Who Was Giambattista Vico?

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) was an original philosopher of culture who contributed in diverse ways to the intellectual life of Europe from the Eighteenth Century onward. His theories about culture and human development anticipated those of Hegel, Spengler, Marx, Piaget, and even Freud and Lacan. His idea of sequential stages of history and thought anticipated the meta-theories of Hayden White, Stephen Pepper, and Karl Mannheim, where periods of history, schools of thought, political attitudes, and modes of perception are determined by the forms of metaphor. He was promoted by such major figures as the French historian Jules Michelet, the Italian humanist critic Benedetto Croce, the Irish novelist James Joyce, and the British philosopher and critic Sir Isaiah Berlin. Yet, partly owing to his style of writing but also to his attempt to frame his theories within a mixture of poetic imagery and autobiographic involvement, Vico’s works have been among the most misread and misunderstood of any philosopher. Vico’s conception of the human imagination, based on a dynamic model of signification, is perhaps the most original and complex ever conceived. His ability to relate linguistics, psychology, environmental factors, and philosophy within a single theory of culture remains, at least in its ambition and scope, unparalleled.

Vico was born in Naples, Italy, the son of a bookseller. He received his early education from local grammar schools and Jesuit tutors. Although he graduated from the University of Naples in 1694 as a doctor of Civil and Canon Law, he characterized himself as a life-long autodidact. His self-instruction began at the age of seven, during his convalescence from a concussion. The attending physician predicted that the boy would either die or grow up to be an idiot. Vico mobilized this omen as a scholarly leitmotif. He characterized his personality as split by the dry humors of melancholy and choler. He argued that history was a parallax view afforded by the twin eyes of geography (contingency) and chronology (necessity). More prophetically, Vico purposefully contrived his major work, the New science (1744) to strike readers as ingenious or idiotic.

Vico’s first important works, one on methods of humanistic study and a second on truths hidden in ancient etymologies, appeared in 1709 and 1710, respectively. A major study of universal right was completed in 1720-22, and the first two parts of his autobiography were finished in 1725 and 1731. Vico’s major work, the Scienza nuova, or New science, was first published in 1725, with a completely revised edition, the Scienza nuova secunda (Second new science) appearing five years later. A third, slightly revised version was published in 1744, just before his death. This version is also called the Second new science, but it is regarded as the definitive edition. The English translation made in 1948 by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch has served as the main reference point for a revival of interest in recent times among a broad range of scholars.

Vico as an Anti-Enlightenment Philosopher of Culture

Vico is typically portrayed as the first important anti-Cartesian. He attacked René Descartes’ rationalism as abstract and unconcerned with cultural invention, human nature, or historical specificity. However, Vico was a Cartesian in his own way. While Descartes conceived of a
subject secure in its own self-recognition (cogito ergo sum), Vico proposed an equal but opposite subject, an empty place-holder unable to witness his/her own nature except by creating networks of symbolic relations with others and nature. Keenly concerned with the mind’s dynamic and self-constructing nature, Vico defined a necessary logic within and through the contingencies of everyday experience, a necessary sequence of developmental stages (“ideal eternal history”), which focused on the question of human origins and how the first human thought and language were distinguished from animal cognition and sign-use.

Vico’s original theory of mythic thought was based on the idea of a universale fantastico (imaginative universal) by which the first human subjects unknowingly disguised their own natures as demonic elements of the external world. Because the human mind was at first unable to form abstractions, it used metaphors involving the body and the senses. Because of this, Vico held that the first perceptions of all cultures were structurally consistent, a means of thinking through things (bricolage, as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would call it).

Vico saw that the creation of culture involved two kinds of inversion of “near and far”. The first was an exchange of what was spatially near and far. The (unconscious) sense of the body found its antipode in the sky, where ether was the animus of a god as robust and sensual as the first humans, whose voice was thunder and whose indecipherable messages were written in constellations and other celestial phenomena. The second inversion was a moral inversion of private and public. Borrowing from Bernard Mandeville’s “thesis of the bees” (1705), Vico held that humans civilized themselves by inadvertently producing public goods (institutions, customs, protections, etc.) by acting out of private self-interest. For example, by grouping together into cities to strengthen the hold of the families over the plebs, the aristocrats instituted a collective civic religion that protected all within the city, laying the foundation for later secularization and representative government.

In ways reinforced through references to mirror images, irony, and metaphor, Vico seems to hold that each cultural institution, act, and object is “anamorphic” in that it embodies these two exchanges of near and far. Anamorphy is a term typically reserved to describe visual images that are concealed within ordinary images, visible only from a specific viewpoint. For readers of Vico, the idea of anamorphy can be extended to cover (1) Vico’s account of the composite nature of human creations and (2) Vico’s methods — some of them strikingly optical — for discovering and deciphering their complexity. Because inversion began with perception, where the extended world of nature was seen in terms of bodies with demonic intentionalities, Vichian comprehension can retrace this process in reverse by paying attention to a topological rather than projective (Cartesian) use of dimensions and distances. As Vico points out, for the first humans the heavens were no further away than the tops of nearby mountains; Hades was as close as the bottom of the furrow. Near was construed as far. Distances were constructed as ritual relations.

Vico’s theory of history itself was an anamorph — a “parallax view” produced by the “twin eyes” of geography and chronology. Geography stood for the immediate contingent conditions that gave rise to the great variety of human cultures; chronology was the necessary sequence of cultural stages through which all cultures (as well as all individuals, institutions, and even events) had to pass. Each stage was defined in terms of a form of metaphor. In the first, the mythic “age of gods”, humans unknowingly back-projected their robust sensuality onto the screen of external nature, regarding physical appearances as divine signs in need of translation. Mythic mentality was purely metaphorical but unaware of metaphor as such. It saw nature filled with literal messages from gods to humans. The practice of divination, the first form of knowledge, concealed the human authorship of natural signs.

Divination gave rise to the development of writing, the natural sciences, linear time (through geneology), and prosaic rather than poetic language. As demonic nature and the cyclopean family were supplanted by models of individual autonomy (the fable of Odysseus’s encounter with the
Cyclops is a signature of this transition), a heroic age replaced the mythic one. Metaphor yielded to the more logical forms of metonymy and synecdoche. Family-based theocracies were secularized into representational governments with written laws. Finally, the power of language to distinguish objects from attributes laid the ground for a modern mentality able to abstract and objectify nature. Human relations could be conceptualized. Truth could serve logic rather than divine will. But, Vico’s account of modern thought returns to the theme of barbarity. Where the violence of the age of the gods came from the body, modern violence is mental, the result of irony and the inversion of the principle of “pubic goods from private vices”; conscious attempts to do good inadvertently but unavoidably cause suffering.

Vico’s historical stages applied also to individual development and even individual experiences, but because of this final ironic downturn, Vico did not privilege modernity as did Jean Piaget, whose scheme of developmental mentality resembles Vico’s. Mythic thought was barbaric through the domination of the senses; modern rationalism was barbaric in its addiction to technique and conceptualization. Thought began in poetic wildness and ended in logically justified madness. Yet, there was hope in this symmetry for a return or rebirth (ricorso). Clearly, Vico intended The new science as a preparation for this rebirth. The Irish author James Joyce exploited the sequence of the “ideal eternal history” and rioro rather clearly in his novels, Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. The theme of “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” underscores the dynamics and scale-independence of Vico’s three-part schema.

**How Was Vico Received?**

Vico has meant different things to different ages and ideologies. Modern philosophers have used Vico to counter positivism and technological domination. Academics have used Vico to protest the tunnel vision of disciplinary practices. While German National Socialists in the 1930s extolled Vico for his theory of nations, Marxists in the 1920s and 1950s applauded his account of the rise of the proletariat. The panorama of the New science embraces a wide array of subjects. Therefore it was not surprising that, in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, prominent scholars from a variety of fields — humanists, philosophers, and social scientists — met in a series of conferences aiming to restore Vico to his rightful place in Western culture.

Geographers typically pride themselves on their ability to synthesize across disciplinary lines, but none participated significantly in these Vico revivals. This is difficult to explain in light of several timely and comprehensive introductions, published in the 1980s, which specifically addressed Vico’s value as a philosopher of place. The first was made by British scholar, William J. Mills. Mills positioned Vico opposite the Positivists and focused on the importance of Vico’s principle, *verum ipsum factum (est)*, interpreted variously as “the made and the true are convertible”, or “humans can have true knowledge of what they have created”. Donald Kunze, an American geographer, responded to Mills by showing how the imaginative universal was an even more useful principle for creating a Vichian philosophy of place.

These complementary introductions seemingly had much to offer humanist geographers responding to the growing use of quantitative methods. Humanists perennially faced charges of pastiche because they drew on a bewildering variety of resources. They might have found in Vico the basis for comprehensive, grounded theory. This did not happen. Vico, important for nearly every humanistic and social science, played no significant role in the development of human or humanistic geography. One geographer, John Pickles, wrote persuasively of Vico’s potential for providing a revolutionary view of the imagination’s role in scientific as well as everyday thought, but his monograph did not gain the attention it deserved. Kunze published a book on Vico as a philosopher of place in 1987; but, as the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan commented in an otherwise positive review, the difficulty of Vico’s ideas and language puts him and his commentators at a considerable distance from the norms of geographic thinking. The years following these
introductions yielded no more than scattered short references by a few sympathetic scholars. Ironically perhaps, the most successful study employing Vico as a philosopher of place is the Shakespearean scholar John Gillies’ *Shakespeare and the geography of difference* (1994). Gillies has created a new geographic paradigm by showing, through Vico’s *New science*, how art can serve as *prima facie* evidence of the sense of place and place’s role in culture.

**Does Vico Have a Future in Geography?**

Typically, Vico revivals have taken the form of pairing the (unfamiliar) Vico with a (more familiar) contemporary figure. This has forced Vico to be the scholar’s silent partner, a *Doppelgänger*, a secret source who makes things happen but never gets proper credit. Vico could instead be used to reconstruct existing theory. The Slovenian scholar Slavoj Žižek has referred to this process as one of making “impossible short circuits” that discover, in familiar works, more in them than they themselves. Vico is capable of bringing new dimensions even to thinkers who are seemingly remote from him; but, more significantly, he is able to address the issue of the signifier (the word, image, symbol, or other material indicator of something) through an ingenious, if barely acknowledged method, which could be called an “optical proof”.

In the semiological terms of signified (idea) and signifier (material indicator), Positivistic science reinterprets and emphasizes the signified as an objective reality, against which thought, language, and theory are subordinated as interpretive systems. In this view, one aims to reduce subjective error and thereby increase objective clarity and predictive power. Critics of Positivistic science have defended the autonomy of the signifier as such by showing how the idea of authenticity is itself constructed by culture. Central to this debate has been the metaphor of knowledge as a light radiating from some external objective reality towards perceiving subjects. Refracted by culture, diffused and dimmed by subjectivity, and eclipsed by unreason, this model forever puts authority at an all-too-literal distance. Philosophers such as Michel Foucault have exposed the geometry of this metaphor as ideological appropriation of knowledge for the sake of power (“panopticism”). A few, including Gilles Deleuze, Martin Jay, and Jacques Lacan, have confronted the issue of optics directly by unpacking its presuppositions. Like Lacan, Vico employed optical strategies to counter projective optical metaphors. The frontispiece Vico inserted into the second edition of the *New science*, just before the book went to press in December, 1730, is a case worth examining in detail (Figure 1).

Mario Papini, Margherita Frankel, Donald Phillip Verene, and others have provided extensive historical-philosophical accounts of this image, but there is still the need to see specifically how this Rosicrucian-style image constitutes an optical proof. Known as the *dipintura*, the frontispiece shows the gaze of the divine eye of Providence shining through an azure opening in a cloudy sky, onto a clearing (“eye”) in the forest environing the first humans, Vico would seem to prefigure the philosopher Jacques Derrida with this obvious presence of an authoritarian gaze; but, by distinguishing distinctive and separate parts of this gaze, and by relating the divine eye to the eye of the reader of the *New science*, Vico strikes nearer to Lacan’s theory of three gazes, derived from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The purloined letter” (1845). It is constructive to review this short story briefly.

A letter that is potentially compromising for the Queen of France is delivered while the Queen is in the presence of the King and the Minister D—. The Queen immediately realizes the danger; the Minister, seeing her anxiety about the letter, realizes it; but the King notices nothing. The Minister, wishing to exert power over the Queen through possession of this potentially scandalous correspondence, replaces the letter with one he happens to be carrying and takes the object of scandal to his apartment, where he puts it in a letter bag conspicuously hanging from the
mantel. The police, working on behalf of the Queen, are convinced that such an important letter will certainly be cleverly hidden and overlook the unconcealed letter when they search the Minister’s residence. The detective Dupin deduces that the letter will be concealed by not being concealed and, visiting the Minister’s apartment, exchanges it with a fake while the Minister is distracted. That is to say, the King and the police, symbols of our networks of symbolic relationships, take in the scene while allowing certain important elements to remain invisible. The Queen and the Minister see the so-called invisible elements but are caught in the impasse of power relationships maintained by the unopened letter. Dupin perceives the nature of the structure maintained by the “invisible” letter and is able to act decisively.

In theoretical terms, the first gaze describes the naïve perception of the reader as well as dogmatic application of pre-existing protocols (the frontispiece as a memory image, an illustration; but also perception in its primary dependence on concealment). The second gaze corresponds to traditional theoretical accounts that could benefit from Vichian short-circuiting (the visual ray connecting the statue of Homer with the jewel worn by Metaphysics, but also the ironic reversal of private vices into public goods; Vico gives an example of this in his revisionistic theory of “the true Homer”). The third type of gaze empowers any “new science” that, like Vico’s, undertakes an account of the subject without relying on a template of the signified — objective history — as an authoritative-ideological source (the ray linking the eye of Providence to the jewel; but also the ability of Poe to place important clues beneath the eyes of the reader using exactly the same trick the Minister plays on the police and, later, Dupin uses on the Minister). Poe and Vico are, in these terms, birds of a feather.

Vico’s frontispiece, like the scenery of a stage play or film, can be conceived as a room whose fourth wall is occupied by the apparatus of production and, later, consumption. The viewer’s eye encounters another eye, however — the divine eye of Providence. Is the viewer’s eye, like Providence’s, also split by reflection? It should be if we follow the recommendation of the verum ipsum factum principle. The best way to know something is to make or do it. To pursue this line of advice, the fourth wall must be converted into a screen with a small eye-piece for the viewer. On the reverse of the screen, hidden from the viewer, is the image of the frontispiece painted in reverse (Figure 2).

Instead of a stage set, the viewer sees a mirror, which serves in the role of a metaphysics — a study guide for the New science. The place of the subject is, in effect, emptied out. The objects of the ideal eternal history dislodge it; as a subject, it no longer exists. Like the first humans, the viewer is at first trapped within the naïveté of the first gaze, then led to a realization of a second, reflected gaze, and finally made aware of a quasi-divine, providential gaze useful to theory. Providence becomes predictive power, the sine qua non of any science.

This optical narration is a demonstration but not yet a proof. To establish the higher level of validity, Vico provides an element of over-determination. The reflected scene, viewed naively, contains an emblematic inventory of the ideas of the New science, arranged in order and explained one by one in the introduction. One object, however, is not explained: the helmet of Hermes. This textual absence makes this the second punctum cæcum (blind spot) of the frontispiece, the point at which, as Lacan would say, the subject is inscribed into the gaze. Was this omission an accident? Or, was it a purloined letter?

Reading the image in the traditional way, the frontispiece is an exercise in the Classical-Renaissance method of memory places as described by Quintillian, Cicero, or the Ad Herennium. A place with distinctive parts — a garden, a building, or a landscape feature, for example — is memorized beforehand and words or ideas to be remembered are turned into objects or personifications and placed inside or around the memory place. This straightforward view must count the missing description of the helmet as an oversight. Perhaps this symbol for commerce, communications, or any of the other functions assigned to Hermes by the classical tradition was
simply forgotten. But, Homer’s statue clearly gestures and even looks towards the helmet, and it would be difficult to accept an explanation of accidental neglect. Rather, it seems more likely that, given the esoteric quality of the image as a whole, along with its possible use of the viewer’s eye as the eye of Providence, a more important role is assigned to Hermes. The reader-viewer has already encountered one punctum cæcum, the divine eye, which, like the King’s gaze in “The purloined letter”, sees nothing. The text designates this second blind spot by saying nothing about it.

Together with the mirror action, the silent Hermes adds a dimension of dimensions, so to speak, by referring to the most esoteric (and, in Vico’s day, well known) of memory treatises, Giulio Camillo’s Gran theatro delle scienze (Great theatre of knowledge). This theatre, which some reputed eye-witnesses claimed was a full-scale architectural device, was detailed in a posthumously published work, L’idea del theatro (1550). Camillo aimed at creating a “universal memory” by simulating a death-journey taken by the user. Hermes, the conductor of the souls of the dead, is also the emblem for that journey common to all cultures. Like Vico, Camillo used a three-part gaze to explain the logic of his theatre. His model was the three-part soul of the Kabbalah. The Nephes was the soul closest to the flesh and hence that part of vision that tolerates and even requires blindness; the Ruach was the middle or rational soul corresponding to the theoretical outlook; the Nessamah, the highest soul, required separation from the lower two souls in order to act decisively to reach the divine. Camillo drew on ancient traditions linking vision with wisdom in a schema of threes, such as the story of the three Gracchi sisters, whose prophecies came from the single eye and tooth that they passed from one to another. This differentiation and ultimate separation of the three-part soul lay the ground for the narrative of discovery of a universal memory. By allying the universal eschatology of the “journey between the two deaths” to a theory of expanded visuality, Camillo like Vico, was able to create an internal gap within his own theory, a gap to serve as the site of what Lacan would identify as a “repetitive automatism”. This Freudian symptom is, Lacan explains, embodied by subjects’ desire to model their very being on the signifying chains that run through them — but, this is nothing other than Vico’s “ideal eternal history”, which (Vico advises the reader of the New Science) will be proved when the reader fuses his own internal mental narrative order with the history’s three-fold nature.

The journey between the two deaths, commonly portrayed as a fractal-like meandering path, as repetitive automatism, is the conceptual heart of the New science. The prototype Vico himself acknowledged specifically, the Table of Cebes, reveals the structure and purpose of this automatism. This widely distributed publication was well known throughout Renaissance Europe. The illustrations that usually accompanied it describe a series of enfiladed spaces, sometimes portrayed as a mountain which a pilgrim in search of truth must navigate in order to reach a temple of wisdom on the top-center. The prototype of this trial is an even more ancient kind of journey, the katabasis or descent into Hades, portrayed throughout classical literature. It is the interval between the hero’s descent into Hades and return. The Virgilian version, taken from Book VI of the Aeneid, a source that was extremely familiar to Vico, contains the (James) Joycean theme of an encounter between father and son. It is also the trial of the reader in search of the dead and misunderstood Vico. It is, as the place of the New science, the model of place in its most fundamental form.

Vico’s version of Hermes is the figure Metaphysics (Metafisica), shown alighting a celestial sphere in the frontispiece but again in an image on the title page unavailable to most readers of the Bergin-Fisch English translation, which shows only the frontispiece. This emblem, known as the impresga, portrays a female figure similar to Metaphysics (and Hermes) in that she has winged temples and repeats the mirror theme of the frontispiece (Figure 3). It was added at the 1744 printing of the New science, apparently taking advantage of the larger page size of that edition.
Donald Phillip Verene has, in a detailed commentary on this unattributed image, opined that the *impresa* is a kind of footnote added to clarify the meaning the *dipintura*. It is, he suggests, the initial condition of a before-after comparison: the triangle Metaphysics holds in her hand is merged with the circle of the mirror in a virtual, or constructed sense. We see seeing in a way that instructs us how to see the *dipintura*, i.e. through the mirror of anamorphosis, where the twin “eyes” of geography (contingency) and chronology (necessity) combine to produce a parallax view. The inscription on the plinth/altar next to the sphere where the winged figure sits, *Ignota Latebat* (“She lay hidden”) refers both to the anamorphic condition of the New science and to the relation of the divine gaze corresponding to that of the King in Poe’s “The purloined letter”: seeing without seeing. Working backwards, Vico’s science is a way of knowing knowing, of building a human world that is known in some latent or tacit sense but not yet known in way that can serve as the basis for theoretical action. The two remaining parts of the three-part Lacanian-Vichian gaze are supplied by the *dipintura*.

The frontispiece emblematizes the study of place through the creation of a scholarly place, where the optics of scholarly understanding (re)navigate the structure that they wish to understand. This method opens geographical inquiry up to the extensive resources of art, literature, and architecture without the Positivist bracketing of these as “merely subjective”. Vico, thus, having lacked a past or present in the scholarship of academic geography, may have a future based not on inserting him into contemporary work as a silent partner but by recognizing, in him as well as in those who forgot him, the potential of a New science lying hidden.

**Further Reading**

Figure 1 The frontispiece from Vico’s *New science*, known as the *dipintura*, showing rays from the divine eye of Providence reflected off a jewel on the breast of Metaphysics onto a statue of Homer, the first poet of humankind. In the clearing, modeled after the first clearings made for ritual observances and also the origin of agriculture, divination, religion, the arts, etc., are shown an altar with symbols of marriage and burial, a plow, a rudder for the birth of commerce, a funerary urn, a tablet with an alphabet, fasces, scales, and other items. Vico discusses all of the elements but one, the helmet of Hermes in the lower left corner, token of the reader’s relationship to the text and the image and, like the image used for the *Table of cebes*, capable of generating madness or wisdom. Reprinted from G. B. Vico, *Principi di scienza nuova d’intorno alla commune natura delle nazione*, 1744.
Figure 2 The frontispiece as structured by the three-part gaze. The viewer is reconstituted as a screen upon which the cultural self’s component parts are displayed in their ideal order. The viewer takes the place of Providence, following Vico’s directions in the *New science* that the reader must narrate the work by realizing the necessary order of his/her own mind. Collage by author.
Figure 3 The image known as the *impresa*, showing Metaphysics sitting on a sphere, leaning against a plinth or altar, regarding a carpenter’s square via a mirror. The inscription on the plinth reads *Ignota Latebat* ("she lay hidden"). This emblem suggests that the truth of the human world, *il vero*, can be viewed only through an angular reflection. Yet, Metaphysics grasps the square as well as the mirror, suggesting another parallax relationship (stereognosis) between what Michael Polanyi would characterize as tacit knowing and reasoned, critical articulation. Reprinted from G. B. Vico, *Principj di scienza nuova d’intorno alla commune natura delle nazione*, 1744.