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Desire and the End of History: Repetition in Vico and Lacan

Timothy D. Harfield, M.A. (cand.)

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Department of Sociology
University of Alberta
HM Tory Building
Edmonton, Alberta
T6G 2H4 CANADA

e-mail: timothy.harfield@ualberta.ca
website: <http://www.ualberta.ca/~timothyh/>

Abstract

Taking its point of inception from similarities between Giambattista Vico's notion of the cyclical movement of history (*ricorso*) and Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic concept of repetition, this paper undertakes to integrate the two models in order to arrive at a controversial model of history rooted in the ontology of the desiring subject.

Central to both Vico and Lacan is an understanding of a cyclical movement, a kind of 'to and fro' motivated by a central desire whose satisfaction is tantamount to death. Vico, for example, describes history as cycling through five stages (rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall), each corresponding to a degree of piety, or desire after the divine. Civility, for Vico, is a result of divine providence which is at work in history establishing and restoring humanity in its relationship to God when, without intervention, pride would return it to a solitary and bestial state of nature. On the other hand, taking the subject as his unit of analysis, Lacan offers a similar account. For Lacan, the subject is only constituted qua subject as a result of a moment of artificial separation from the 'real' (a primordial state of undifferentiated being) through an originary act of signification. The subject, for Lacan, is separated by a desire for that object whose otherness is responsible for the subject in the first place. And so, says Lacan, the subject is inevitably caught in a repetitive movement toward that thing which is primordially 'lacked,' and away from it because its achievement would mean a loss of differentiation, or symbolic death. This paper will draw out affinities between the providence in Vico, and the death drive in Lacan, and suggest a reading of Vico's (meta)history as one which is sustained by a cycle of desire (piety) and whose end (purpose and completion) is a fulfillment that, to use Derrida's expression, is always a fulfillment to come.

Desire and the End of History: Repetition in Vico and Lacan

Central to both Vico and Lacan is an account of history as cyclical, characterized by a repetitive ‘to and fro,’ between proximity and distance, in relation to an object of desire whose achievement is tantamount to death. Lacan, for example, posits a subject that only comes to contract its subjectivity as a result of self-alienation. Originally existing as undifferentiated from the world—or in what Lacan would refer to as the ‘real’—the subject is originally lost to itself for, in the absence of language, which is to say the basic capacity for abstraction, the subject is unable to constitute itself—or identify itself—as *for-itself*. In the real, the subject exists in a state of absolute proximity to itself, and so of pure potentiality.

Hypostasis, or what Levinas describes as “the event by which the existent contracts their existing,”¹ is, in Lacan, the moment at which the subject achieves a traumatic split from the real through the ability to take itself as an other. Subjectivity (which is to say consciousness or identity) for Lacan, is fully realized only as a result of some originary *act* of separation from the real, that would allow the *subject* to picture the given-to-be-seen *for itself*, objectifying it under their own gaze. The subject, then, achieves its identity at a cost: its original unity with the real:

This split, after awakening, persists—between the return to the real, the representation of the world that has at last fallen back on its feet, arms raised, *what a terrible thing, what has happened, how horrible, how stupid, what an idiot he was to fall asleep*—and the consciousness re-weaving itself, which knows it is the same, keeps a grip on itself, *it is I who am living through all this, I have no need to pinch myself to know that I am not dreaming*.²

Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s essay on “The Intertwining—The Chiasm,”³ Lacan suggests that human subjects are always already ‘pictured,’ belonging to that which is given-to-be-seen under

¹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*. Trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1987), 43.

² Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan, Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1998), 70.

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

the gaze of a hypothetical all-seeing other. For Merleau-Ponty, argues Lacan, it comes down to a question of

reconstituting the way by which, not from the body, but from something that he calls the flesh of the world, the original point of vision was able to emerge. It would seem that in this way one sees, in this unfinished work, the emergence of something like the search for an unnamed substance from which I, the seer, extract myself. From the toils (*rets*), or rays (*rais*), if you prefer, of an iridescence of which I am at first a part, I emerge as eye, assuming, in a way, emergence from what I would like to call the function of *seeingness* (*voyure*).⁴

The Lacanian subject is therefore constituted by desire: the subject *is* only to the extent that they are able to extract themselves from the world and make it other. This is accomplished, suggests Lacan, only through a kind of artifice, a screen onto which the world is mapped *for* the subject. On the one hand, the subject can only come to know itself as a whole, or as *gestalt*, through the intermediary of a mirror which stands in for the objectifying gaze of others. The subject, then, can only take itself as an object of knowledge to the extent to which it is capable of separating itself from itself, and viewing itself as an object for others:

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as *gestalt*, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which appears to him above all in contrasting size (*un relief de stature*) that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him.⁵

On the other hand, just as the subject, by nature coincident with itself, must effect an artificial separation in order to know itself, so, too, must the subject, by nature undifferentiated from the real, effect an artificial separation from the real in order to take *it* as an object of knowledge.

The subject, therefore, wins their identity only by losing the world; yet, in losing the world, the subject also longs to get it back; herein lies the cruelest of ironies. On the one hand, the subject lacks, and so is motivated by a drive toward satisfying its most basic desire: a return

⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 82.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1977), 2.

to the real. On the other hand, however, such a return would also mean giving up the subject's differentiation *qua* subject. It would mean laying down their gaze, their ability to 'picture' the world in language, and so their experience of what Lacan calls *symbolic death*.

At the heart of every subject, then, are two opposing and mutually exclusive drives: the life-drive (*eros*, or the drive to preserve subjectivity), and the death-drive (*thanatos*, or the will to self-negation). This opposition at the heart of the Lacanian subject establishes a repetitive movement toward and away from the traumatic moment that first produced the subject's split from the real. The subject is drawn to the real, but upon contacting it immediately resists, fleeing from death and back into life.

The subject in himself, the recalling of his biography, all this goes only to a certain limit, which is know as the real....An adequate thought, *qua* thought, at the level at which we are, always avoids—if only to find itself again later in everything—the same thing. Here, the real is that which always comes back to the same place—to the place where the subject in so far as he thinks, where the *res cogitans*, does not meet it.⁶

The subject's history, then, is inaugurated by a split, which the subject seeks to both preserve and destroy. To eliminate this originary split and absolutely accept one's primordial place in the real, is to lose identity and so absolutely abolish the possibility of history.

Although concerned more with the social than the individual, Vico's account of human history is rooted in the ontology of the subject in a way similar to Lacan. Human history, argues Vico, emerges with, and as a result of, the achievement of subjectivity. In a fabulous ontogenetic narrative, for example, Vico posits a primordial state in which the human world was populated by dumb animals seeking only after their own utility. Lacking all capacity for language, these original humans are just as Lacan suggests: undifferentiated, given-to-be-seen, pictured:

By fleeing from the wild beasts with which the great forest must have abounded, and by pursuing women, who in that state must have been wild, indocile, and shy, they became separated from

⁶ Lacan, *Four Fundamental concepts*, 49.

each other in their search for food and water. Mothers abandoned their children, who in time must have come to grow up without ever hearing a human voice, much less learning any human custom, and thus descended to a state truly bestial and savage....They would be quite without that fear of gods, fathers and teachers which chills and benumbs even the most exuberant in childhood.⁷

Human history is inaugurated, according to Vico, by the first emergence of subjectivity, and this subjectivity is realized for Vico in a way that, once again, resonates strongly with the Lacanian account. According to Vico's account of ontogenesis, Human being emerges only through trauma, an event capable of startling the potential subject in such a way as to provoke its separation from the rest of nature -- in such a way as to take itself as an other in relation to others that are not itself.

In his fabulous and mythological account of human origins, Vico uses thunder to represent that traumatic encounter with otherness necessary to produce the differentiation of human beings from their environment. Consciousness, argues Vico, was produced by the need to 'picture' the Other, and it was the fear produced by thunder that originally created the need to picture. In picturing thunder as an Other (as variations of the sky god Zeus), these first subjects were forced to other themselves in relation to it: consciousness is formed, for Vico, when the tautological "I am I" becomes the "I am not not I."

Of such natures must have been the first founders of gentile humanity when at last the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightening, as could not but follow from the bursting upon the air for the first time of an impression so violent....Thereupon a few giants, who must have been the most robust, and who were dispersed throughout the forests on the mountain heights where the strongest beasts have their dens, were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know and raised their eyes and became aware of the sky. An because in such a case the nature of the human mind meads it to attribute its own nature to the effect, and because in that state their nature was that of men all robust bodily strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they *pictured* the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes.⁸

⁷ Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 113.

⁸ Vico, *New Science*, p. 117-118.

To his account, however, which to this point resonates fairly strongly with Lacan, Vico adds the suggestion that God, having created human beings for relationship with Him, is active in human history, intervening in ways that restore and preserve piety when it is lost to pride. The concept of providence is central to Vico's account of the subject in history, and thunder is the providential act par excellence. According to Vico, humanity's original descent into 'bestiality' came about only after the sons of Noah rejected the religion of their father⁹ – a kind of symbolic death through the killing, not only of the father, but of the Name that guarantees the fathers authority. In refusing God's authority, Noah's sons sought to install themselves. Not realizing that their vanity was not sufficient in itself to guarantee the symbolic order, the descendents of the sons of Noah lost themselves to themselves. In the absence of divine providence, subjectivity was impossible to sustain; and in the absence of providence, humanity was helpless to find itself. In light of this situation, thunder is a supernatural intervention intended by God to shock humanity back into relationship with Himself.

Vico, then, agrees with Lacan that human beings are driven toward their own destruction. However, he rejects the idea that there is any sort of internal 'life drive' whose aim is the preservation of subjectivity. Instead, Vico conceptualizes the human pride, or selfishness, that Lacan includes under the rubric of *eros* as a necessary part of *thanatos*. For Vico, it is the will to self-sufficiency that is tantamount to absolute differentiation, the will to symbolic death, and the end of human history.

In providing for this property [of being social] God has so ordained and disposed human institutions that men, having fallen from complete justice by original sin, and while intending almost always to do something quite different and often quite the contrary—so that for private utility they would live alone like wild beasts—have been led by this same utility and along the aforesaid different and contrary paths to live like men in justice and to keep themselves in society and thus to observe their social nature....The conduct of divine providence in this matter is one of

⁹ Vico, *New Science*, 9.

those things whose rationale is a chief business of our Science, which becomes in this aspect a rational civil theology of divine providence.¹⁰

In a way that anticipates Nietzsche, then, Vico here observes that the semblance of the good of Reason also contains the seeds of its own annihilation.

The fact that, for Vico, pride and *thanatos* are one in the same is evidenced by the appeal to another, and more ancient, creation narrative, one that predates and, in fact, conditions the possibility of a subjectivity that could be lost and found. Vico follows the Biblical account of creation, claiming that subjectivity first came into being as a result of Divine activity, and that it was sustained by an original and absolute piety, or relationship of Creator to created. Human history, however, does not begin at the beginning, but rather with the fall, and with an increasingly absolute desire to reject God and to install humanity in His place. In the absence of God, human beings seek only after their own pleasure and utility and quickly fall into a Hobbesian state of nature in which life is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

For Vico, then, human history is cyclical, following a pattern of rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall.¹¹ As in Lacan, each of these stages correspond to a degree of proximity to the object of desire; and, like Lacan, Vico argues that a satisfaction of the subject's desire is tantamount to the end of history. Furthermore, Vico is similar to Lacan to the extent that he situates the subject between two conflicting desires. Where they differ, however, is in the fact that Vico locates *eros* outside of the subject, suggesting it, not as a desire for self, but as a desire for an other that can only be maintained through the desire *of* the other: a providential desire that can only be maintained through divine activity.

¹⁰ Vico, *New Science*, 4.

¹¹ Vico, *New Science*, 79.

The main reason for this difference between Lacan and Vico is their differing opinion on the nature of the Other as an object of desire. Lacan's other is nominal, a reified artifice necessary to the constitution of human subjectivity. In other words, the Lacanian subject is only possible because of a projected fantasy that it must refuse to acknowledge: "Is it not precisely because desire is established here in the domain of seeing that we can make it vanish?"¹² Vico's transcendental object of desire, on the other hand, is an Other in a real sense, God, and it is only a 'real' relationship with this Other that, in Vico's account, guarantees the possibility of subjectivity. In contrast to the Lacanian subject, which loses itself as a result of an absolute proximity to the object of its desire, a proximity that reveals its spectral heritage, Vico's subject only loses itself only as a result of absolute distance. In contrast to Lacan, therefore, who positions the subjects as perpetually bouncing between two poles, compelled, as it were, toward a moment of death that it refuses to accept for reasons of self-preservation, Vico's subject, but more precisely civil history, is compelled from without, through providence, toward a piety. In Lacan, agency is one in the self; in Vico it is won in the Other. This is not to say that Vico ever suggests the possibility of coincidence with the Other, God, or transcendental object of desire. As he concludes his work, "from all that we have set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise."¹³ Piety is not fulfillment, but rather sustained desire in the hope of achieving a proximity that can never be. In this, the psychoanalytic notion of *eros*, as a will to self-preservation, is more akin to Rousseau's *amour propre*. Piety, as a continual movement toward an Other sustained by the desire of the Other is love truly, and so *eros* in the richest and deepest sense of the term.

¹² Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 85.

¹³ Vico, *New Science*, 426.

To conclude, Human history is, for Vico, a story of loss. Civil history is possible only as a result of the alienation of its subjects, and it is oriented toward its end(s) by *eros*, or providence, and *thanatos*, or self-supremacy. Vico's account establishes the two 'ends' of history, poles between which human history necessarily vacillates. In his demand for piety, Vico establishes human history as a process sustained, not by the achievement of either end, but rather by the *promise* of an impossible moment when identity and the fulfillment of desire coincide: an impossible return to that original and paradoxical moment of true identity rooted in an absolute abrogation of self in relation to God. In a Derridean way, then, Vico's historical identity is constituted by an infinite and repetitive movement sustained teleologically, by the promise a future that is always and necessarily to come.

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