Giambattista Vico's Political Philosophy: Poetry First

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Introduction

Giambattista Vico's (1744) *New Science* can be read as a work of political philosophy. The common philosophical question to be asked is this: how do humans move from a state of nature to a state of civil union? This is a question for political theorists and political philosophers and has been asked by a variety of them from Thomas Hobbes (1651) to Robert Nozick (1974). However, Vico's answer is linked to the development of language in a way that makes the *New Science* fascinating reading for anyone interested in language, its development, and its relations to the development of mind, reality, and the structures and institutions of society. To answer the political question, Vico suggests that language must have emerged and developed in certain ways for primeval humanity to move out of a state of nature and enter into a state of civil society. He, then, through an analysis of the first fables and texts, seeks to provide evidence for his hypothesis. Through this analysis, Vico is led to the following conclusions: (a) language is required for a political union to emerge from a state of nature and develop society; (b) such language is fictive; (c) such language is tropical; and, therefore, (d) such language is not literal in the sense of it corresponding to anything true; and, finally, (e) poetical language precedes literal language. I intend to show that Vico does provide an account of how humans moved from a state of nature to a state of civil union in a way that leads to the conclusions (a) to (e). We must begin by characterising the Vichian state of nature and, then, move on to his considerations about language. After that, we draw our conclusions.

The Vichian State of Nature (Barely Human)

In the state of nature, humans are barely human; that is, there is nothing really human about them except for their bodies, senses, and certain affective qualities. This is to be thought of as a hyperbolic state. We can, if we want, think of this as an actual state or an artificial position. In both cases, it acts as a starting point. It helps us to consider what more is needed for human society to emerge. For Vico, the answer is clear, language and rhetoric.

To get more of a sense of the aforementioned hyperbolic position, we must delete most of what we associate with humans in a state of society. All artefacts are, therefore, to be thrown out. But, also, we must eliminate any natural abilities that we can think of as developed abilities. For example, certain cognitive abilities. There is, then, no language in any sense of the term. There are no signs and no sign systems. There is no sapience, no abstractions, and no rational thought if there is anything that can be called "thought" at all. There is no self-awareness and no sense of a single unified individual being. There is no Cartesian self; no sense of an internal reality as opposed to an external reality. There is in the state of nature nothing, but bodies, senses, and a bare human affectivity.

So, for example, as far as ratiocination goes in the state of nature, we hear that "the first men must have been...without power of ratiocination...all robust sense and vigorous imagination" (Vico 375). At an earlier point, we read this "[Humans] were for a long period incapable of truth and of reason" (Vico 350). As far as the lack of self-awareness goes, we get this: "The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to attend to itself by means of reflection" (Vico 236). That is, "just as the bodily eye sees all objects outside itself but needs a mirror to see itself," such is the human mind (Vico 331). It is ratiocination that is necessary for the kind of reflection in question. And if this is true, then, given the passage above, we may conclude that there is neither ratiocination nor self-awareness in the state of nature.

But, of course, this is not all there is. For the state of nature is a state of *nature*. Vico talks about God's providence guiding the development of humanity. Vico, appropriating the Christian idea of providence, associates this with *nature* and *natural law* (Vico 31, 136, 310). Human development is we can assume natural and the movement from the state of nature to a state of society naturalised. The gifts of nature, then, include the human body, the human senses, and human affectivity. As Vico says of the first human minds, "Minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualised, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body" (Vico 378).

Nature sets the limits of the body, for example, the limits of the noises we can make in constructing vocal signs; the limits of our senses, we do not, for instance, see ultraviolet light. And then there is human affectivity, also in the gift of nature. Fear being the primordial affect. But, there is one more important thing nature has given the human primal being; this is freedom of choice (Vico 136, 310), which is both a bestial burden (Vico 221, 338), and a natural blessing (Vico 340), for it plays a central role in the development of humanity through the creation of a language that constructs a formidable reality.

The minimal human being, then, has its body. With the body comes a group of senses and a bare nature, including visceral fear. This is compounded by complete human ignorance and the complete inability to make sense of the environment (Vico 375). To be consistent with the assumptions above, visceral fear is not to be understood as experienced as belonging to an individual. Rather, it is experienced as belonging to the world itself. The following passages suggest something like this, too: "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, [humans] make [themselves] the measure of things" (Vico 120; cf. 181). That measure can only be affective, for all else is absent. Next, "When [humans] are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, and cannot even explain them by analogy to similar things, they attribute their own nature to them" (Vico 180). In beginning times, as we have said, there is nothing to that nature but affectivity, sense, and body. Later still, talking of the founders of the "gentile world," who we may associate with those who first came out of a state of nature, Vico writes, "[T]hey gave the things they wondered at," things of ignorance (Vico 184), "substantial being after their own ideas, just as children do, whom we see take inanimate things in their hands and play with them and talk to them as though they were living persons" (Vico 375). He references this to an earlier passage which talks of the language of the first humans, which "gives sense and passion to insensate things" as children do (Vico 186). And, again, talking of the persistence of this early kind of thought in some modern people, which Vico associates with the expression, "the magnet has an occult *sympathy* for the iron," Vico says, "they make of all nature a vast animate body which feels passions and effects" (Vico 377). This is all natural to the first humans.

Moreover, it does not seem inconsistent to think that no occasion of fear is the same as any other occasion of fear for the primitive and irrational human, for there is no such thing as intelligible similarity for such a being. And, for the same reason, no experienced thing is intelligibly different. There is neither the experience of intelligible similarity or difference in the state of nature. This is line with Vico's insistence that in the early stages of humanity, humans were unable to form intelligible class-concepts (Vico 34, 209). Rather, everything is visceral and immediate.

Humans are, as we said, burdened and blessed with freedom and such freedom is unbridled (Vico 338). Leading to the possibility of untamed savagery (Vico 338). This is the burden. There is nothing, as we have said, except the limits of the body, stopping human beings from acting in any way they want. For civility to emerge something must rein in human freedom. That is, something must proscribe certain behaviours and redirect others towards better ends (Vico 340, 388). This is god (Vico 338). More specifically, it is the fear of a terrible divinity (Vico 7, 340, 502, 916). Fear of this divinity bridles freedom and tames savagery. This is just another expression of human freedom, for these terrible divinities are creations of the human mind. Thus, freedom comes to bridle freedom. Freedom determines, that is, its own limits.

For Vico the possibility of perceiving a terrible god that proscribes some behaviours and redirects others, a language is needed. In particular, a system of signs is needed. With the most basic system in place, humans are able to bridle freedom and tame savagery. Therefrom, the emergence of society. To delineate this process, I turn briefly to a later semiotician, Charles Saunders Pierce (1868). Drawing on some of his ideas will help in outlining Vico's vision and understanding why Vico thought language was needed for the development of society and why Vico thought that tropical language was so important to his thesis.

Peirce's Theory of Signs

Peirce over his life divided signs along many dimensions. One classic way of dividing the sign was between icon, index, symbol. An icon is a sign that is connected to its object by a likeness or appearance. For example, an actual dead body is a sign of death since it is dead. An index is a sign that is connected to an object by some kind of factual relation that exists between the sign and the object, for example, a contiguous or causal physical relation. In the present case, the dead body may be a sign of pestilence. A symbol is a sign that is connected to its object by an implication. So, the dead body may be a sign to remove oneself from the surroundings on pain of contracting a deadly disease. In all cases, the connection between the sign and what it stands for is made by means of an "interpretant." An interpretant is a cognitive function that connects one object (the sign), by certain of its features, to another object (the signified). Peirce's semiotics is vastly more complicated than this, however, this basic picture may be used as a heuristic to understand the kind of language that allows humans to move from the Vichian state of nature to a state of civil society. So with some of these terms in mind, let's return to the state of nature and see what role language plays in the emergence of civil society.

The Emergence and Development of Language and Society

In Vico's original position, the body is receptive to the environment through sense. There is no gap between the senses and the environment. For there is no abstract space in which a gap might develop. But, more importantly, there is no difference between human affectivity and the environment, as Vico says, the early humans give sense and passion to insensate things as children do. There is, then, no sense of difference between what is sensed, what is felt, and the environment. They are one thing, at any time, immediate, present, visceral.

Vico is also very insistent that everything at this time is experienced as a particular as opposed to belonging to a general category. So, for example, speaking of the first poets, the first speakers of language, he writes: "[T]he first poets must have given names to things from the most particular and the most sensible ideas" (Vico 406). And, we get this quite extraordinary statement: "[W]e can now scarcely understand and cannot at all imagine how the first [humans] thought who found gentile humanity. For their minds were so limited to particulars that they regarded every change of facial expression as a new face...and for every new passion they imagined a new heart, a new beast, a new spirit" (Vico 700).

So, two instances of something sensed, something also felt, something that is in the world, and the environment, are always distinct at this early time. We have said that there is no intelligible similarity because similarity requires some level of abstraction, and abstraction is wanting in Vico's state of hyperbolic nature. The abstract cognitive capacity for drawing on similarity is not yet developed to any significant degree. However, now it seems, we must start with the lack of any kind of similarity (and by consequence difference). The imagination may substitute for this lack, but we shall not assume that this is so at this point. And, so, everything is immediate and unconnected. For example, two different claps of thunder are immediate, present, and unconnected, neither the same nor different to the primitive human.

However, similarity relations do develop and they must develop, otherwise we could not get to a position in which human freedom is proscribed and redirected in the correct ways by a formidable reality. Over time, two instances of a single phenomenon, divided, for example, by space or time, come to signify

each other and this is done in the simplest form we can imagine, iconically. In the absence of reason, it is the memory that connects the two in this way. But the memory, for Vico, is nothing but one facet of the imagination (Vico 211, 819). So it is that we can say, it is the imagination that connects any two instances in the way stated. And, in the sense that the immediate image is a sign of the non-immediate object (or vice versa), it is the imagination that acts as the interpretant. This does not necessitate any sense of mental representationalism (though Vico does often speak of a mental vocabulary or dictionary (e.g., Vico 35, 145, 161, 162)). In any case, then, a clap of thunder (immediate or not) may be a sign of another clap of thunder (immediate or not). This is, for Vico, a sign made of a natural object and it is one of the first kinds of sign to emerge.

This is still not sufficient to form a system of signs that prohibit and prescribe our behaviours. So we must suppose that language develops still further. We have supposed that two instances of the same phenomenon and of the same sense modality can be thought of as similar. They are tied together by the imagination, and this also allows one to act as a sign for the other, iconically. The dissimilarity that is transcended here is the dissimilarity in time; though we may also suppose that the similarity can transcend spatial difference, for example, when two things are sensed in some proximity. We may also think that two instances experienced dissimilarly with respect to sense modality, can be brought together by the imagination and one can act as a sign of the other; again, this is done iconically. The iconography lies in the aspect of affectivity that each shares. Thus, for example, a clap of thunder and the smell of a predator may both come to be instances of and signs for a single reality, fear.

Up to now we have considered natural significations. The next step is the development of artefacts. For Vico, the first signs are natural signs, as outlined and a set of basic artefacts. For example, gestures. These again will signify iconically, aping the salient iconic features of the affective environment. So, for example, a loud clap of the hand, by aping a sudden clap of thunder, will signify the instance of fear that *is* the clap of thunder, the smell of a predator, etc. But it may also be an instance of fear, itself. We may also take it that pictograms and related forms of visual signification appear. For example, a picture of two hands coming together may, iconically, signify the affectivity in question and, again, this may be both a sign *and* instance of fear. Vico calls the natural significations and basic behavioural artefacts a mute language, which is the first language for him (Vico 32, 225, 401, 434). Vico speaks of hieroglyphics, but this can be misleading, as hieroglyphics are more than mere pictures and it seems that, really, Vico wishes to speak of pictorial signs.

The ability to proscribe and prescribe emerges with such language. For, we can imagine, that a clap may proscribe a behaviour or future behaviour. Or put together with other gestures may speak to the same end; and we can certainly think that that is possible with pictorial signs. Now, the basic requirements for society to emerge are in place, fear can be artificially instantiated and signified and control of behaviour, thereby, mandated. But this is also the birth of the trope. These tropes help connect proscriptions and prescriptions to god and develop society.

The Tropes, Language, and Developments in Society

How do the tropes fit into this picture of the emergence of language and its society-forming power? Let's try and get an idea of what tropes are first. The basic definition of a trope is found in Vico's (1996) *Institutiones Oratoriae, 1711-1741*. A trope for Vico is the transference of a sign. A sign is transferred when it is used in an extraordinary way. That is, assuming that a sign, s, denotes a thing, x, ordinarily, but does not denote the thing, y, ordinarily, s is used tropically if s is used to denote y. Of the tropes, synecdoche and metonymy appear first, metaphor and irony come later. (Following Vico in the *New Science*, I will only focus on the former three). According to the aforementioned schema, synecdoche occurs when the sign, s, is used to denote y, where y is a part of x, or vice versa. Metonymy occurs when the sign, s, is used to denote y, where y is associated with x, as with a property, cause, effect, contiguity, etc. Metaphor occurs when the sign, s, is used to denote y because y is similar to x. That is done for either ornamental reasons or necessary reasons. An ornamental metaphor involves using s to denote y based on a similarity between y and x for, for example, beauty or some affective end. A necessary

metaphor involves using *s* to denote *y* based on a similarity between *y* and *x* because there are no other signs that denote *y*. We may extend both uses of ornament and necessity to all tropical instances, and thus talk of ornamental or necessary synecdoche and metonymy. Vico doesn't explicitly do this. However, he implies that it is not out of place. For example, consider the following passage from the *New Science*:

> [T]he first poets must have given names to things from the most particular and the most sensible ideas. Such ideas are the sources, respectively, of synecdoche and metonymy. Metonymy of agent for act resulted from the fact that names for agents were commoner than names for acts. Metonymy of subject for form and accident were due to the fact that, as we have said…, they did not know how to abstract forms and qualities from subjects (Vico 406)

In both cases, we may suppose that commonality, or known expressions, and the lack of expressions afforded by abstraction led to a kind of necessary metonymy.

As said, the appearance of the first signs give rise to the tropes and these tropes drive the development of society. Let us see how.

Synecdoche

The first language, as we have described it, is natural (nature is composed of signs), gestural, and later pictorial. These are iconic signs. These signify particulars. The imagination creates class-concepts. In this way, some new way of thinking about the world is constructed. This can correspond with the use of a sign that designates a particular of the class coming to designate the class of individuals to which it belongs. So, for example, a particular person's head (natural, gestural, pictorial) may come to signify a particular person iconically. *This* is an example of synecdoche, for Vico, because head signifies part of a whole, the body (individual or person) (Vico 407). Later, it may come to signify a family, tribe, race (including human), etc. In this way, a group or class is signified by a signifier of something belonging to that group or class. This represents a further synecdochal use of a sign, for a sign that ordinarily classifies a particular comes to classify the whole. In time, the sign may become a literal signifier, and what it signifies come to be seen as an entity in its own right. For example, a universal type, an abstract type, or Platonic universal. This is important to later developments in human thought and society. For example, universals may come to be investigated in their own right, or the idea of a human type may come to support the idea that humans are equal in value. For the things of the early languages became the fodder of latter contemplation.

Other Kinds of Metonymy, Causality, and Social Class

Strictly speaking, synecdoche is a species of metonymy. But we can consider other types. Consider, then, the clap of thunder, a natural sign that we have said may signify fear (cf. Vico 377, 387). We may also think of lightning as a natural sign, signifying something other than fear, for example, it may come to be an instance and sign of the visceral feeling of dread. We can think that this occurs because lightning is contiguous with thunder and as the imagination connects the two, lightning comes to be an indexical sign of thunder and an instance of dread (since it is not too hard to think that dread may precede fear in the human mind). Vico, further, argues that the sky is representative of god, and he thinks there is good evidence that this is a universal phenomenon (Vico 473-482). Assuming this to be true, we may also suppose that the imagination connects thunder (fear) to the sky (god) and that, therefore, thunder (fear) becomes an indexical sign of a formidable or angry god. There is, then, an indexical relation between lightning and thunder, thunder and god, and, as a consequence, lightning and god. It is not hard to think that dread and fear, exemplified by lightning and thunder, come to signify a terrifying god; as Vico says, the thundering sky came to be seen as an omnipotent god (Vico 383). In so doing, the signs will have been transferred metonymically. Likewise, we can think that artefacts signifying the natural instances in question do the same thing. In both cases, prohibitions or prescriptions may be formed. For example,

a zig-zag gesture, iconically representing dread, may prohibit behaviour by being used to signify the anger of the formidable supernatural being or the presence of that terrible being, itself.

Furthermore, we can think as the imagination connects the three instances in question (dread, fear, and god), the imagination produces the concepts of cause and effect (Vico 180). Once these concepts are grasped, even in the most basic sense, other natural occurrences can be seen or used to signify the mood or will of god (Vico 9, 62, 377, 379). This makes the primitive language richer and predictive and, thus, it gives rise to auspices. With this, a class of individuals who can read the rich language of nature appears (Vico 381). That, in turn, produces a social division and a division of linguistic labour (c.f. Putnam 1973); with a privileged group determining the meanings of signs important to society (Vico 381). There are experts, which become a privileged class (Vico 250). And, thus, we can see a further way to prohibit some behaviours and redirect others directed by the auspices and their interpreters (Vico 14, 31). Indeed, if everything is associated with god, and everything can be seen as causally related to god, either as an effect, the opportunity for metonymy increases. Indexicality giving rise to concepts of cause and effect lead to metonymic opportunities, and further ways to direct behaviours to the maintenance and development of society.

Necessary Metaphor

There are more things in the universe than there are signs for them, according to Vico (Vico 1996) and any number of additions for which signs must be found. We already have an example of class-concepts added by the imagination and which, above, come to be signified by a sign that stands for a particular that belongs to the class. We may also add things invented (artefacts), or discovered, separated in thought, etc. But language is always finite in the face of these additions. Nevertheless, there are a number of strategies available to us to name these things. Tropicality takes centre stage here. Synecdoche, as we have just seen, does a fine job. There is also the possibility of using a sign that denotes one thing to denote another thing because of an (imagined) similarity. For example, the name of a fruit may come to denote the name of a colour, due to the colour of the fruit. This may occur when the colour comes to be differentiated from other colours it was not previously differentiated from. The development of colour words is testament to the underlying assumptions here. The name, for example, for orange is taken from the fruit, presumably due to the similarity of appearance. And new colour words are needed when broad washes of colours are discriminated into more distinct types, as the history of blue teaches us, a colour late to language and culture (Berlin and Kay 1991, cf. Winawer et al. 2007).

Ornamental Metaphor

Ornamental metaphor is also seen to emerge from a primitive system of signs. For example, the clap of thunder mentioned above, whether associated with a naturalistic sign, gesture, or pictorial sign, or later still a primitive oral emission, signifies iconically. The sign may be adopted to denote a prominent figure, family, group, tribe, etc. because the two have similar fearsome properties or that is what the adopting individual or union (family, group, tribe, etc.) want to signify. The two occasions of use do not denote the same entity. One occasion of use denotes primarily, the other denotes by implication. The signification is symbolic, here. Vico does not associate this with the very first humans, but the age of families and heroes that emerge after the first individuals form civil groups. At this stage, emblems symbolic of certain attributes are formed and, again, produce class divisions and social hierarchy.

Conclusions: Poetry First

In the beginning, then, there are natural signs, gestures, and pictorial signs denoting instances and objects iconically. These signs *animate* the world. They help, that is, to construct an affective reality that reins in freedoms and creates the possibility for society. They are fictive in ascribing these affective properties to reality. Such signs, next, as language develops, come to be associated with tropical uses, synecdochal, metonymic, and metaphorical uses, and they presuppose or produce significations that signify in noniconic ways, being associated with contiguous relations and fabulous causalities, and later symbolic

use. All leading to the stratification of the first societies. All of this is posited as the means to the primary end: that being the migration from the state of nature to human society, and its subsequent maintenance and development. If we define the literal as that which corresponds to truth (or our contemporary truth), the language in question is not literal; it is fictive and tropical. For Vico, that is, the foundations of language and the formation and development of society is first fictive and then tropical. In his words, the languages that help to form and develop society are poetic. Vico says "[T]he sublime labour of poetry is to give sense and passion to insensate things," (Vico 186), and, as we have seen, that is done to coalesce society. Poetry comes first, then; but also second, in developing society beyond its beginnings into a place of diverse classes. Vico is also fond of saying that poetry comes before prose (Vico 235, 409, 460, 472). But we might say, poetry (the combination of fiction and rhetoric) comes before literal language.

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