquiry and it will elevate historical knowledge above and prior to any metaphysical, logical or ethical knowledge. The method he will employ is twofold: philological, or historical, and philosophical. The former is the attempt to avoid what Vico saw as the error of his predecessors, that is the “conceit of scholars”, or the conflation of how we see the world given our historical, social existence and how the world actually is. To explain something, to know it, is to realise that it is a production of men’s minds and its ultimate cause is to be located there. In order to make manifest the how, the why as well as the what of an event or an idea, one must reveal its origins in those institutions and primitive ideas which make it possible.

Therefore, Vico will begin with a philological or historical investigation which will draw out the truth hidden in the fables, myths and primitive religions of a people. He will not treat these as mere superstition or false knowledge, but as embodiments of the metaphysics and theology, the logic, the morals, economics and the politics of a people. In short, he will firstly lay bare their worldview since it is in relation to this that their ideas and practices will find their ultimate justification. It is this philological approach which is contrary to the principles of Cartesianism and natural law theory since the enquirer must “… descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those
quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort.” (NS³ ¶338) The philological aspect of Vico’s method highlights the mythical and poetic origin of knowledge and morality in the primitive metaphysics and theologies of earlier civilisations. It reveals that modern knowledge systems employ concepts produced non-rationally in worldviews that sought to order and make sense of the world.

Yet, his enterprise will also be philosophical, but not in the sense that it should be concerned with metaphysical reality as that is beyond the scope of human knowledge and it is conceit on the part of the scholar to assume otherwise. Instead, the philosophical element of his enquiry consists in abstracting from our nature those elements we share with our ancestors, in order to discover those conditions which must be in place for an historical and social human being to exist. (NS³ ¶332) The social critic can observe, in the customs and languages of society, the human choices and motivations which gave rise to society in the first place. Vico’s new science should carve away the contingent social existence of man from the necessary way in which man must exist in order to be a knowing and ethical subject. His method is, then, hermeneutical. Social meanings and frameworks constitute the ground from which the social critic can interpret behaviour and are necessary for an appropriate description of an historical agent’s intentions and actions. To start from the assumption that human beings are universally the same all the way down is an error: history and society constitute an agent’s identity. To understand the actions of agents, one must first understand the possible range of motivations available to them and these possibilities will be determined by social and historical location. (Skinner, 1974; Gadamer, 1993) So, not only does Vico’s thought embody substantial non-modern claims, his methodological approach is also explicitly at odds with the dominant scientific rationalism of his time.

If Vico can discover fundamental ideas which are universal to all ways of life,
then he may be able to say something about that which makes worldviews possible: “Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples, unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth.” (NS 1 ¶144) What, then, are the uniform ideas one discovers embodied in all institutions and civil societies no matter their geographical or temporal location? Vico identifies three institutions necessary for social existence: first, religion, for civilisation and knowledge has to arise from the attempt to explain the cause of reality. (NS 1 ¶8) There is a storm, a flood, a drought because the spirits are angry; there is an abundant harvest because the spirits are merciful. It becomes possible to offer primitive explanations of the events and occurrences of everyday life in terms of a coherent system. However, nothing substantial can be deduced about the content of religions, their hierarchy of goods, the roles and obligations of their disciples. All of that remains a philological (particular) enquiry and not a philosophical (universal) one. So, for example, the new science will reveal that societies will be unified by an understating of the world about them in terms of the seasons of their geographical location. Religion, at base, expresses this symbiotic relationship between the society and its means of subsistence and such agricultural rituals will determine the form, but not the substantial content, of a religion. (One can easily talk of the history of the Christianisation of Paganism, and how the rituals move from expressive, to pragmatic and finally “rational” status.) The content of the religion forms the basis of one’s metaphysical worldview and furnishes a society with the concepts that will later be abstracted and refined into a science proper.

The second universal institution, marriage, sets up a household and the economics of later institutions. It frees the human from the binding desires of hunger and sexual need. Finally, respect for the dead is universal to every human society. It is true that Vico always talks about the burial of the dead as universal – strangely since he was so intimately knowledgeable of classical myth and poetry – but he makes clear what
the underlying principle of such a ritual is when he states: “Nor, finally, has there been any nation, however barbaric, in which the unburied corpses of its members have been left to rot above ground, for such would be a nefarious state, i.e. a state sinning against the common nature of men.” (NS¹ ¶10) The ritual itself is not the significant point, it is the proper, human respect paid to the dead; that is, the simultaneous recognition of death in another and that the other was like oneself.

Humans act upon principles which regulate action over and above mere survival and these three institutions capture the historical moment when the human being as opposed to the animal emerges and creates a symbolic, meaningful world which is a reflection of his expressive nature. It opens the possibility of both a (necessarily fictional if understood as realism) metaphysical description of the world and an ethical system of normative rules: one ought to obey the Gods, to provide for one’s family and to respect the dead. (NS¹ ¶10; NS³ ¶¶7-13) These are the formal conditions of society and identity, of being recognised as human, but one can say nothing, without philological research, about what the Gods command, what goods should be provided to your family and how to respect one’s dead.

Vico, on the basis of his identification of social as opposed to brute existence, recognises a significant capacity of the human being that make this social existence possible: common sense. Furthermore, all nations express common sense which forms the origin of law in unreflective obligation: “Common sense is judgement without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race.” (NS³ ¶142) So, if all men have the power of ingenuity to form those concepts that will provide the basis for institutions and all men share common sense, or a shared, unreflective disposition for law, then those institutions which embody ideas universal amongst all men may reveal a ground common to all men. (NS¹ ¶9) Note here that there is also a common sense not only applicable to a peculiar society, but to men as
a whole. The philological and philosophical investigation of social and civil institutions will disclose what must be the origins of history and humanity; that is, the moment when history and civilisation began. (NS$^3$ ¶338)

Vico’s New Science is interested in two related questions: how does human history arise and what is the original function of the imaginative, created world of metaphysics? History is made possible by the emergence of society and society itself arises by men’s universal disposition to law (although the content of law is variable), the systemising of reality into a symbolic and meaningful whole in order to have power over it and a universal natural disposition to social relationships. The world of metaphysics arises from the refinement of religion with its roots in explanatory animism and allows men to channel and systemise their desires and exert control over reality.

4| Possible reconstruction of a Vichian normative theory 1: historical appropriateness

The consideration of Vico’s thought so far offers an account of the descriptive aspect of the social thesis: liberalism is in error because it conflates the particular social constitution of the human being with the universal essence of the human being. Therefore, normative judgements derived from this basis will repeat this error. Adherents of the social thesis who wish to offer a normative political theory based in an Aristotelian account of human nature also commit the same error: if a society is to be just or legitimate it must make certain types of life possible and unjust or illegitimate societies, contrarily, obstruct worthwhile types of life. (MacIntyre, 1985; Taylor, 1977) Yet, in order to justify such a normative element, the account of human nature requires a full metaphysical explanation, which given the exposition of Vichian thought so far offered, can be nothing but controversial (a product of the social processes that brought it into being).
How, if this avenue is presently closed, is it possible to offer a normative ground for social critique and evaluation on the basis of Vichian thought? In the first edition of the New Science, Vico comments that all the sciences, disciplines and arts have arisen from the origins of humanity, through a process of refinement and sophistication (though, be careful not to confuse this with progress as we understand it). His new science will describe the stages (ideal eternal history) through which a society passes in order to reach modern, democratic civilization and the abstract concepts of philosophy and the order of natural science. These refined and sophisticated concepts are derived from and dependent on the primitive societies which ground on our own and to forget this will precipitate a fall into error (as the natural law theorists did). Vico’s hermeneutical method is the method with which one can understand (both geographically and temporally) distant cultures and through understanding them, comprehend ourselves that bit better, but it seemingly cannot form the basis of an evaluative critique.  

Over and above a philological method to show the origin of particular social structures in languages and ways of life, Vico’s new science also offers a philosophical method which reveals regularities in the rise and fall of societies; a philosophical narration of history. Could the ideal eternal history form the basis of an evaluative critique of social arrangements, institutions and practices? Could one say, superficially and colloquially, that these values (liberty, equality) are or are not apt for a specific historical stage and other values (honour, filial ties) are or are not the standards by which social structures ought to be evaluated?

Let us firstly determine exactly what type of philosophy of history Vico is actually offering and, for simplicity, let us consider three possibilities: metaphysical history, empirical history and hermeneutical history. What follows does, unfortunately, suffer from broad stroke syndrome, but it will allow a better understanding of Vico's position. First, metaphysical philosophy of history, perhaps best instantiated in a certain
interpretation of Hegelian thought, is either rationalist or theological and its method normally deductive. (Hegel, 1990) One need only fix the ultimate end of history and those rules that govern it to be able to describe the phases through which the beliefs, civilisations and institutions of men must pass and one can quite easily do so from the armchair of one's own home. This cannot be Vico's position for two reasons. First, such a rationalist approach to history rests upon an assumption of progress characteristic of the Enlightenment. (Mendelbaum, 1971) Hegel, for example, held that the stages of history were determined by the progress of Spirit, but this leads to a counter-intuitive consequence: the evils of history are ultimately justified since they bring about progress. Individuals, to put it rhetorically, are mere grist to the mill of Spirit. (Hegel, 1991, §340) Vico is thoroughly counter-Enlightenment: there is a sequence of ages, but no progress from one to another, merely change. And second, Vico continually uses empirical evidence: he makes recourse to contemporary documents, and – more significantly – he holds that historical knowledge yields new facts unattainable to reason alone.

However, his approach to history is not empirical like that of a Hobbes or a Locke and, further, it cannot be since the facts drawn from the past need to be worked over if the historian is not to misappropriate and misinterpret them. The conceit of scholars reminds us that history is a theory laden exercise and, for Vico, the full explanation must give the reasons why what has occurred has occurred and not just note the fact. The methods of empirical history, however, might be more sophisticated than pure observation: one can use induction to draw out empirically verifiable theories such as "every revolution is followed by a period of terror". Again, though, Vico wants more than a mere explanatory law, he wants the reason why what occurred occurred, not just that it more often than not follows such a course.

Vico's model is unsurprisingly hermeneutical: it combines a theoretical approach (ideal eternal history and the knowledge one can deduce about men) with empirical
revision of the ideal theory. One uses the structure of ideal eternal history as the horizon of one's understanding to bring one's comprehension of others into line with how they see themselves and the world. His science generates new knowledge of the actualities of which we, the knowing subjects, are ourselves the authors, agents endowed with motivations. It is a science of historical agency. (Berlin, 2000, 41) Induction for Vico is the humanist account of induction: it is the creation of universal in order to structure the world, not the discovery of them inherent in the facts of reality.  

So, how does the hermeneutical account of the philosophy of history operate? When we ask “Why did x Φ?”, we presuppose that (i) x, like us, is an agent and this formal, abstract reduction makes understanding possible. X will act to achieve goals and to further what he believes to be the good, and he will justify what he does in terms of reasons which can be made intelligible to us; and (ii) the substantive content of these reasons and these goods may well be very different from those that we ourselves hold to be good reasons. X's motivations depend on his way of life and its central beliefs and values and philology will make us familiar with these. So, history involves three steps: (1) I generate and propose categories of understanding, drawn from my own experience and believed relevant to the object in hand (imagination or “induction”); (2) I interrogate the historical object before me and reflexively ask whether these concepts render the object intelligible or do these concepts need to be revised; and (3) given what I have learnt I revise these categories in order to disclose a better understanding of the agent involved in the object.

So, what role does ideal eternal history play in Vico's system and can it supply the ground for normative critique? Ideal eternal history is the path that societies would follow if the situation and context of their rise and fall were merely theoretical. It plays much the same role as the Newton’s theory of motion plays in falling balls: if there were no wind, no other forces, et cetera, then the ball would fall like this. Similarly, a society
would follow the path of ideal eternal history, but empirical contingencies (geography of a country, meetings with other peoples, disasters, geology of the land, and so on) also play a role. History is knowledge that requires the combination of metaphysical narration (ideal eternal history) and empirical narration to do with causes in the world (NS³ §§349-350). Ideal eternal history is a regulative element that describes the perfect manifestation of a certain stage of history and is a formal requirement for an accurate description of historical agency.

Let us return to the normative version of the social thesis: a society is justified or legitimate if it makes worthwhile lives possible. How do we tell which lives are worthwhile? That depends upon the substantive content of the good which is relevant and appropriate to the agent, class or epoch in hand. We need to regulate this by firstly determining the phase of history which is relevant. A good society is one which satisfies the human being’s desire to order the world (ingenuity), to form social structures (the three institutions) and to live according to laws (common sense). Formally a society to be a society must meet these requirements, but substantially (what good constitutes a worthwhile life) a society cannot appeal to universal human nature, but to the norms applicable to its phase of history. So, given the table (figure 1), one can extrapolate the appropriate virtues and vices of a worthwhile life depending upon the relevant stage of history.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social form</th>
<th>Nature of one’s political leaders</th>
<th>Justification of Laws</th>
<th>Form of Government</th>
<th>Authority/Political obligation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Of gods</td>
<td>The favoured or envoys of the gods</td>
<td>Divine right</td>
<td>Theocratic</td>
<td>Divine awe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of heroes</td>
<td>Nobles believed to be descended from gods</td>
<td>Might is right (tinged with divine authority)</td>
<td>Aristocratic</td>
<td>Militaristic form of obligations – strict obedience to the law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of men</td>
<td>Human: reasonable and accountable to law</td>
<td>Human reason and duties</td>
<td>Democratic</td>
<td>Trust placed in people who represent my needs and my intelligence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 1: Vico’s sequence of the ages**

So, what is the role of the social critic on this model? How can one say that this social practice should or should not be tolerated? There are two roles as I see it: (1) to remind us that interference in other cultures and societies cannot be on our own terms, but must be on theirs (that is, values consistent with their way of life) if we are to respect their self-understanding. Given the above discussion, though, there is also a further normative claim: (2) to ensure that the laws and institutions of one’s own way of life are consistent with the ideal of one’s phase of history. The notion of human rights cannot be used to evaluate the actions of Homeric characters just as the motivation for heroic glory cannot justify actions of our contemporaries. And when the values of legitimation are at odds with the institutions of a specific time, normative evaluation becomes possible in the relativistic sense of “one ought (not) to Φ in such and such a culture/society/context.”. Revolution may well be permissible when the phase of history is changing and values are out of time.

For example, one could describe the English civil war and the succeeding years
until the Glorious Revolution (with the correlate theoretical works) as an attempt to throw off the yoke of outdated legitimation practices, that is the divine right of kings and traditional natural law, with more modern contract models. In figure 1, it is clear that such an explanation would in many ways mirror the change from the age of heroes to the democratic age of men. And, alternatively, civil disobedience may be permissible when particular laws and social practices do not reflect the ideal phase of history. So, the civil rights movements of the twentieth century were an attempt to express the agreed and substantial value of equality. As a central value, equality was taken as a given for and appropriate to the social structures and arrangements of that century but was not actually instantiated in practices and institutions.

So, we have a political norm applicable to all societies: evaluation of the institutions and practices of a society ought to be historically appropriate. Prior to the rejection of this picture – or at least the recognition that, as it stands, it is incomplete as a possible normative account – one ought to say what is advantageous about it. First and foremost, it seems to offer a theoretical framework from which one can justify the vernacular intuition often offered by people against internationalist intervention. When countries use military force in the name of liberty or democracy, or when economic aid is tied to conditions of free trade, one inevitably hears voices of differing levels of articulacy protesting. From "they are not ready for it yet," via "it is not consistent with their own way of life" and "the material conditions are not yet in place" to the most rabid "pure and simple cultural imperialism." These intuitions can now be justified by an underlying theory. The benefits of this model include, one, the refusal of cultural imperialism that seeks to impose capitalism or democracy on societies that just aren’t ready (to put it colloquially); two, a deep justification of the genealogical critiques of Western values with the consequent disclosure of a genetic fallacy if these values are held to be objective or universal and normatively applied; and, three, a theoretical but non-
metaphysical justification of the social thesis. Moreover, and this is what separates it from mere descriptive accounts, it also sets normative and rational limits to proper critique in terms of historical context.

Such benefits are far too costly, however, and if this were to be the be all and end all of a Vichian normative political theory, it would be extremely undesirable. Take, for example, the controversial social practices of human sacrifice and female circumcision. It is arguable that these practices can be justified in terms appropriate to their stage of history and hence, on this picture, be legitimate. Human sacrifice and female circumcision would be quite legitimate in the age of gods, where laws are justified by divinity and ratified by oracles. And such a conclusion is surely counter-intuitive: we would desire to interfere in such practices but this would violate the norms of our theory. The only resolution is to reject the theory itself as undesirable. Such cases involves a collision of epochs of history and the theory presented above seems to advocate an apartheid of civilisations. The consequences of such would be an unacceptable quietism in the face of aspects such as gender inequality in other phases of history and a complete inability to deal with one of the most pressing problems of contemporary political philosophy, viz. conflict of values within conditions of pluralism.

Such a discussion has not been in vain, though. Taken on its own, the preceding historical account of normativity is not complete. It does, however, supply criteria for distinguishing between good and bad philology and brings us nearer to understanding alien cultures. In order to understand the substantial account of good embodied in a society, one needs to identify its grounding historical stage. But, in order to criticise social practices such as human sacrifice and female circumcision, a further normative axis is required.

5| Possible reconstruction of a Vichian normative theory 2:
historical naturalism

A clue may well lie in the considerations of when one can protest or seek to change a law or institution and when one can bring about revolution. In the former case of protest, the aim is to conserve the institutions and practices of society when the values which ground society are not substantiated; in the latter revolutionary case, the aim is to change the institutions and practices of society because the values which used to legitimate practices no longer “speak” to the people. The underlying reason is oddly familiar in both cases. The aim is to keep society stable, either directly by enforcing those values the state promotes; or indirectly by demanding the substantiation of those values the state ought to promote. When one's political arrangements can no longer be legitimated by outdated values, then the people will demand new justifications of the authority of the rulers and if these are not forthcoming, they will reject the structures as it stands, leading to instability. Alternatively, when social practices do not live up to the values and norms of public culture, then the people will see it as unjust and demand change. Again, if their call is not heeded, the state loses its authority and this will lead to instability. (It is interesting to note that stability is the reason Vico dismisses Epicurean accounts of political authority and, by extension, utilitarianism.) (NS1 ¶12)

We can now see that when the values of one's society are not substantiated in its institutions or practices, or when the dominant values of the public political culture no longer reflect the "voice" of the people, then change is desirable. Change is desirable in order to avoid instability. Yet, stability cannot be a good in itself since, intuitively, tyrannical and oppressive yet stable societies are undesirable. So, why is stability for the right reasons (thus excluding oppression and tyranny) a good?

Vico's opponents, of course, had an answer: stability is good since under conditions of stability, the individual is able to secure his or her property in Locke's broad sense. A stable society is better than an unstable one because it secures and
protects the liberty and property of individuals. However, such a liberal statement is not consistent with Vichian thought for two reasons. First, he would be guilty of introducing a metaphysical description of human nature into his thought that, without further elaboration, would be guilty of the "conceit of scholars". And, second, such an introduction of basic desires would lead to a familiar (but inferior) contract model of political legitimation.

The aim of this argument is to retain the advantages of historical normativity (the justification of the role of the social thesis in explanation, the recognition of the social thesis as problematic for any universal, substantive normative claims, and the norm of historical appropriateness) without committing social criticism to the worst excesses of relativism (irrationalism, quietism in the face of historically appropriate yet intuitively undesirable social practices and the inability to evaluate inter-culturally and inter-historically). The contract theorist does so through the postulation of substantive desires, but such a universal description of the human being is a metaphysical error for Vico.

Let us take a few steps back to an earlier claim by Vico: human beings have a universal common sense that predisposes them to law-regulated behaviour. These laws can be characterised as the laws of a class, of a people, of a nation but also of “the entire human race”. (NS1 ¶142) In other words, there are values which are operative in our practical reason that appeal to one’s identity not only as a member of a specific class, nor only as a member of a specific society nor people, but also and above these as a member of the human race. What here is meant by value? I propose what I assume to be a rather uncontroversial and minimal description of a value when I assert that values are motivations worth having. (Wolf, 1993) Take, for example, that when my village is attacked, I have the simultaneous desires to flee and to fight. The value here is that desire which one desires to act upon when faced with these drives pulling in opposite
directions and the hierarchy can be explained rationally. So, I desire to flee the invaders, 
but I also desire to protect my family and my staying and fighting is rationally connected 
to this second consideration. The second desire is privileged, that is, it is the one which I 
ought to act upon, because the web of meanings that constitute my society propose the 
values of family, honour and heroism.

Put like this, it is clear to see how such values can be social productions 
corresponding to the anti-realist relativism of Vico’s picture. Heroism and honour rely 
upon a specific society, a specific division of labour in the family and specific social 
meanings for their value. However, what would the nature of values which are operative 
on the whole human race be? There are two possible candidates for universal values in 
this sense, as I see it. One, values which are universal are objectively true values 
understood in terms of moral realism or universal coherentism. The value of respect, for 
example, may be held up as a universal value which acts as a binding motivation in the 
subjective set of all human agents because the statement “it is right (or good) to respect 
others” is truth-apt. Morally real values trump both subjective and cultural values in the 
motivational set. We, fortunately, need not delve into the complexities or merits of such 
a position since it is so clearly at odds Vico’s own position. Such values would depend 
on a metaphysical picture beyond the ken of the human being and Vico has already 
dismissed such a position in his consideration of natural law theory.

Two, these values may reside in a universal account of human nature, so we 
might want to return to naturalism and empirical facts about human beings. However, is 
this not also a return to some metaphysical description of the human being? The answer 
is both yes and no. We do not directly describe the nature of human beings as 
characteristic of the social contract tradition, that is we do not reduce human beings to 
atoms or simple entities within our metaphysical worldviews, but approach the question 
of human existence through the hermeneutical enterprise of philology. The aim is to
find in what institutions all men agreed and through these to postulate certain formal 
motivations characteristic of human beings in opposition to non-social animals. If one 
interrogates social existence to find a commonality between men that explains the 
existence of society and hence the universal aspect of social existence, then this is not a 
metaphysical error. In modern parlance, top-down approaches lead to errors (using the 
concepts of our worldview will corrupt the understanding), whereas bottom-up 
approaches are to be encouraged (where the universal arises from consideration of 
difference). The difference lies in the fact that these social contract theorists sought to 
use the account of human nature to derive substantive structures and arrangements for 
the state. Vico uses human nature in a minimal sense.

Vico’s notion of society is an odd synthesis of traditional views. Like Aristotle 
(and Hegel), Vico does not think human beings can exist independently from a social 
order, but like Hobbes, Locke and the social contract tradition, he sees society as an 
artificial and not a natural entity. To put it simply, society is a man-made object, but is 
necessary for a certain species of animal to become human through the re-channelling 
and redirection of desires and passions into the creation of a moral, socially adjusted 
being. Society begins with an imaginative leap and the invention of a religion; the ideas, 
rituals and practices of which form the basis of social living and the substantive dictates 
of practical reason. This initial imaginative leap creates the basic axioms (“credible 
impossibles”) of one’s practical reason and substantiates them in institutions, a 
conception of the good and a web of social values and meanings. Society is artificial, in 
the barest sense of being made by man, but its creation is not motivated by reason but 
emotion, first amongst all, fear and this non-rational birth will express certain 
motivations common to all men in shared institutions. The error is to turn our modern 
concepts back on their non-rational origins, rather than to let the non-rational origins 
narrate how our modern concepts came about.
Does this, then, give us any hope in a naturalism of values? The commonality of humanity is represented, as we have seen, by three universal institutions: religion, marriage and respect for the dead. These in turn represent that the fact that humans *qua* humans will have a basic web of beliefs about creation, purpose and the intelligibility of the universe (religion, science, metaphysics), they will have basic divisions of roles and responsibilities and an interlaced hierarchy of obligations and duties (family and class structures), and also they will see death as, in some sense, intrinsically significant in the life of the community as a whole and to the individuals who constitute that community (rites of death, sanctity of human life, the intrinsic worth of human life, a system of rights, *et cetera*). Conjecturally it seems that human beings have a predisposition to law-regulated behaviour motivated by the need to dominate what is unknown to them and have a universal desire to die in their own fashion, in a way consistent with the meanings of their society. The natural facts of human beings are that death is significant and society, with its roles and responsibilities, is necessary. At base, then, humans fear meaningless death and want to live well. So far, so Hobbes. Such a claim, however, is formal and empty until the philology of a specific society tells us what it is to live well and what a meaningful death would consist of. Hobbes’s mistake (and that of most social contract thinkers) is to seek simple substantial natural desires. Vico, in contrast, holds that it is society that supplies the substance to desires and human nature that gives them their formal structure alone. (Verene, 1988, 9)

If one is to imagine what life would be like for a *human* at a specific historical time, then one must firstly recognise that in order to be a human he or she must be moulded by those primitive institutions necessary for social living, that is marriage, the rites of death and religion which reflect the natural conditions of human existence. To imagine outside these is to imagine a being which is not human. And to comprehend the particular nature of a culture, one must look at the actual form of its myths, institutions
and language in order to understand its view of the world and the agent’s own understanding of his roles, duties and obligations.\textsuperscript{11}

Remember that for a full explanation of a phenomenon, that “causes” of it can only be known if the object of knowledge is a creation of humankind. Such an explanation will not only involve the how and when of an object but, most importantly, the why. Why is understood as for what reason, a purposive non-modern form of causality. Since societies are artificial, that is inventions of men’s actions, then their wherefore can be known to us. The creation of societies is an expression of fundamental universal desires in human beings. One associates in societies for reasons of security, for the preservation of the family, for protection from meaningless harm and death. (NS\textsuperscript{3} ¶347) However, we ought to be careful, because such considerations in a Vichian picture are too minimal to do substantial work (as they would for Hobbes or any other rational naturalist). What constitutes security is always to be understood substantially in social terms and will change from society to society. Harm and death are permissible for other reasons, “bloody” good reasons, but what constitutes “bloody” good reasons is a social matter, what in contemporary ethics is often brushed over with the non-committal “get out of gaol free card” of “all things being equal.” The good is variable (unlike Hobbes who goes for the lowest common denominator). Hence a society is a good society if it sets the limits and values that make meaningful lives possible, supplies a given structure of social relations in which the individual can recognise himself as a constitute part and satisfies the grounding reasons for the association of individuals.

On this picture, normativity arises in response to two questions: one, is this social practice consistent with one’s way of life? And, two, does it violate the basic needs of an individual? The two axes of our new normative social thesis are: a society, characterised as a web of meanings, values and concepts, is legitimate if (1) it can justify its institutions and practices to its own members in terms of publicly shared values (it is historically
appropriate); and (2) can also demonstrate that the institutions and practices do not violate the basic needs which ground the invention of all human societies (minimal naturalism).

Vico holds that the commonality of humanity is found in his social existence as constrained by a minimal naturalism and, so, he grounds his historical science in the faculty of imagination regulated by basic universal facts about human beings. It seems that, at base, the aspect of universality for political judgements is to be grounded in naturalism, but Hobbes’s project, which sought to unite ethics with self-regarding reason to generate political norms, reduced human beings to asocial, atomistic bundles of desires that are too simple to explain the multifaceted variety of social behaviour. For Vico, naturalism constrains the faculty of imagination which produces the foundations for substantive judgements of reason only indirectly. Hobbesian rational naturalism is too restrictive since it begins and ends with reason alone: all men want welfare, that is the maximal satisfaction of desires. However, this underdetermines the possible constitution of welfare and has the consequence of oversimplifying sociology by not supplying the necessary concepts for a full understanding of human behaviour. Humans often sacrifice their own felicity, and that of their families, for other social goods, and unless one can understand the nature of these sacrifices, sociology as a science remains incomplete. The basic needs and desires of humans can be satisfied and manifested in a myriad ways depending on one’s worldview.

The philological-philosophical method is indirectly grounded in a minimal naturalism because the faculty of imagination is constrained by these considerations in the production of possible social worlds. A reflective attitude to one’s social practices and mores will disclose their contingent grounding in an imaginative creation of a possible way to exist humanly. Such a minimal naturalism when applied to the issue of conflict demands that for a social fabric to fulfil its role, then it must embody the human
commitments to the value of life, the significance of death, the goodness of security, the
rightness of law, the badness of unnecessary pain, and so on. And, more importantly,
the violation, repression or contradiction of any of these requires justification which
appeals to central values of the tradition, the grounding myth. Any society which
engages in violating practices is either illegitimate or needs to offer a “bloody good
reason” for the violation.

So, in short, here is the final proposal for Vichian normative political theory.
The legitimacy of the institutions of a particular state are to be evaluated along two axes:
one, are the institutions legitimated immanently by those historical values and norms
understood from the point of view of the agents who belong to that tradition (historical
appropriateness); and two, is the understanding of the agents corrupted and are their
basic needs and interests violated by the social structure (minimal naturalism). Such a
normative theory holds good to the observation of the social thesis and seemingly does
not invoke a controversial metaphysical account for the justification of its normativity.

Bibliography

Abbreviations to works of Vico:

AWI – *On the ancient wisdom of the Italians taken from the origins of the Latin language*
(1710), *Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. Pompa, L., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1982.

NS¹ – *The First New Science: the principles of a new science of the nature of nations leading to
the discovery of the principles of a new system of the natural law of the gentes* (1725), *Selected Writings*
(1982).

NS³ – *The New Science: principles of new science of Giambattista Vico concerning the common
Cited texts:


**Notes:**

1 It is one which I shall have to deal with in the future and it will come as little surprise that I do hold that the reconstruction I offer here is consistent with the Vichian project and his central ideas. There is a further problem with Vichian reconstructions and anachronism, though, that bears mentioning. Given the interpretative constraint (“the conceit of scholars”) whereby we tend to understand everything immediately in terms of what is familiar, the use of contemporary language may generate very real errors in reading his work. I hope that this has been avoided here.

2 This comment is, of course, a mere rhetorical hook, it is made into a substantial point in the words that follow. One, however, need only look at the development of liberal accounts of political legitimacy from the universal truth of natural rights in Locke through to the political liberalism of Rawls to have an experience of the shying away
from substantial claims about the value of liberal “goods”.

3 Beluval (1969) suggests that Vico was not familiar with the writings of Descartes himself, but aimed his critique at him though Cartesians such as Pascal, Malebranche and Spinoza. The translation of *la vera* as ‘intelligible’ rather than the more literal ‘true’ follows the suggestions of Fisch (1969).

4 Hence Berlin’s (2000, 41-57) interpretation of the importance of the imaginative faculty, or the hermeneutical method by which the historian understands the world as the people of the time must have understood it.

5 Abbreviations to the works of Vico are given at the end in the bibliography.

6 Of course, such criticisms of the Cartesian project depend upon the *verum-factum* principle and it is possible that the rationalist might just deny the cogency of that assumption.

7 Such a claim is consistent with Jürgen Habermas’s (1984, 1:1, iv) evaluation of hermeneutics in general.

8 Boccaccio in his *Genealogia Deorum* proposes a theory of induction that does not move from multiplicity to common property, but one which expresses a common property in order to give meaning to the multiplicity (poetic expression). For Vico’s relation to humanism, see Grassi (1990).

9 Vico describes only three ages. Empirically, there may be more than three, but I here don’t consider alternatives.

10 Although, Caporali (1992) demonstrates that in Vico’s earlier work two basic human needs (liberty and preservation) founded a positive normative appraisal of and an
admiration for the Roman Republic.

11 The position advocated here is replicated in the thought of Hampshire: “The two elements in procedural justice - a universal rational requirement of two-sidedness and respect for locally established and familiar rules of procedure - are linked as two natural needs in our minds in their practical and political workings. If either the rational requirement or the respect for custom breaks down and ceases to operate, we should expect catastrophe. Conflict will then no longer be resolved within the political domain but will be resolved by violence or the threat of violence, and life will become nasty, brutish, and short. Whatever one’s conception of the good, such anarchy will generally be reckoned a great evil, alongside starvation and near-starvation, disease, imprisonment, slavery, and humiliation.” (1999, 91-92)