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# Keys to Vico's Metaphysics



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## INTRODUCTION

Giambattista Vico, a philosopher of remarkable complexity, develops a thought that is not immediately grasped and requires constant and careful review to unravel his most characteristic and celebrated theses. According to his own perspective, he employs “reason” in its most Italic sense: a continuous *andar raccogliendo* (gathering) aimed at intellection, though the latter serves merely as a regulative ideal, in Kantian terms. A significant challenge in comprehending his work stems from the Baroque nature of his prose, which appears more lucid in Latin than in Italian. Works such as *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* and *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* are more accessible than the culmination of his speculation, the *Scienza Nuova*. Engaging with his thought necessitates patience and consultation of his interpreters to capture the core of his argumentation.

This document focuses on the book *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* (a work that continues to spark interest to this day<sup>1</sup>) and constitutes a set of *dispensae* or, more properly, *notae* on it, aiming, as Horace would say, “*Coelum ipsum*

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Matteucci, Giovanni (ed.), *Studi sul De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Quodlibet, Roma 2002, 224pp.

*petimus stultitia*” (*Carmina*, 1,3), that is, though it may be vain, it is necessary that, with the poor finite concepts employed by man, he seeks to grasp something of the infinite, as the *animal metaphysicum* that he is. It compiles the contents studied in an undergraduate philosophy course taught at the Universidad Veracruzana, which explains the organization of the materials and the bibliography used for their analysis. Therefore, this is not a systematic treatise on Vico’s metaphysics but a series of expositions presented as “keys” to delve into his philosophizing. *De antiquissima* is a fundamental work for understanding Vico’s metaphysics, which departs from scholastic and Cartesian substantialism (based on the concept of *res*), introducing the *verum-factum* principle, linking true knowledge to the creative action of the human mind, and the concept of *conatus*, which conceives reality as a dynamic process. As Lomonaco asserts, it is a metaphysics that prefigures the *Scienza Nuova*, prioritizing history and the human mind<sup>2</sup>.

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Coatepec, June 2025

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lomonaco, Frabrizio, *Vico e a metafísica*, en: Lomonaco, Frabrizio- Sertório de Amorim e Silva Neto, Humberto Guido (eds.), *Metafísica do gênero humano: natureza e história na obra de Giambattista Vico*, Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, 2018, pp. 183-211.

## 1.

### HISTORICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF VICO

To contextualize Giambattista Vico within the framework of the history of philosophy, it is essential to first briefly outline the history of philosophy immediately preceding him. This implies or presupposes an understanding of what characterizes modern philosophy and the major Renaissance movements, the prelude to modern Italian philosophy.

Following the profound crisis of scholasticism that characterized the 14th century, the emergence of Renaissance philosophies can be observed. This, however, does not imply the complete dissolution of scholastic philosophy; on the contrary, it maintains a significant degree of its original vigor, particularly that which stems from the 13th century. Consequently, certain scholastic positions persist during the Renaissance and subsequently exert a direct, albeit not exclusive, influence on Vico and other modern philosophers. A common misapprehension is the underestimation of the significance of scholastic philosophy in the context of comprehending the development of modern philosophy. It is imperative to acknowledge that numerous modern and pre-modern philosophical positions, that is, those present during the Renaissance, are, to a certain extent, a continuation of medieval scholastic philosophy. In modern philosophy, scholasticism does not cease to exist; rather, it continues

to be cultivated during the Renaissance, in modernity, and even in contemporary philosophy. For example, the broad philosophical movement of neo-scholasticism is evident in the neo-Thomism of authors such as Gilson, Maritain, Sertillanges, Masnovo, Fabro, Bontadini, Vanni Rovighi, Lotz, and Coreth, among others.

A close examination of Renaissance philosophy reveals the existence of at least three distinct strands: Platonic (Renaissance Platonism or Neoplatonism), Aristotelian (notably the vigorous impulse of Aristotelianism in its neo-Averroist strand and the recovery of the commentaries of Alexander of Aphrodisias), and scholastic. From these three strands, modern philosophers, in turn, draw inspiration. There exists, so to speak, a long chain that links philosophers to scholastic philosophy. Furthermore, contemporary philosophical discourse, particularly that stemming from the rationalist tradition, continues to bear many of the connotations characteristic of Scholastic thought.

The term “Renaissance Neoplatonism” is a historiographical-doctrinal designation employed to differentiate it from ancient and medieval Neoplatonism. Indeed, this current reaches the pinnacle of Greek speculation in antiquity, encompassing such notable authors as Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus. For many scholars, Plotinus represents a significant pinnacle of Greek speculation, having developed a comprehensive system of thought that synthesizes and consolidates the discussions of his predecessors. From a doctrinal perspective, his influence is comparable to that of Plato and Aristotle. Neoplatonism maintained its influence throughout medieval philosophy, albeit interwoven with religious philosophies. Indeed, medieval philosophy is fundamentally religious, though not

exclusively Christian. These philosophies are all rooted in the Greek or Greco-Roman tradition and its respective revelations, namely, the Hebrew, Christian, and Islamic. The three religious philosophies are, to a large extent, Neoplatonic, though not exclusively. The great speculative syntheses of the Middle Ages, such as those of Avicenna and Averroes, retain many Neoplatonic elements. However, the former aligns more closely with these teachings, while the latter revisits Aristotle with renewed vigor. Among the Hebrews, figures such as Ibn Gabirol (Avicbron) and Maimonides are particularly noteworthy, as both of them were Neoplatonists. In the context of Christian philosophy, the Neoplatonic framework manifested during the late antiquity or the early Middle Ages, with notable contributions from St. Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius. Indeed, St. Augustine's philosophical orientation is distinctly Neoplatonic, as evidenced by his rediscovery of the *libri platonici* through the intermediary of the Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose. The Church Fathers already employ Platonic, Middle Platonic, and Neoplatonic rhetoric to formulate the first philosophical reflections emerging within Christianity. In the Greek world, Pseudo-Dionysius represents the culmination of Neoplatonic-Christian speculation in the Byzantine context, with works such as *De divinis nominibus* and *Theologia mystica*.

Scotus Eriugena, undoubtedly the greatest representative of early scholasticism and the most significant Christian author of the 9th century, translator of the Areopagite and a profound connoisseur of St. Augustine, is likewise a Neoplatonic-Christian, a symbiosis that persists later in the 11th century with St. Anselm of Aosta and, ultimately, with St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas Aquinas. Despite employing an Aristotelian language more frequently than his contemporaries, the Angelic Doctor's

metaphysics can be predominantly characterized as Neoplatonic-Christian. As demonstrated, Aquinas cites Pseudo-Dionysius more frequently than Aristotle. This suggests that the spirit of Neoplatonism persisted throughout the Middle Ages, despite the influence of other authors, including Aristotle himself. Consequently, it is unsurprising that Neoplatonism persisted with considerable influence during the Renaissance period.

Prominent representatives of Renaissance Platonism include Nicholas of Cusa, Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Giordano Bruno. It is noteworthy that only Cusanus is not italicized, a detail that underscores the robust tradition of Neoplatonism that was cultivated in Italy during the Renaissance. The foundational framework of this metaphysics posits that all phenomena are rooted in a singular principle. Indeed, all reality is believed to stem from a single overarching principle, most often identified with the concept of the One, in accordance with the tenets of ancient Neoplatonism. This model is termed “henology,” which, in the context of the Middle Ages, aligns congruently with “henotheism,” a doctrine asserting the oneness of God, as opposed to a multitude of deities. From this single principle, various other concepts are derived within Neoplatonism. The concept of the One, as understood by Plotinus, is associated with the Intelligence. In the case of Proclus, the concept of the One is associated with Being. The ontological model of metaphysics is ultimately derived from the Neoplatonic model of Proclus, as evidenced in the works of St. Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Boethius, and others.

Renaissance Aristotelianism, on the other hand, emerged as a response to the Aristotelian scholasticism initiated by St.

Albert the Great and culminated by St. Thomas Aquinas, whom, nevertheless, they acknowledge as authorities. What, then, do Renaissance Aristotelians seek to achieve? In essence, they strive to elucidate the authentic meaning, as they perceive it, of Aristotle's theses, unmediated by Christian philosophical influences. Since the Middle Ages, and particularly during Aquinas's era, there has been a discernible inclination to access Aristotle's original texts directly. In the past, Aristotle's thought was influenced by Islamic mediations, particularly those of Averroes. Many texts from this tradition arrive via the Hispanic channel, as it is well known that Islamic culture flourishes with particular strength in Hispania. This route, while not the sole avenue, arguably the most consequential, facilitates the reemergence of Aristotle's knowledge in the Western world. The Toledo School of Translation, for instance, assumes a pivotal role in its recovery. However, this process entails the translation of Aristotle's works from Arabic into Latin. In the 13th century, however, St. Thomas, who wields considerable influence, collaborates with William of Moerbeke on translations from Greek to Latin.

However, during the Renaissance, a scientific discipline began to emerge that had not yet been recognized as part of the established sciences, although it could be discerned in some form in the works of Greek and Latin writers. This emerging discipline was known as philology. In Italy, particularly in Florence, a major center for philological study emerges, linked to Marsilio Ficino. This model is replicated, albeit with less vigor, in other locations. The objective is to recover Aristotle's philosophy without the constraints of scholastic interpretations, which necessitate a profound understanding of Greek. Rather than relying on Christians as interpreters of

Aristotle, it is necessary to return to Greek exegetes, such as Alexander of Aphrodisias, the greatest commentator on Aristotle in antiquity, and Averroes, considered by many an authoritative medieval commentator. This does not imply that Renaissance exegetes are non-Christians; rather, they seek to perform a philological, scientific study of the text.

Their adherence to Christianity is evident in their constant concern to note that some of their Aristotelian interpretations are not in harmony with Christianity. Representatives of this Aristotelianism include Achillini, Agostino Nifo, Pietro Pomponazzi, Jacopo Zabarella, and Bernardino Telesio. Pomponazzi's extensive treatise on the immortality of the soul (*De immortalitate animae*) aims to interpret Aristotle directly, despite the author's awareness of its contradiction of Christian Aristotelianism, he states it openly. Indeed, according to the texts and aligning with Averroist and Alexandrian interpretations regarding the immortality of the individual soul, it must be maintained, in the spirit of Aristotelianism, that it is not immortal, but only the *intellectus agens*, which is universal. The *intellectus agens* is the only agent that is in act, and thus it never diminishes and is consequently immortal. However, as the treatise draws to a close, he asserts that he is Christian and believes in the immortality of the individual soul, a position that contrasts with that of Aristotle, as the Book of Revelation affirms the immortality of the individual soul.

Bernardino Telesio's contributions include the development of a multi-volume treatise on nature, titled *De rerum natura*. In this work, Telesio repudiates certain tenets of traditional Aristotelianism, particularly within the field of physics. The latter is inherently limited in its ability to progress if it relies exclusively on deductive reasoning; it also demands

empirical observation. Aristotle's model of physics is purely deductive in nature, asserting that observation of reality is unnecessary once the ultimate explanatory principles are possessed. Consequently, physics can be expounded solely through concepts, that is, a metaphysics of nature, and using *instrumentalia*. Telesio rejects this view. Consequently, it is unsurprising that subsequent authors, including Galileo Galilei, explore this alternative, also employing mathematics. Among the Anglo-Saxons, a figure such as Francis Bacon emerges prominently. The scientific study of nature is predicated on three fundamental methodologies: observation, calculation, and mathematics.

Finally, a third philosophical strand has persisted: scholasticism. During the Renaissance and in subsequent periods, certain scholars endeavored to maintain their adherence to the prevailing tradition. Others aim to incorporate elements of what they call "modern" philosophies, that is, components of Renaissance philosophy. The proponents of Scotist and Thomist versions stand out. Among the latter, Giovanni Capreolo, Silvestri, and Tommaso de Vio, or Cajetan, must be mentioned. However, the most prominent figure is undoubtedly Francisco Suárez, who, though not exclusively Thomist, as he incorporates Scotist elements, is also modern. He is the one who writes the first metaphysics as we know it today, though his concept of *esse* is closer to Scotism than to Thomism. His most significant work is the *Disputationes metaphysicae*, in which, instead of adhering to the Aristotelian sequence of topics, he employs a rational organization. Indeed, prior to Suárez, metaphysics was fundamentally a *commentarium* on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Suárez organizes the material in a systematic and logical manner, commencing with the term "metaphysics," from

which all its problems derive. This material is methodically arranged into fifty-four issues to be resolved.

Descartes, a few decades younger than Galileo, encountered the scholastic tradition at the Collège de La Flèche, likely through Suárez's mediation, via the Coimbra manuals. Descartes' greatness lies in his ability to reformulate traditional philosophy based on new canons, a concept that had already been glimpsed, for example, in Renaissance Aristotelianism. A distinguishing hallmark of contemporary philosophy is the prevalence of gnoseological prefaces, a practice exemplified by Descartes. While Renaissance philosophy addresses the study of the thing directly, for Descartes, a gnoseological preamble is necessary. It is imperative to scrutinize the conditions under which the subject attains awareness, that is, to discern the conditions of possibility for knowledge. This does not imply, however, that earlier philosophers were oblivious to epistemological issues; rather, they did not prioritize these inquiries as a preliminary step to metaphysics. Descartes poses the question of whether he truly knows and whether he can be certain of anything he knows. The attainment of true knowledge is contingent upon certainty. As long as it is possible to doubt noetic contents, there is no certainty, and thus, the philosophical construction cannot begin. Hence arises methodical skepticism: one must doubt the senses, what others transmit, etc.; all these contents can be doubted, and consequently, there is no certainty. However, it is impossible to doubt that one doubts, that is, the very act of doubting; therefore, there is certainty in the cogito. Nevertheless, given that thought, one form of which is doubt, does not occur without a genuinely existing subject, one intuitively perceives one's own existence, the well-known *sum*. From here, Descartes admits many more pieces of knowledge,

including the existence of God. The proof that Descartes employs, as is well-known, is a variant of St. Anselm's *unum argumentum*. Furthermore, the existence of God functions as a guarantor for sensory knowledge, as it enables the rejection of the evil genius.

Beyond the *cogito*, Descartes modifies the conception of philosophy and, therefore, the contents of metaphysics. The primary point to be made is that, as elucidated in his renowned *Meditations on First Philosophy*, it becomes evident that metaphysics becomes devoid of the contents of ontology. Metaphysics is confined to the contents of what is subsequently designated as *metaphysica specialis*. This is a distinction of great significance within rationalist philosophy. Ontology studies are defined by the entity to which they are ascribed, contingent upon the tradition in which they are inscribed. For many rationalists, as well as for Suárez, general metaphysics or ontology studies the *ens* and not necessarily the real entity, but the entity in all its generality. In contrast, special metaphysics is a specification of certain entities that are particularly relevant to philosophy, namely the rational soul (*psychologia rationalis*), the cosmos as a whole (*cosmologia*), and God (*theologia rationalis*). It is precisely this special metaphysics that Kant targets in the Critique of Pure Reason: metaphysics is impossible as a science because there is no phenomenon of the soul, the world as a totality, or God, although for the Prussian, metaphysics unfolds through practical reason (*Critique of Practical Reason*) and feeling (*Critique of Judgment*): indeed, though metaphysics as a science is not possible, this does not mean that metaphysics cannot be done. In other words, metaphysics unfolds through morality and aesthetics. In the first case, morality is not possible without postulating the existence of God and the immortal

soul. Hence, the *Critique of Practical Reason* begins with postulates indemonstrable for theoretical reason. This model is also foundational to Schleiermacher's theology of feeling and, consequently, his hermeneutics. Schleiermacher himself provides the guidelines for the universalization of hermeneutics, which occurs through feeling.

Following Descartes is Nicolas Malebranche, particularly significant for Vico. Indeed, some of Vico's metaphysical foundations reflect Malebranche's influence from a distance.<sup>1</sup> This eminent philosopher is chiefly recognized for his advocacy of occasionalism. Occasionalism posits the notion that all contingent events or occurrences are attributed to God as their cause; however, they are not God. In this manner, the tenet of pantheism is circumvented, as God is transcendent, that is, not synonymous with the cosmos. Nevertheless, all events that occur in the cosmos have God as their ultimate cause. In Vico's thought, there is an echo of this position in the realm of truth and knowledge: the only entity capable of comprehending causality is the originator of realities. Consequently, only God knows things.

Following the precept that Aristotle's contributions must be transcended, Empiricism emerges with Francis Bacon and the quest for a *novum organum*, a term denoting a new method of experimentation. However, it is Locke who adopts Descartes' teaching of the gnoseological preamble. This inquiry is undertaken in the context of his reflections on human understanding, with the objective of delineating the limits of sensory and intellectual perception. Another significant philosopher is

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Costa, Gustavo, *Malebranche y Vico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 9-10, 1998, p. 75-83.

George Berkeley, who posited that the existence of a thing is reduced to its perception, as expressed by the Latin phrase “*esse est percipi*.”; in other words, for a thing to exist or subsist, it must be perceived. Ultimately, since God perceives all reality, reality exists. However, the culmination of this current is expressed in David Hume’s philosophy. He essentially maintains that the limits of knowledge are defined by the scope of impressions and their derivatives. Consequently, ideas lack valence, meaning they reflect reality only faintly. Furthermore, there exist certain “entities” about which no knowledge can be obtained, such as the soul and God. Consequently, these entities enter philosophical discourse without purpose, and thus, in Hume, there is a significant prelude to the critique of special metaphysics as a science, as seen in Kant. The contents of special metaphysics are negated at the pinnacle of empiricism.

In this manner, modern philosophy reaches an impasse; in other words, it appears that there is no possibility for advancement or continuation of philosophical inquiry. Indeed, philosophical inquiry persists until Kant, as previously mentioned. Empiricist philosophy is characterized by a negation of metaphysics, while rationalists affirm metaphysics. In this context, Giambattista Vico emerges, whose influence was not immediate, like Kant’s, but has recently become a subject of study, particularly due to the Italian idealism of Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile, cultivators of his thought. In the era of Vico, philosophy was subject to two distinct perspectives. On the one hand, metaphysics can be renewed through the theory of knowledge, that is, a new gnoseology, corresponding to the path taken by Kant. Hume has already awakened him from dogmatic slumber; as metaphysics cannot be done with theoretical reason, but it is possible through practical reason and

feeling. This allows metaphysics to maintain its course and escape the impasse. The other option is to shift the object of metaphysics to something other than substances exclusively, that is, to change the perspective of the object of inquiry, which is no longer the soul or God as substances, though they remain objects of study. Metaphysics can be renewed in this way, and this is the focus of Vico's works *De antiquissima* and *Scienza Nuova*. The latter has the most significant impact, as it establishes an entire metaphysics of history, which exceeds the scope of this study.

Metaphysics is traditionally conceived as a "second navigation." This is the expression employed by Plato. It means that, through dialectic, philosophy, and rationality, man seeks to reach a reality not subject to movement, change, decay, or decline; for Plato, it involves reaching the Ideas, where the *οὐσίαι* (substances) are perpetual, where truth is contemplated definitively. This is precisely what metaphysics seeks. What Vico does is use human history to undertake the second navigation, to reach ideal models and, consequently, the Mind of God. In this sense, the Platonic vein endures, forging novel pathways. The Mind of God has a stable character, and history can lead toward it. The two aforementioned works manifest this intention, to a greater or lesser extent, through which Vico undoubtedly endeavors to advance metaphysics and enable it to circumvent the impasse in which it finds itself in his era.

According to Francesco Botturi, Vico's philosophy stems from at least three sources, which he deems more significant than others. First, the humanist-Baroque tradition, which provides certain typical gnoseological and expository orientations, such as the fact that argumentation often seeks to engage the

reader rather than deductively demonstrate a doctrine, as will be seen, especially toward the end of *De antiquissima*. Secondly, the Platonizing metaphysics that provides the categories for a metaphysical, in this case veritative, foundation of humanist anthropology. Renaissance Neoplatonism converges in Vico through authors such as Ficino; however, late-antique Neoplatonism, including that of St. Augustine, is also recovered, particularly through Malebranche, and to a somewhat lesser extent through Nicholas of Cusa. The third source is the practical component, which is ethical-juridical in nature, particularly with regard to its adoption of the Romanist tradition and its association with the Aristotelian tradition. Thinkers such as Grotius, Bacon, Malebranche, and Locke are instrumental in this regard<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Botturi, Francesco, *La sapienza della storia: Giambattista Vico e la filosofia pratica*, Vita e Pensiero, Milán 1991, pp. 8-9.



2.

ANCIENT WISDOM AND CULTURED LATIN

In the course of examining the origins of the Latin language, Vico proposes that a considerable proportion of its terminology originates from an erudite usage that obscures a profound wisdom. Certain words possess a noetic content that reveals the cultivation of philosophy within them and, ultimately, embody wisdom, specifically that of the Italics. However, it is widely recognized that the Romans were not initially regarded as a society characterized by a commitment to the pursuit of wisdom. The question thus arises as to how the Latin people have managed to incorporate such profound philosophical content into their own language. Philosophy, it seems, represents the pinnacle of a culture. Indeed, several modern philosophers, among whom Hegel stands out, assert that philosophy is the culmination of a people's spirit, the highest moment achieved after various stages of intellectual development. Vico writes: "I could take an example from my own time: when the school of Aristotle flourished in philosophy and that of Galen in medicine, one constantly heard from the mouths of the ignorant phrases such as 'horror of the vacuum,' 'the repulsions and attractions of nature,' 'the four humors,' 'qualities,' and many others of this 'sort'; later, since modern medicine and

physics have prevailed, one hears the common people at every turn say ‘circulation of the blood,’ ‘clot,’ ‘useful and harmful ferments,’ ‘air pressure,’ and so forth.”<sup>1</sup> Vico’s objective is to demonstrate that, during the historical period when Aristotle’s physics and Galen’s medicine held sway, signifying the cultivated zenith of that era, the general populace, or the *vulgar*, employed expressions derived from these theories.

However, in modern physics and medicine, such as the discoveries of Harvey concerning blood circulation, different terms are employed: the phrase “circulation of the blood” is not found in classical thought. However, during the reign of Emperor Hadrian (117–138 CE), amid the intellectual ferment of Gnostic, Neopythagorean, Middle Platonic, Stoic, and other philosophies, certain terms began to be used in Latin that were previously uncommon, according to Vico. These include *ens*, *essentia*, *substantia*, and *accidens*. These were not known in Latin because Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* was unknown at that time. Subsequently, scholars became acquainted with these terms, leading to their widespread dissemination. These terms have persisted in our language, as it is derived from Latin. A seminal example of such cases is *ens*, which is employed to denote all that exists; *essentia*, which is used to indicate the mode of being of the entity; *substantia*, signifying that which endures or truly exists; and *accidens*, denoting that which always exists derivatively or requires a support to be. Vico’s observations suggest that the incorporation of such expressions into Latin was not possible without the influence of other cultures, given that Latin was the original language of an agricultural and martial people. Hence, he states that until the era of Pyrrhus, the

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Proemium.

ancient Romans had devoted themselves solely to such tasks, “I conjectured that they had received these [terms] from another learned nation and had used them without knowing their meaning (*eas ab alia docta natione ipsos accepisse et imprudentes usos esse coniectabam*).”<sup>2</sup> The Latins were not particularly distinguished as an originally cultured people dedicated to philosophy; the Romans were primarily concerned with practical matters. Their expressions fundamentally referred to or stemmed from these phenomena, these circumstances, and not from philosophy, which they simply did not cultivate. In point of fact, they exhibited a marked rejection of philosophy, favoring instead the practical: the organization of the city, military strategy, and agricultural cycles. They regarded abstract speculations as useless.

Thus, cultured Latin has a foreign origin. Vico’s hypothesis posits that this influence stemmed from the Ionians and the Etruscans, who were considered learned nations. The cultural sophistication of Latin, and by extension, the erudition of the ancient Italics, can be traced back to the Ionians and Etruscans. Some philosophers, originally Ionian, became their successors through migration to southern Italy, namely the Eleatics, likely also influenced by the Pythagoreans. Meanwhile, in northern Italy, the Etruscans flourished. The geographical proximity of the Latin people to the sources of these influences suggests a high probability of their exposure to the influences that Vico suspects. The Eleatic philosophy, originally Ionian, is eminently metaphysical, with its most influential representatives being Parmenides, foremost, and Melissus. With respect to the Etruscans, it appears that their impact on the Latins

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Proemium.

centered on religious ceremonies and civil theology. This suggests that, for Vico, the Etruscans possessed a highly defined and clear religious organization. Rather than natural theologians, like the Eleatics might be, they were certainly civil theologians. This suggests the hypothesis that, according to Vico, the veneration of a religion is directly proportional to the elevation of its beliefs concerning the supreme Divinity. Consequently, within the Christian tradition, ceremonies are regarded as the purest of all, given that the dogmas underlying these ceremonies are considered to be the most elevated. This can be attributed to the fact that the Latins, who succeeded the Etruscans in terms of civil religiosity, transmitted these teachings to Christians. Indeed, Italians are profoundly influenced by the ancient religiosity of the Etruscans.

Etruscan architecture, characterized by its simplicity when compared with that of other peoples, provides a compelling argument that, in the field of geometry, the Etruscans surpassed the Greeks. This observation by Vico is of great significance, as the mathematical sciences, particularly geometry, constitute a preparation for theology. Indeed, this is not a gratuitous claim: to engage in metaphysics, knowledge of mathematics is necessary, an ancient thesis tracing back to Plato, who held that to enter the Academy, one must know mathematics, such that not just anyone could access it without this knowledge. Aristotle, in Book VI of the *Metaphysics* (1), asserts that in order to engage in metaphysics, or “first philosophy,” as he terms it, one must progress through the various degrees of abstraction, which are represented by the sciences dealing with these degrees, namely physics and mathematics. Thus, it is evident that one cannot engage in metaphysics without first having studied physics and mathematics, as metaphysics is an even more

abstract discipline. Therefore, it is essential for the mind to be prepared for such elevated speculations through the study of theoretical sciences, which, according to Aristotle, are hierarchically ordered. Consequently, metaphysics is often studied subsequent to physics and mathematics, as all metaphysical concepts are in some way associated with the philosophy of nature and mathematics. According to the classical conception, metaphysics represents the zenith of philosophical inquiry and the pinnacle of human knowledge.

The philosophical underpinnings of the Latins draw from both Greek and Eleatic sources, while the adoption of Roman traditions, including the worship of gods, sacred expressions, and pontifical words, was influenced by the Etruscans. Consequently, it can be hypothesized that the most sophisticated etymologies of Latin words are derived from these two peoples. Latin possesses erudite terminology, but the Latins are not cultured per se from a historical perspective; they inherited this culture from other peoples, primarily the Greeks. With respect to the religion and philosophy of the Etruscans, this cultural heritage has prompted an endeavor to elucidate the primitive wisdom of the Italians, commencing from the origins of the Latin language. To the best of our knowledge, this has not been attempted until now. However, it could be considered among the aspirations of Francis Bacon, as has been noted, whose model inspires this inquiry, now applied to the specific case of Italic philosophy.

In the *Cratylus*, a dialogue from Plato's younger years, still heavily influenced by Socrates, the origin of language is addressed. There, Plato studies the origin of Greek words, proposing a philosophy of language. The thesis posits that the words of Greek philosophy spring from nature, thereby

demonstrating an intimate relationship with the natural world and reflecting the wisdom of the ancient Greeks. However, this inquiry by Plato, which seeks to identify the causes of the Greek language, differs from the objective of exploring the primitive wisdom of the Italians. Its focus lies in establishing a parallelism with the philosophical investigation undertaken by Vico. Other authors, such as Varro, Julius Scaliger (in *De causis linguae latinae*), Francisco Sánchez (in *Minerva*), and Gaspar Schopp, in his notes to the latter book, have approached the study of the Latin language from a philological perspective. Varro is an ancient author, while Scaliger, Sánchez, and Schopp are Renaissance humanists dedicated to the science of philology. However, their approach diverges from the methodology proposed by Vico. The objective of this study is to identify the underlying causes of the language and to define its system, starting from the philosophy they have learned. It is implied that to do philology, a theoretical position guides the analysis of the origin of words. In more contemporary terms, it could be said that they proceed from certain philosophical prejudices to conduct their philological science. In contrast, Vico's investigation does not align with any "sect" or philosophical school; rather, it seeks to directly explore the origins of words to uncover the wisdom of ancient Italy, which later proves decisive for developing the *Scienza Nuova*.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, it is not a philological study but rather a quest for the sapiential content of words, the arcane knowledge enshrined in the Latin language. This perspective, which eschews a philological method that would tether the investigation to a particular philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Tessitore, Fulvio, *Vico y el descubrimiento del conocimiento histórico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 33, 2019, pp. 93-108.

school, enables the interpretation of terms without the biases of a specific tradition. Indeed, Giambattista Vico's investigation defies facile classification within a school. As previously noted, Vico is neither a rationalist nor an empiricist, nor is he fully a Renaissance humanist. Rather, he draws from various currents, making him a sort of modern eclectic. His interest lies in the wisdom contained in the cultured phrases of the Latin language, rather than the etymological provenance of words. This marks a significant difference from traditional philological approaches.

Vico's plan was to write a monumental work divided into three parts: a *Liber Metaphysicum*, a *Liber Physicum*, and a book on anthropology. It is unfortunate that only the first volume, entitled *Liber Metaphysicum*, has survived. This volume constitutes a complete book in itself, despite the fact that the original project was more extensive. Research indicates that the remaining two books, if indeed composed, have been lost, with no evidence of their existence remaining. This situation is not uncommon among philosophers, as many planned grand works they did not complete; for example, Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, promises a second part that he never wrote, and though he becomes disenchanted with his initial philosophy and explores other paths in the famous *Kehre* (turn) of his philosophy, his early thought is studied based on that first part. Similarly, Vico had planned at least three volumes—one on metaphysics, another on physics, and one on anthropology—but only the metaphysics book, titled *Liber Metaphysicum* as the first in the projected series, remains today.

This book is dedicated to Paolo Mattia Doria, a Genoese geometer whom Vico held in high esteem and with whom, as is known, he discussed the contents of the work. Doria was a

member of an intellectual circle, a salon of discussions typical of the era, where thinkers gathered to debate ideas. Vico participated in these gatherings alongside Doria. The dedication is indicative of this relationship: “I have set out to investigate in this first book the expressions that allow us to conjecture what opinions the wise men of primitive Italy held about the first truth, the supreme divinity, and the human soul.”<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, the text’s three primary themes are delineated: truth, divinity, and the soul. These themes are addressed under the patronage of Doria, whom Vico portrays as an exceptional philosopher due to his lineage and erudition, and influenced by the Cartesian and Gassendist schools. Beyond his interest in other philosophical disciplines, Doria pursued profound studies, cultivating them with great elevation and wisdom, which, according to Vico, is characteristic of an admirable spirit. Vico lauds Doria not solely for his aptitude to appreciate the thoughts of other eminent philosophers but also for the hopes he fosters with his own contributions, which Vico deems as significant as those of Descartes. Nevertheless, history demonstrates that Doria did not attain such eminence, as would otherwise be evidenced by extensive studies. In this context, Vico highlights a particular merit of Doria: being the only modern thinker to deduce the first truth for human action, applying it to both mechanics and political science, and presenting a model of a prince free from the nefarious arts of governance, an ideal reminiscent of Cornelius Tacitus in the ancient world and Niccolò Machiavelli in the modern world. This observation is significant because Vico underscores that, in his philosophy, reason is not merely theoretical but has a practical

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Dedicatio.

application. This is in line with the typical approach among the Latins, who valued the utility of things. In this sense, truth must be applied to practical fields such as mechanics and political science, which align with Christian law and are a desirable goal for the state's well-being.

The dedication also reveals a personal relationship: Doria assumed a patronage role for Vico, welcoming him with benevolence and encouraging him to pursue his academic endeavors. During a dinner conversation at Doria's residence the previous year, Vico proposed a theory about nature, rooted in the etymologies of the Latin language, which posits that all things are driven toward the center of their respective movement by a wedge-like force and expelled from the center to the circumference by a contrary force. In other words, human action has an internal origin that expands outward, a process difficult to study geometrically, as it involves understanding how an internal impulse generates an external action. Vico, as he himself relates, asserts that all things are born, live, and die through a movement of contraction and dilation. Doria, along with other distinguished scholars of the city—Agustín Arellano, Jacinto de Crisóforo, and Nicolás Galicia—advised Vico to develop this demonstration from the beginning, with order and clarity, emphasizing the method of Latin etymologies. Consequently, Vico composed a series of metaphysical reflections, dedicating them to Doria as a gesture of gratitude and pledging to dedicate subsequent investigations to the three aforementioned scholars in acknowledgment of their support.



3.

THE *VERUM-FACTUM* PRINCIPLE

Rodolfo Mondolfo, a preeminent expert on the Hellenistic tradition and a prolific scholar of modern works, elucidates that since antiquity, a dichotomy has been established between *homo faber* and *homo sapiens*. However, as early as the time of the seven Greek sages, this distinction was not merely a separation but also a “reciprocal bond” and an “association of both activities in the same person.”<sup>1</sup> For Plato, knowing is doing, and for Aristotle and Seneca, desire and inquiry give rise to an activist conception of knowledge. Among other sources, Mondolfo cites Philo of Alexandria’s *Quod Deus sit immutabilis*, “in which the aforementioned demonstration of God’s omniscience arises precisely from the distinction between various forms of doing (generating, constructing through the path of art, introducing order), each of which is recognized as an evident and undeniable source of knowledge.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly,

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<sup>1</sup> Mondolfo, Rodolfo, *Verum fatum. Desde antes de Vico hasta Marx*, Siglo XXI, México 1971, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup> Mondolfo, Rodolfo, *Verum fatum*, cit., p. 17.

there is a substantial tradition from which Vico himself draws, as demonstrated by John Milbank<sup>3</sup>.

The first chapter of the *Liber Metaphysicum* introduces the fundamental and profoundly impactful thesis in Vico's philosophy: in Latin, the terms *verum* and *factum* are taken for one another or, as the scholastics say, they are convertible (*convertuntur*).<sup>4</sup> This assertion encapsulates a comprehensive doctrine that merits meticulous examination. In scholarly discourse, the term "convert" signifies that two notions possess an equivalent conceptual extension, thereby rendering them interchangeable in their denotation. This notion is conceptualized within the framework of the doctrine of the transcendentals, a central tenet in medieval metaphysics. It is imperative to draw distinctions between related yet distinct terms: "transcendental," "transcendent," and "transcendence." In scholasticism, "transcendental" refers to that which has the same conceptual extension as the entity (*ens*), encompassing all that is; "transcendent," on the other hand, refers to what is separate from the physical world, such as God in the Neoplatonic tradition; "transcendence," finally, has an anthropological sense, related to human liberation, as in the Platonic perspective, where the soul must free itself from the body to achieve its fullness.

The notion, a term derived from the Latin *notio* (from *notitia*, meaning "what is noted" or "what is seen" intellectually),

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Milbank, John, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico, 1668-1744: The Early Metaphysics*, Edwin Mellen, 1991, pp. 9-76.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 1; cf. García Marqués, Gabriel, *El verum factum en la génesis de las obras de Vico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 30-31, 2016, pp. 143-161.

is pivotal in this context. Transcendental notions are those which denotation is infinite; that is, they apply to all that is. In terms of contemporary philosophy of language, it can be posited that they possess infinite denotation. The quintessential transcendental notion is the entity (*ens*), as it is predicated of all that is, unlike “God,” which does not encompass everything, since not everything is God. In contrast, the entity is applicable to any entity that exists. Other transcendental notions, which share this infinite denotation but vary in their connotation and, as the Latin formula *secundum rationem* dictates,<sup>5</sup> are *unum*, *bonum*, and *verum*: *unum* connotes the indivisible, *bonum* the desirable or appetible, and *verum* the knowable or intelligible. This means that every entity, qua entity, is one, good, and true; the more entity something has, the more unitary, good, and true it is, a thesis of Neoplatonic origin. This gradation is observable in reality: a stone, for example, has a lesser degree of entity than a cow; if a rock is split, two rocks result, as its unity is lesser; but if a cow is split, two cows do not result, indicating a greater degree of unity. According to the classical view, at the pinnacle of reality, God is the least divisible entity, while the lowest entities, such as those merely extended, tend toward near-infinite divisibility. This principle extends to other notions as well: the more entity something possesses, the more good (i.e. more desirable) and true (i.e. more intelligible) it is. In the case of God, who embodies the utmost entity, He is also the most one, the most good, and the most true. However, this does not imply that we fully comprehend Him, as His intelligibility surpasses human capacity. In the scholastic formula, it is stated that *ens et unum convertuntur, ens et bonum*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Santo Tomás de Aquino, *De Veritate*, q. 21, a. 1.

convertuntur, and ens et verum convertuntur, indicating that these notions are interchangeable in their extension. However, Vico introduces a variation: verum et factum convertuntur, meaning the true and the made are convertible, they are identical. Vico writes: “verum et factum reciprocantur seu *convertuntur*,”<sup>6</sup> meaning that the true and the made are reciprocal; this thesis is central to Vico’s philosophy,<sup>7</sup> as it identifies the true, which pertains to knowledge (the intelligible, what can be understood), with the made; in other words, what is true is equivalent to what is made. In this sense, Vico’s position opposes that of Descartes, as “the criterion of science lies not in the evidence of the object derived from the clear and distinct idea, but in that which is conferred upon the object through full possession of the constructive process, whereby no one knows an entity better than the one who has made it.”<sup>8</sup>

Vico then adds: “Likewise, *intelligere* (to understand) is the same as reading perfectly and knowing clearly.”<sup>9</sup> The etymology of *intelligere* is revealing: it comes from *inter* (within) and *legere* (to read), meaning “to read within”; to *intelligere* is to know something internally, in depth, in contrast to superficial knowledge. The latter, which is not *intelligere*, is called *cogitare*, which in Latin means to think and, in Spanish, corresponds to *pensar*. Vico introduces another expression, “*andar racogliendo*” (literally, “going about gathering”), which

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<sup>6</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, I, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Croce, Benedetto, *La filosofia di G. B. Vico*, Laterza, Bari 1922, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo. Fonti teologiche nell’opera di Giambattista Vico*, Lateran University Press, Vatican City 2006, pp. 95-96.

<sup>9</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, I, 1.

describes the process of thinking as an act of collecting scattered elements. This distinction is crucial for Vico's theory of knowledge, which serves as a gnoseological preamble. Strictly speaking, man does not *intelligere* but *cogitat*, that is, he thinks by gathering little by little, taking elements from here and there, reviewing and revisiting them. Human knowledge does not occur in a single stroke but involves a process of circling around things, a "going about gathering" that allows the necessary elements for eventual understanding to be collected. The rationale underlying this phenomenon is articulated by Sertório de Amorim and Silvia Neto: "The human mind finds itself aligned with and separated from the beings and objects that compose Creation, so that, to think them, it must gather them from outside and bring them within (the mind), which happens differently in the case of divine wisdom. Because God created everything voluntarily, He possesses them wholly, in the smallest details, within Himself."<sup>10</sup>

Vico continues in these terms: "*Ratio* signified the gathering of arithmetic elements and the proper quality of man by which he is distinguished and excels over beasts";<sup>11</sup> *ratio*, derived from the Greek *logos*, meaning "to gather" or "collect," was originally used in arithmetic to collect numbers and measures, a process necessary for that science. In a broader sense, *ratio* designates the quality that distinguishes man from animals, the "beasts"; this is a classic philosophical thesis: rationality is what separates man from other animate entities in

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<sup>10</sup> Sertório de Amorim e Silva Neto, Humberto Guido, Quaestionis definitionis et nominis latinis idem. *Lenguaje y conocimiento en el De Antiquissima de Vico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 30/31, 2016-2017, p. 391.

<sup>11</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 1.

the sensible world. Although today we speak of the “rationality” of animals (such as migrating birds or organized ants), this is only by analogy; animals are not rational *per se*, as they lack the ability to organize themselves differently according to places and climates, as humans do; ants, for example, maintain the same organizational pattern worldwide, as do bees or ducks that migrate from north to south in winter; although they seem to act rationally by “gathering” elements of their experience (such as climate changes), from the classical perspective, this apparent rationality comes from their creator, not from themselves.

Indeed, from Vico’s perspective, as a Christian philosopher, it can be argued that animals possess a certain degree of rationality, albeit in a derived sense, as God imprints specific modes of behavior in response to particular circumstances. However, strictly speaking, animals are neither rational nor do they produce language proper. Although they use signs to communicate, they lack language in the human sense, which is characterized by its analogicity, that is, its malleability and variability. Humans, for instance, exhibit a capacity to articulate distinct languages, such as Spanish in one locale and Chinese in another. In contrast, animals, such as birds, produce consistent vocalizations irrespective of their geographical location, thereby demonstrating an absence of language proper. This creative capacity of human language carries profound implications. If humans create language, and it is our product, then, according to Vico’s principle *verum et factum convertuntur*, language aligns with the true, as what we make (such as creating language) is what we truly know.

In the classical tradition, man is considered an *animal rationale particeps*, a rational animal that participates in reason

but is not its absolute master. Humans, despite their rational nature, do not wholly embody the characteristics of rationality, as certain aspects elude our grasp. In certain schools of classical philosophy, God is conceived as *Ratio*, the supreme Reason, which serves to safeguard this human limitation. Vico introduces a doctrine about language and ideas in relation to these doctrines: words are signs of ideas, and ideas, in turn, are signs and representations of things. This triadic relationship (words-ideas-things) is fundamental to his thought and highlights the malleability of language. Words, indeed, are variable, as there is no single human language, and speech, as an application of language, varies according to how we express ourselves. This doctrine is rooted in Augustinian thought, as Gadamer observes. To comprehend hermeneutics, Gadamer asserts, one must revert to St. Augustine and his conception of the *verbum interius*. In this framework, the word represents ideas, but ideas are neither the words nor their direct expression; the expression, in any case, is the word, while ideas are representations of things. In order to comprehend what ideas are, it is necessary to ascertain their ontological correlate. Ideas require an intellect, or mind, to conceive them. That is to say, for there to be ideas, there must be an intellect, and whenever there are ideas, there is an intellect that contains them. An exception to this thesis would be Plato, who, in his theory of Ideas, holds that they exist separately in the *τόπος οὐράνιος*, subsisting independently of any mind.

Some Middle Platonists, including Philo of Alexandria, have rejected Plato's separation and proposed that the Ideas are contained in the divine Mind, which is identified with God. Neoplatonists, however, to circumvent the issue of multiplicity in God (a problem raised by Plato in the *Parmenides*), situate

the Ideas in the Intellect, the primary emanation of the One (God). Thus, the Intellect encompasses the Ideas, thereby introducing a duality (Intellect and Ideas) that preserves God's transcendent unity. However, within the framework of Christian metaphysics, an alternative interpretation is adopted: God contains the Ideas, and these are His very essence reflected, resolving the problem of multiplicity by identifying the Ideas with the divine substance. Moreover, this tradition, through St. Thomas Aquinas, holds that truth, ultimately, refers to the intellect. Indeed, "the true denotes that toward which the intellect tends," for "knowledge consists in the known being in the knower," so that, "since the true is in the intellect insofar as it conforms to the apprehended thing, it is necessary that the reason of the true derives from the intellect to the understood thing, so that the latter is also called true insofar as it is ordered to the intellect"; but the ordering of the known thing to the intellect has an essential or accidental relation, the former occurring when its being depends on it, while it is accidental in relation to the intellect that can know it; thus, "natural things are called true insofar as they attain the likeness of the Ideas that are in the Mind of God." The conclusion, consistent with Vico's proposal, states: "a thing is said to be absolutely true in relation to the intellect on which it depends. Hence, manufactured objects are called true in relation to our intellect: for example, a house is said to be true when it attains the likeness of the form that is in the architect's mind."<sup>12</sup>

In the case of man, who possesses a finite intellect, he also conceives ideas, but these are representations of things, not the things themselves. When we know something, such as a cow,

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<sup>12</sup> Santo Tomás de Aquino, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 16, a. 1c.

we do not contain the thing in us but rather a representation of it. From a rational standpoint, the cow does not penetrate the human body; however, from a metaphysical perspective, prior to the act of creation, God eternally conceives the Ideas of things. In human knowledge, the idea is a representation of the thing, a process that ancient materialist philosophers explained through emanations: things emitted particles or atoms that entered through the eyes, enabling knowledge; Aristotle, however, rejects this theory and proposes an intentional relationship between the subject and the thing, an intentionality of knowledge that generates the idea as a representation. For example, when comprehending a chair, we have an understanding of the chair that represents it, yet we do not mistake the chair for a book, because reason distinguishes the ideas; words, in turn, represent ideas, making these representations public. Indeed, humans do not have a direct relationship with things; rather, the world is mediated by ideas. Unlike animals, humans do not perceive reality in a brute manner; instead, they classify reality through ideas, allowing them to distinguish a chair from a book or a cake from a stone. This phenomenon of mediation is what astonishes Plato and leads him to develop his theory of Ideas: the assertion that we do not experience things immediately, but rather through ideas, and that we use language to represent them. From this perspective, ideas possess a universal character: the concept of “chair” that a specific subject possesses is analogous to that of any rational being who knows what a chair is, although it may be expressed differently (“silla” in Spanish or “sedia” in Italian). This universality may stem from direct experience, the testimony of others, or tradition, as occurs with things we have not experienced but can form an idea of. According to Vico, reason thus consists of gathering

data, and as such, it is a continuous and unfinished process. We never achieve a complete idea of a thing, as more elements can always be gathered. The notion of “andar raccogliendo” underscores the notion that definitive knowledge is elusive; instead, from a pragmatic perspective, ideas serve as guiding principles. The awareness that a chair constitutes an extended body, akin to the human form, enables the latter to avoid collisions, thereby exemplifying the practical utility of ideas, despite their imperfections.

Vico later adds: “Just as *legere* is to gather the elements of writing with which words are formed, *intelligere* consists in gathering all the elements of a thing necessary for the idea to arise in its perfection.”<sup>13</sup> “To read (*legere*) is to join letters to form words, while *intelligere* is to gather the elements of a thing (such as the legs, seat, and backrest of a chair) to form its idea. However, as noted at the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, no human successfully assimilates all the elements of a thing, thereby indicating an absence of proper *intelligere*. In terms of philosophical controversy, this refutes Descartes, who sought clear and distinct ideas, but these are impossible to attain from a purely human perspective. Furthermore, for Vico, thinking (*cogitare*) is proper to man, while intelligence (*intelligere*) is proper to God; humans think, that is, they continuously gather elements, but they do not achieve perfect, infinite, and absolute intelligence, as only God, who gathers all elements, fully *intelligere*. Since *intelligere* is equivalent to obtaining a clear and distinct idea, consequently, man does not *intelligere* definitively, though he does aim toward it through his rational activity. For this reason, Croce’s assertion that Vico does

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<sup>13</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 1.

not intend to call Descartes' doctrines false is accurate but "only seeks to downgrade them from complete truths to fragmentary truths, from science to consciousness,"<sup>14</sup> as will be explored later.

From this follows a conclusion about the true: "The true is the made itself, and consequently, in God is the first truth, because God is the first maker."<sup>15</sup> Since the true and the made are interchangeable, only the one who makes holds the truth about them. God, being the creator, possesses absolute truth because He intelligere all that He makes. Humans, on the other hand, can only approach the truth in things created by God as well as our own artifacts, which we eventually come to know better than the former. Indeed, as a watchmaker knows a watch he crafts, we know better what we make because we know exactly how it was made. Vico applies this thesis to science, implying that human knowledge is an infinite process of gathering elements and refuting Descartes's aspiration for a completed science. For Descartes, metaphysics is the root of the tree of knowledge, whose trunk is physics, and whose fruits are sciences, such as medicine and ethics. The latter is the most prized fruit.<sup>16</sup> However, Vico maintains that we will never possess definitive knowledge because we will always be gathering elements, thus resulting in an endless search.

Divine truth, according to Vico, is infinite and absolute because God contains and orders all the internal and external elements of things; the human mind, limited and external to things, can only gather external elements, generally those

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<sup>14</sup> Croce, Benedetto, *La filosofia di G. B. Vico*, cit., p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 1.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Descartes, René, *Los principios de la filosofía*, p. 15; AT, IX, 2.

accessible to the senses, and approach their inwardness but will never fully understand them. Therefore, man is a participant in reason, not its master. Vico illustrates this difference with an analogy: Divine truth is like a three-dimensional sculpture that can be seen from all angles, while human truth is like a flat painting, limited to a single perspective. For example, an orange cannot be fully known by humans: they see one side, but not the interior, segments, or imperfections. God, in contrast, knows everything absolutely. Science, therefore, is the knowledge of how a thing is made, that is, of its causes, a process that in man remains partial.

Vico associates this doctrine with the wisdom of the ancient Italics, for whom the true and the made were interchangeable. However, when considering the eternal world, pagan philosophers, such as the Eleatics, attribute to God an action only *ad extra*. Christian theology, in contrast, employs a distinction between operations *ad intra* and *ad extra*, positing that God possesses an internal action within the Trinity, wherein Christ and the Holy Spirit are generated, not created, as articulated in the Creed. This *ad intra* generation is eternal, without temporal succession; thus, the Scriptures call the Wisdom of God *Verbum*, for the Word, identified with Christ, is the intellection of all Ideas. In Christian theology, all things are created through the Word, a doctrine of Platonic and Stoic origin. The Word, eternally known and generated by the Father, contains the elements of all Ideas, thereby enabling God to create this universe and, potentially, countless worlds, an idea that resonates with modern rationalist theology.

The theological theme warrants further clarification. Even in Vico's century, mastery of philosophy entailed familiarity with theology, and vice versa; both disciplines, regarded as the

royal sciences in the Middle Ages, constitute a medieval legacy. Consequently, it is not unexpected that Vico's discourse encompasses the development of distinctions related to doctrines such as uncreated Truth and created Truth. This distinction is significant because, by respecting the principle that truth lies in making, a potential theological difficulty arises. If truth is linked to the act of making, to *facere*, it could be inferred that God, in order to know, would need to create, which poses a problem within the framework of creationism. Rather than conceptualizing creation as an autonomous act of divine will, it would appear that God is compelled to create in order to know. In accordance with the principles espoused by Vico, the act of knowing is synonymous with the act of making. Thus, the assertion of knowledge is predicated on the existence of an act of creation. If this principle were strictly applied to God, it would create a theological tension: This would imply that God would have to create the cosmos necessarily to know, contradicting the doctrine that He creates freely, not by external constraint. If this is the case, then Vico's principle would be in conflict with theology (as previously occurred with Averroes), thereby suggesting that creation is a prerequisite for divine knowledge.

Vico resolves this issue by resorting to the theological distinction between generation and creation. The act of creation is defined as producing something from nothing, in other words, *ex nihilo*, an act exclusive to God, as creatures—angels, humans, and others—lack this capacity. The term “to generate,” however, has a different meaning, one that is linked to ancient philosophy. The Latin term *generatum* derived from the Greek *πρόδος*, meaning procession. In Neoplatonism, the doctrine stipulates that from the One, the Intellect emerges, and subsequently, the Soul, a descending process called

generation. In theology, when it is said that God generates, it refers to an *ad intra* act, internal to the divinity, distinct from creation, which is *ad extra*, external to Him. Thus, God generates eternally: the Father generates the Son, and the Son, together with the Father, generates the Holy Spirit, maintaining continuous generation. Sabetta, as a theologian, explains that this is “the revealed doctrine of creation, distinct from *ad intra* generation, which allows safeguarding the ontological distinction between God as the creative principle and the reality (real or ideal) in which He neither resolves nor identifies Himself.”<sup>17</sup>

This solution preserves Vico’s principle: God knows because He is always generating, in an infinite act. To illustrate this point, one may draw upon Aristotle’s simile of the unmoved Mover, whose immobility is not indicative of inactivity but rather an activity so complete that it appears static. This fullness, which would have been inconceivable as inaction for a Greek philosopher or medieval theologian, reflects an overabundant activity. Neoplatonists, following this line of thought, posit that the One, due to its excess of activity, generates the Intellect, and this, in turn, the Soul, giving rise to the world. Our author writes: “From these elements, known in His divine omnipotence, arises the absolute real Word, which, being eternally known by the Father, is also eternally generated by Him

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<sup>17</sup> Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 103; cf. Löwith, Karl, *Verum et factum convertuntur: le premesse teologiche del principio di Vico e le loro conseguenze secolari*, in: Aa. Vv., *Omaggio a Vico*, Morano, Nápoles 1968, pp. 73-112. On page 80, he writes: “Without the Christian-theological premise that in God knowing and making are identified, given that the divine Word is already, as such, creative, and that man is similar to God, Vico’s principle of the convertibility of the true with the made would lack a metaphysical foundation, that is, an onto-theological one.”

(*et ex iis in sua divina omnipotentia cognitis exactissimum reale verbum existit, quod, cum ab aeterno cognoscatur a Patre, ab aeterno item ab eodem genitum est*).<sup>18</sup> This passage unequivocally suggests that its focus lies in generation rather than creation. The Word, a theological term for the Son, is eternally generated, and classical authors employ precise language, eschewing superfluous terms. Consequently, creation (*ad extra*) is distinguished from generation (*ad intra*), thereby safeguarding the principle that God knows because He always produces.

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<sup>18</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 1.



4.

FROM DIVINE TRUTH TO HUMAN SCIENCE

In the subsequent section, *De origine et veritate scientiarum*, Vico asserts: “From the opinions of the ancient Italian sages concerning the true, and from the distinction observed in our religion between what is generated and what is created, we take as a principle that, since the absolutely true resides solely in God, we must profess as entirely true what God reveals to us (*Ex quibus antiquorum Italiae sapientum de vero placitis, et hac, quae in nostra religione adhibetur, geniti et facti distinctione, principio habemus, quod cum in uno Deo exacte verum sit, omnino verum profiteri debemus, quod nobis est a Deo revelatum*).”<sup>1</sup> This text serves to reinforce the distinction between generation and creation, suggesting that the absolutely true resides in God and must be accepted as such. This acceptance is rooted in the belief in a divine superiority, transcending human comprehension, thereby precluding a comprehensive examination of its nature.

Among the revealed truths that surpass human reason is faith, which involves accepting as true the testimony of another. A paradigmatic example is creation *ex nihilo*, an unattainable

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

phenomenon by reason alone. According to Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle, the world is eternal due to the eternity of motion and the unmoved Mover, as previously noted. Another example is the Incarnation of Christ, which is not empirically verifiable. These truths are regarded as inconceivable and accessible only through faith. It is from this reflection that the genesis of human sciences emerges, along with the standard by which their veracity is ascertained. In fact, Vico establishes a hierarchy of sciences based on their proximity to Revelation, the absolute ideal. God knows everything because He possesses the elements that constitute reality, a capacity that is evidently superior to human reason. Thus, he distinguishes between *cogitare* (thinking discursively, gathering elements through division) and *intelligere* (fully comprehending the constituents of an entity), a faculty that man does not possess properly. Human science functions as a dissection of nature, separating and analyzing its components to comprehend them. This method refutes skepticism by demonstrating that everything has a cause, though it reflects the limitations of human knowledge compared to the divine.

Human cognition does not occur through immediate and complete intuition, which is precisely what *intelligere* entails. No philosopher claims that we grasp the essence of things through an intuitive stroke. The concept of “intellectual intuition” pertains exclusively to the ability to differentiate between one entity and another, rather than to a comprehensive grasp of its inherent nature. This distinction is part of practical experience; when presented with a rock and food, they are immediately differentiated without requiring elaborate reflections on their digestibility or ultimate composition. Similarly, when attempting to pass through a wall to reach another room, one

intuitively recognizes the need to go around or exit through the door. This does not imply understanding the fundamental components of the rock or food, or those of a door and a wall, but merely identifying them as distinct entities, an almost natural ability shared by all. Consequently, no philosopher posits that we know the essences of entities immediately. The attribution of such a stance would constitute the construction of a fictitious argument. However, in order to navigate the world, it is sufficient to distinguish between things; nevertheless, Platonic dialectic takes this a step further. It begins with these differences to seek common elements, thereby rising toward a higher unity. In metaphysics, the philosopher transcends the multiplicity of entities to identify universal traits, a process that is superfluous for everyday life. It is possible for an individual to engage in the preparation of food without resorting to metaphysics, instead relying on practical distinctions that are gained through experience.

In philosophy, common elements are pursued to ascend to a unifying Principle of reality, that is, to rise to the metaphysical plane. In *The Republic*, Plato identifies this principle with the Good, as the unifying element of the cosmos; in *The Sophist* and *The Parmenides*, he associates it with the One. Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus, have sought to unify these concepts in the concept of the “One-Good,” in which the One represents the unity of reality, and the Good is both its origin and the end toward which all things tend. This position aligns with the biblical assertion that God created everything good, thereby facilitating the integration of Neoplatonism into Christian thought. Some scholars have posited that Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus, may have been influenced by Christianity prior to the divergence of their philosophies.

However, there is no textual evidence of his to substantiate this claim. Beyond this speculation, Middle Platonism already paves the way for the Neoplatonic system, which Plotinus consolidates. In this framework, the Good corresponds to the *exitus* (emanation) of things from the One and the *reditus* (return) to unity, terms that translate the Greek *πρόοδος* and *ἐπιστροφή*, used by Plotinus, Proclus, and Iamblichus.

Vico aligns with this tradition in his observation that humans, in practicing science, start from the separated to seek unification. Descartes, in the *Discourse on Method*, formalizes this process: first, one analyzes, separating parts, then synthesizes, reuniting those parts into a coherent whole. This method demands that each stage undergo exhaustive review repeatedly. In the natural sciences, this process of analysis and synthesis is continuous and, in absolute terms, unfinished, allowing for ever-growing but never complete knowledge. In order to comprehend the human being, Vico divides it, from a classical, non-materialist perspective, into body and soul, and the soul, in turn, into intellect and will. From the body, he abstracts figure and motion, and from these, along with everything else, the concept of being and unity is derived. The intellect, as the seat of intellectual knowledge, is distinct from the sensible. Reason, rooted in the intellect, operates discursively, rather than immediately grasping essences clearly, as previously noted. The will, classically defined as the faculty of desiring what the intellect presents, is oriented toward goods, some of which are non-sensible. The will can encompass any type of goods, including intelligible ones, such as health or honesty, imperceptible to the senses but prevalent in moral decisions.

This division —body, soul, intellect, will—allows for further distinctions, such as freedom or rationality. Rationality, in

particular, signifies that the human intellect functions through analysis and synthesis, rather than through direct intuition. Vico proposes a “humble gnoseology,” as Croce calls it, characterized by a progressive approach to things without fully grasping them. The body is attributed figure (spatial contours distinguishing it from other entities) and motion (change of position). These precise terms must not be confused with “form” (the essential structure in Aristotle’s physics). Consequently, each individual possesses a distinct figure while maintaining the common characteristics of the human form.

In accordance with the principle that greater entity entails greater unity (expressed in the transcendentals: *esse et unum convertuntur*), a rock possesses a lesser degree of entity in comparison to a plant. The division of a rock results in two rocks, whereas the splitting of a tree does not necessarily yield two trees. An animal, as a more unified entity, further substantiates this. Indeed, the greater the unity of an entity, the greater its being, its ontological consistency. In the case of man, this implies that he possesses a greater degree of being than a rock, signifying a greater fullness of being. The being in man is more fully realized than in other entities. From an Aristotelian perspective, humans share fundamental potentialities with plants, including birth, reproduction, feeding, nourishing, and perishing. These capacities are evident in the manner in which humans feed, albeit in a different manner than that of plants. Likewise, he possesses the potentialities of animals, primarily the sensitive life. This does not imply that the human senses in the same manner as an animal, whose sensory faculties may encompass different or even superior abilities, such as sight, hearing, olfaction, or gustation. However, there is a certain degree of similarity. It is posited that animals, whose existence is

confined to the sensible, may possess senses that surpass the limits of human imagination. In addition to sensation, humans possess intellectual and volitional life, and, in Vico's perspective, a spiritual dimension. This implies a greater fullness of being. His philosophy, thoroughly modern, posits man at the pinnacle of natural things. For Vico, human superiority lies in transcending the sensitive life of animals. Animals do not *intelligere*, lack will in the strict sense, do not reason, nor establish a relationship with God through religious rites.

Vico asserts that metaphysics studies the entity (*ens*). The entity is all that is, so metaphysics is the study of the entity from the perspective of being, that is, what makes entities be. Metaphysics focuses on being, but the entity serves as its mediation. The mode of being of the entity, traditionally referred to as "essence," differs from being itself. In metaphysics, there exist essentialist approaches that regard being as an accident of essence. However, Vico prioritizes being as the horizon of his thought. Knowing the essence of an entity, such as an orange, completely and reliably is impossible, given that elements are always lacking, which would limit science. In contrast, the study of being offers a more determinate basis, assigning each discipline an aspect of being: arithmetic studies unity and its multiplicity, geometry studies figure and its dimensions, mechanics studies the internal motion of the movable entity, medicine studies the body from the perspective of health, logic studies reason, and ethics studies the will.<sup>2</sup>

Man, then, possesses various dimensions of being, making him multiple, that is, possessing entitative variation. It is precisely for this reason that man is finite, and his unity is not total,

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

as might be concluded from the discourse on the unity of the entity or the convertibility between the one and the entity. Only in God is there perfect unity and, thus, reality, while in man, these are divided and cease with death. From a theological perspective, God is regarded as the most unitary entity, thus possessing the greatest fullness of being. In Him, intellect and will are identical, without the human disjunction between knowing and willing. What God knows and wills is realized without fluctuation, being all things in an eminent degree. The generation and corruption of beings do not affect His being, whereas finite entities depend on multiple factors to exist. According to Vico, God is the sole true being, and finite entities are privative of being. This somewhat evokes Parmenides, for whom being is eternal and indivisible. In the Christian Neoplatonic tradition, human beings and all creatures collectively emerge from nothingness, thereby distinguishing them from the divine. However, Vico sometimes seems to approach a Spinozist view, in which finite entities are modes or attributes of a single substance—the infinite and eternal being—lacking their own persistence. Spinoza employs a single substance as an example, illustrating that its modes of existence are ephemeral and lack consistency, and that they ultimately reintegrate into the substance. In contrast, Christian metaphysics draws a distinction between created beings and divine beings. For Plato, absolute being is the *οὐσία*, the subsistent divine Ideas, with the Good as the supreme Idea in *The Republic*. However, the Judeo-Christian tradition, as outlined in the *Book of Exodus*, delineates God as “*Ego sum qui sum*,” an expression that evinces profound philosophical resonance: “And our ascetics, or Christian metaphysicians, preach thus: before God, no matter how great we are, or for whatever reason we are great, we are nothing (*Et*

*nostrī ascetae, sive metaphysici Christiani, ita predicant: nos prae Deo, quantumlibet maximos, et quavis de causa maximos, nihil esse).*"<sup>3</sup>

The expression "Ego sum qui sum" points to a subsistence so consistent that all other existing things resemble nothingness before it. This doctrine, though seemingly simple, has far-reaching implications, not only in Christian philosophy but also in atheistic currents like Sartre's. The nothingness in Sartre relates to the lack of consistency in entities, whose fragility, weakness, and transience stem from their origin in nothingness. This perspective is articulated by Kierkegaard and subsequently by a succession of existential philosophers. In the Old Testament, as articulated in the books of *Ecclesiastes* and the *Song of Songs*, man is depicted as a mere breath or a frail reed susceptible to the whims of any wind. Christian metaphysicians, following this line of thought, maintain that, before God, we are nothing, regardless of our greatness or origin. God is unique because He is infinite, and Christian metaphysics asserts that the infinite cannot be multiplied, as that would be contradictory. It is only the finite that permits multiplication, for it can be divided into an infinite number of fragments. Created unity vanishes before the immense, which admits no measure.

Consequently, the body fades, as motion requires a place defined by it, and without a body, there is no place. Human reason is nullified before divine understanding, which contains all things without the need for reasoning. In man, reasoning serves as a means to understand; in God, it is direct work. The human will, fragile for not always fulfilling what is desired,

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<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

stands in contrast to the divine, which, as the optimal goal in itself, is unassailable. The infinitude of being constitutes a metaphysical thesis: being is infinite and cannot be encompassed, whether from a gnoseological or ontological perspective, distinct but related dimensions. Indeed, gnoseologically, no mental category contains being; everything—stone, animal, man, angel, red, virtue, honesty—participates in being or falls under its most universal *notitia*, with no category above it. Ontologically, only an entity or mind capable of comprehending being in its totality would be infinite, thus indicating that only God is so.

Human reason is insignificant before divine Understanding. From a gnoseological perspective, we are driven to understand, driven by the desire to comprehend things, as occurs in philosophy when inquiring why things are as they are. However, God, with full intellection of all things, does not need to reason. From this perspective, reason is considered a limitation of the human intellect, inapplicable to the eternal. Attributing it to God would be to anthropomorphize Him excessively. In Him, the Ideas are present, and what in us is reasoning, in God is *opera*: what He conceives and wills is realized, in accordance with Vico's principle that states, "One understands what one makes." Consequently, by creating all things, God understands all. On another level, the human will, fragile for not always achieving what is desired, contrasts with the divine, which is unassailable, as what God wills is accomplished; thus, only God knows everything, and humans seek to resemble Him, according to Vico.

This may give the impression of anthropomorphizing God. However, this assertion stands in direct opposition to Vico's original intentions. One may consider the term "willing"

to be a linguistic device employed to elucidate His mode of action, devoid of superfluous pretensions, as it does not inherently pertain to Him, given the finite nature of human notions in relation to Him. As Vico is aware, the ancient tradition establishes three ways of speaking of God: cataphatic, apophatic, and eminent. The act of ascribing will or willing to God constitutes an inevitable form of anthropomorphization, as human cognition is limited to our own intelligence, thereby distinguishing understanding and willing as two distinct movements. In man, one can understand something and will another, manifesting a certain dislocation. When applied to divine reality, it is posited that such dislocation is nonexistent: what God comprehends is what He wills, and thus, it is realized. However, this is considered to be a form of positive or cataphatic language, which is regarded as less precise according to established linguistic tradition. Negative or apophatic language is deemed more intelligible, denying imperfections to God, such as divisibility by saying God is indivisible, or materiality by affirming He is immaterial. Cataphatic language endeavors to capture an essence of the divine, yet it lacks precision. Conversely, it is more precise to affirm that God is infinite, immaterial, and unmoved, employing negative terms such as incorporeal and incorruptible. Additionally, superlative or eminent language is employed, signifying that human categories are inadequate for addressing God, to whom is attributed that which surpasses them. He is not substance but hypersubstantial; He has no essence but hyperessentiality. The Platonic theological tradition places a higher value on negative and eminent language than on positive language. The assertion that “God is a will that wills” is a limitation, as humans are predicated from their condition, unable to transcend it.

In Christian philosophy, it is fundamental to distinguish God's being from the created being, as previously noted. The human being does not participate in God's being, except in the sense of the Ideas, that is, the Paradigms of creation projected in the divine Mind before the cosmos's creation. God draws being from nothingness, not from Himself, as claiming otherwise would imply that created being is generated or engendered, as the Latin term *generatum* indicates. In Spinoza, however, there is no creation proper but an unfolding of the single substance, the being in and by itself, identified with God, whose reason resides in Himself. This perspective aligns with Christian philosophy, as God's purpose is not external to Himself but inherent to Himself. This thesis reemerges in the context of idealism, wherein the cosmos is conceptualized as the unfolding of the divine Idea, a concept that temporalizes and thereby diverges from the Christian tradition, which positions God within the confines of eternity. Hegel, having received training as a theologian to be a Lutheran pastor prior to his transition to philosophy, introduces this innovation: God manifests in the temporal unfolding of the world, which is, in a sense, God Himself.

Vico employs the Latin term *minuere* (diminution) to denote the process of dividing and altering an entity, as illustrated by the separation of the components of a created entity, thereby reducing its integrity. This issue of division in the sciences prompts the question of whether the resolute or analytical method, as celebrated by Aristotelians, is without value. This method, which resolves an entity into its genus by applying its properties, involves an ascent to broader categories, but by dividing, the original composition is lost. This is what happens logically with the famous syllogism that posits a major and

minor premise, whose middle term, well-distributed, is implied in the prior premise. Strictly speaking, a *resolutio* occurs here, as the reasoning is resolved by appealing to the genus. In the domain of human knowledge, Vico observes that man has endeavored to comprehend nature throughout history. However, he faces a fundamental limitation: he cannot fully apprehend it because he does not possess within himself the elements or causes of things, that is, the ultimate reasons explaining why things are as they are, making a strict *resolutio* seem impossible. When attempting to know nature, man discovers that his mind is limited and not infinite. Things exist outside him, and to know them, he must observe them externally, but lacking their causes within himself, a gap, a void, arises between the knowing subject and the known thing, that is, a separation. Notwithstanding this imperfection, man employs his intelligence through the process of abstraction to overcome this limitation to a certain extent. Abstraction consists of setting aside certain aspects of reality to focus on others that are representative. Through this process, man has created two fundamental concepts: the point and the unit, which Vico employs throughout *De antiquissima*. The point, which is represented as the smallest mark in geometry, and the unit, which is understood as the basic concept of arithmetic, have no real or subsistent existence; they are, rather, fictions crafted by the human mind. On this matter, he writes:

“Indeed, the point, if you describe it, is no longer a point; the unit, if you multiply it, ceases to be a unit. Furthermore, it took the liberty of proceeding from them to infinity, so that it could draw lines to immensity and multiply the unit infinitely. And thus, it constructed a kind of world of forms and numbers that it could wholly encompass within itself; and by

extending, shortening, or combining lines, adding, subtracting, or operating with numbers, it performs infinite works, because it knows infinite truths within itself (*Punctum enim, si designes, punctum non est; unum, si multiplices, non est amplius unum. Insuper pro suo iure sumpsit ab his in infinitum usque procedere, ita ut lineas in inmensum ducere, unum per innumera multiplicare sibi liceret. Atque hoc pacto mundum quemdam formarum et numerum sibi condidit, quem intra se universum complecteretur: et producendo, vel decurtando, vel componendo lineas, addendo, minuendo, vel computando numeros infinita opera efficit, quia intra se infinita vera cognoscit*).<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, when traced, the point ceases to be an ideal point, as it acquires dimensions, and the unit, when multiplied, loses its indivisible character. From these fictions, man has advanced toward infinity, drawing lines indefinitely and multiplying the unit without limit.

According to Euclidean geometry, a line is a succession of points, and the unit is the foundation of numeration, and through this convention, humans have created a world of geometric forms and numbers that symbolically encompasses the universe. Through the extension, shortening, or combination of lines, and the addition, subtraction, or calculation of numbers, man generates a multitude of works, for he inherently possesses truths that, though fictitious, are operative. The point and the unit, as human creations, are analogous to divine creation: just as God projects and creates the cosmos, man projects and creates these abstractions to approach reality, though this approach is, ultimately, a fiction. It is evident that these fictional elements lack any tangible existence within the natural

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

world. There is no subsistent point, circle, triangle, square, or chiliagon as entities independent of the mind. However, humans employ these fictions to describe reality, asserting, for instance, that the Earth is spherical, or that specific objects are square or triangular in shape. These forms are not ontological realities, but rather, they are projections of the human mind.

It is evident that Vico does not repudiate the utility of mathematics and geometry; rather, he regards them as the most efficacious instruments for comprehending reality.<sup>5</sup> According to his principle that *verum est facendum* (the true is what is made) man knows mathematics and geometry with certainty because he has created them.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, an Augustinian nuance can be perceived: humans, by producing these fictions, act as co-creators with God, albeit on an infinitesimal scale.

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<sup>5</sup> The following note is highly significant from the perspective of Vico's overall thought: "His evaluation of mathematics could be summarized as follows: mathematics deals with numbers and figures that man constructs, but these are abstractions, unreal entities. In a word, mathematics obeys the criterion of 'verum ipsum factum'; however, it is a science of fictions. Consequently, if there were no other form of reciprocity between truth and fact, the criterion of truth formulated by Vico would be sterile, and man would be condemned to total ignorance. However, for Vico, there is the activity of the human spirit in its becoming, that is, in its history: there are facts accomplished by man, which the same man who produced them knows. This truth is not the abstract truth of mathematics; it is a concrete truth, the very reality of the spirit, known through its becoming. Thus, Vico frees himself from the mathematicism characteristic of Cartesian rationalism, which sought to reduce everything to clear and distinct ideas and subject it to the rigorous necessity of geometric demonstration.", Muñoz-López, *La crítica de Vico a Descartes*, «Cuaderno sobre Vico», 2, 1992, p. 59.

<sup>6</sup> It is evident, then, that Vico does not reject knowing with certainty, cf. Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 106.

Concepts such as the square root, the Pythagorean theorem, and the infinite parallel line that never intersects have no existence in nature; they are human constructs that facilitate progress in knowledge. These fictions, far from having a negative connotation, are essential instruments for understanding the world. He subsequently asserts:

“Creation is not only necessary for solving problems but also for the elaboration of theorems themselves, which are commonly thought to require mere contemplation. While the human mind gathers the elements of the truth it observes, it cannot avoid producing the truths it knows (*Neque enim in solis problematibus, sed in theorematis ipsis, quae vulgo sola contemplatione contenta esse putantur, operatione opus est. Etenim, dum mens colligit eius veri elementa, quod contemplatur, fieri non potest quin faciat vera, quae cognoscit*).”<sup>7</sup>

This process mirrors Giambattista Vico’s *verum-factum* principle, which posits that the true (*verum*) and the made (*factum*) are convertible, signifying that we possess knowledge of something insofar as we ourselves have created it. For instance, in the development of a mathematical theorem, the act of its construction simultaneously implies its knowledge, thereby manifesting the truth it contains. In this sense, true knowledge is achieved through the act of creation. This act is analogous to God’s creation, but it is never equal to it, as truth lies in what man produces through his intellectual activity.

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<sup>7</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.



5.

NATURE, REASON, AND CREATION

Whoever studies nature, however, cannot define things according to the truth, that is, determine their essence and make them truly. According to the *verum-factum* principle, this limitation arises because humans do not create nature; the latter exists independently of our intervention. Consequently, we cannot know natural things in their most intimate essence or their most proper aspect, since we are not their creators. In summary, we have not created natural entities, such as animals or plants, and therefore, we cannot know their intimate nature absolutely, but only approach it through external observations and conceptual constructions employed by reason.

Indeed, the function of reason, according to its etymology, consists in “grasping,” that is, gathering and collecting the elements from which things are truly constituted. Nevertheless, this faculty of reason does not supersede the aforementioned constraint: one who studies nature is incapable of defining phenomena according to truth because he is not the creator of nature. Consequently, man cannot determine with certainty the essence of things, understood as their intrinsic nature. In this context, the term “nature” is understood to encompass two distinct meanings. Firstly, the term alludes to that which

functions according to its inherent principles, that is to say, the natural, which operates without human artificial intervention. In this sense, the natural is defined as that which possesses an internal principle of action, independent of human will. However, from Vico's perspective, this independence is not absolute, as it is considered a creature of God. Secondly, the term "nature" denotes the inherent essence of a thing, its intimate constitution. In Latin, the term "*natura*" is understood to encompass both meanings. On the one hand, it refers to entities that possess their own inherent principles and, on the other hand, it refers to the essence of entities.

Since man does not create nature, he lacks the ability to fully comprehend its essence, thereby limiting our knowledge to that which we observe and classify. This limitation leads to the differentiation of different metaphysical approaches: some metaphysics focus on knowing essences, seeking to determine what makes a thing what it is; others, however, maintain that the first thing we know is the existence of things, not their essence, prioritizing being over the definition of their nature. The selection of an approach is contingent upon the metaphysical system that has been adopted. Nevertheless, Vico emphasizes that the ability to assign each thing its nature and make it truly proper to God, rather than to man, explains why our knowledge of natural essences is limited. Only God, as the creator of nature, possesses complete knowledge, while man, not being the creator of the natural, must settle for partial and mediated knowledge.

However, man, in accordance with the analogy Vico establishes with creation, "defines the names themselves and, without any substance, creates, as if from nothing, the point, the line, and the surface (*Nomina ipsa definit, et ad Dei instar ex*

*nulla re substrata, tamquam ex nihilo res veluti creat).*”<sup>1</sup> These geometric concepts—the point, the line, and the surface—do not exist in reality as we conceive them; they are fictions of the human mind. In this context, the term “fiction” does not bear a pejorative connotation. Derived from its Latin etymology, “fiction” (*fictio*) signifies artifice, a deliberate construction of the mind. These fictions function as instruments employed to elucidate both nature and physical phenomena. In essence, in natural reality, points, lines, and surfaces do not exist as independent entities; rather, they are abstract concepts produced by the mind in an attempt to comprehend nature. No one perceives a point in nature in the pure mathematical sense; these concepts are products of the mind, but not in a deceptive sense, rather as instruments that allow us to approach the natural and structure our knowledge.

In creating these concepts, man emulates God in a sense. As a metaphysical thesis, Vico posits that, in a manner analogous to God’s creation of nature, humans create the point, the line, and the surface, thereby enabling human knowledge of nature through these fictions. As products of our mind, these concepts are analogous to natural things insofar as they are creations of God. We know these concepts because we have created them. In this sense, mental fictions function not only as useful tools but also as the means by which man can access knowledge of nature, albeit in a mediated and limited way.

Geometric concepts, such as the point, the line, and the surface, are constructs of the human mind, and thus, can be apprehended with certainty. This is analogous to the manner in which God knows natural things, as He is the creator of all

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

things. In this sense, these fictions are products of our intellectual activity, and as our creations, we understand them fully. This thesis is pivotal to comprehending Giambattista Vico's thought, as it demonstrates how man, through his cognitive constructs, attains knowledge, emulating, in a limited capacity, God's creative and cognitive faculties. Vico defines the point as that which has no parts (*quod partes non habeat*); the line as a succession of points or a length without breadth or depth (*puncti excursum, sive longitudinem, latitudinis ac profunditatis expertem*); and the surface as the union of two distinct lines at a point or as an extension including breadth and length but excluding depth (*duarum diversarum linearum in unum punctum coitionem, sive latitudinem cum longitudine, praecisa profunditate*).<sup>2</sup> These definitions constitute the most elementary fictions of our mind, fundamental to mathematical and geometric sciences. Due to their fundamental nature, these concepts should be readily comprehensible, as they are foundational to our capacity for reasoning and classification, developed from the earliest stages of learning.

The function of reason, according to its etymology, consists in "grasping," that is, seizing, gathering, and collecting the elements from which things are truly constituted. From this process, the mind forms words that generate ideas. This phenomenon was noted by the authors of the Latin language, who employed the terms *quaestio nominis* (search for the name) and *quaestio definitionis* (search for the definition) interchangeably. For the Romans, seeking the definition was tantamount to inquiring what idea was generated in the human mind when pronouncing a word, thereby revealing the intrinsic connection

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

between the name and the concept it represents. In this context, names function to indicate possession, yet their nature is considered fictitious. Analogous to how God creates natural things, humans create names and language. Vico adopts the Aristotelian thesis that considers language an artifice or convention, in contrast to the Platonic view in the *Cratylus*, according to which language is natural and names have an intrinsic connection with the things they designate. For Vico, language is a human fiction, a construction that facilitates our approach to things and the structuring of our knowledge. No one perceives reality without this fictitious mediation; things do not present themselves to us in their pure state, but we always define them through language. The definition functions as a conceptual framework that is applied to reality, thereby enabling its ordering and understanding. For this reason, it seems that Vico does not align with the Platonic position on the origin of language, where names are *μίμησις τῆς οὐσίας*. Gensini is likely correct in suggesting, even though he seeks to contrast Vico with the Aristotelian perspective on the origin of names, that the difference between Vico and Plato in this matter “lies in the fact that Vico’s ‘natural’ is realized through subjective means, through the coherence established by primitives between certain phonetic sequences and their real correlates. The *ousía* represented by ordinary, probably monosyllabic, language is not, in conclusion, something inherently belonging to things, but consists in the way the primitive mind sees things, likening them to itself.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Gensini, Stefano, *La metáfora viquiana y la ciencia cognitiva: un problema de filosofía del lenguaje*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 28/29, 2014-2015, p 46.

The inability to define a concept invariably signifies the absence of knowledge concerning its inherent nature. In such cases, we resort to the most universal concept, *ens* (entity), which, from a logical perspective, is the emptiest, with the fewest notes and, therefore, the greatest extension, as it encompasses all existing individuals. In the domain of philosophy of language, this pertains to the concepts of connotation and denotation. Connotation refers to the notes defining an entity; the fewer notes a concept has, the greater its denotation, that is, it applies to a larger number of individuals. To illustrate, the concept *ens* denotes the totality of individuals, encompassing everything that exists, from animate beings to inanimate objects. If the note of “rationality” is added, the concept is restricted to humans, excluding other entities like inanimate objects or non-rational beings. This process demonstrates that as more notes are incorporated, denotation decreases, as the concept becomes more specific. These concepts may be considered mental fictions. Vico emphasizes that many of our notions and sciences are built upon these fictions, which are essential for ordering and understanding reality.

The distinction between name and definition is crucial. The endeavor to define the term entails identifying the idea its name represents, and its attribution is considered arbitrary, though it does align with historical motivations. Vico, as a pioneering figure in the philosophy of history, underscores the historical origins of names. In essence, names and their definitions respond to historical vicissitudes. Any denomination is a fiction, as it could be designated otherwise without altering the underlying reality. In this sense, the definition, represented through the word, is also a fiction, but in a positive sense: it is a mental construct through which we classify things.

It was said that the need to classify is inherent to man, as we do not perceive things in an undifferentiated manner. For instance, we differentiate between the consumption of edible food and non-edible objects, such as stones, because we assign distinct concepts to each. These definitions function as conceptual frameworks that we apply to reality, thereby enabling us to relate to it in a meaningful way. In this process, the human mind not only observes but also actively creates categories that facilitate the understanding of its surroundings.

A similar evolution has been observed in the field of human science, wherein initial attempts, though seemingly futile, have ultimately contributed to the emergence of valuable disciplines. A paradigmatic example of this is alchemy, which sought to transform any material into gold based on the principle that matter has a basic structure that, when modified, could produce that metal. This principle, devoid of any esoteric connotations, posited that if matter possesses a fundamental component, altering it could yield gold. These investigations contributed to the development of chemistry as a systematic science, thereby illustrating how human curiosity, even when directed towards unattainable goals, can result in the generation of practical knowledge.

In a similar vein, human curiosity, in its pursuit of truths elusive to nature, gave rise to arithmetic and geometry, the most fundamental sciences from a historical perspective. Early philosophers, such as Thales of Miletus, utilized these disciplines to address practical problems, including the measurement of the height of a pyramid through shadow projection. These methods can be regarded as early forms of arithmetic, albeit expressed differently in their respective eras (for instance, in the form of our modern Arabic numerals). These sciences,

likely rooted in prehistory, led to mechanics, which Vico considered the foundation of the arts essential to humanity (*omnium artium hominum generi necessarium parentem*). Mechanics reflects the modern spirit of transforming nature, rather than merely observing it, laying the groundwork for engineering, which fully emerges in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. To comprehend the field of engineering, it is imperative to attain proficiency in mechanics. This, in turn, necessitates a foundation in geometry and arithmetic, underscoring the genealogical relationship between these disciplines, according to Vico.

However, it is Vico's contention that human science emerges from a fundamental limitation of our mind: its inability to encompass the things it desires to know and, therefore, to create the truths it studies. Since we do not create from nothing, we resort to mental fictions. The most exact sciences reflect this original limitation and, through creation, resemble divine science, in which the true and the made are the same, in accordance with the *verum-factum* principle: "*veri criterium ac regulam ipsum esse fecisse*".<sup>4</sup> Sabetta clearly explains: "The difference between divine science and human science is not only quantitative (God knows all the elements from which entities are made, the human mind only a part), but also—and above all—qualitative, because divine knowing is a disposing and generating, while human knowing is a composing and making from an apprehending (*novere*); divine knowing is synthetic, human knowing is analytic."<sup>5</sup> Among the non-philosophical sciences, mathematics was considered the most exact by 18th-

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 99.

century thought. In Vico's thought, mathematics assumes the role of mediator.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, mathematics is a human convention, a mental fiction. Concepts such as "4" or "6," or equations like " $2 + 2 = 4$ ," do not exist in natural reality; they are constructs that group individuals under an abstract concept. While these operations are valid within the confines of the system, they lack a direct correlate in nature, which consists of individuals, not numerical abstractions. In this context, "fiction" does not imply falsehood, as previously mentioned, but rather signifies our cognitive necessity for classification and organization.

Similarly, concepts like "democracy" are mental fictions, created to define human and historical realities, but without intrinsic existence. The notion of "democracy" is not an observable entity; rather, it is a conceptual construct employed to describe a political system whose validity can be contested, as evidenced by the work of certain philosophers who have questioned its universality. The need to classify is essential for interacting with the world; without this capacity, we would be incapable of distinguishing between different realities nor acting practically. For instance, when selecting a means of transportation, we differentiate between routes to identify the most suitable one for our destination, thereby illustrating how classification is indispensable to daily life. Thus, in a manner analogous to divine creation, humans create the truths we study, thereby rendering them true for us. As previously mentioned, this reflects an updating of the Augustinian perspective,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Muñoz, Gemma – López, Alonso, *La crítica de Vico a Descartes*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 2, 1992, p. 56.

according to which humans are co-creators of the cosmos, applied here to the gnoseological and metaphysical realm.

Logic, a fundamental component of philosophical inquiry, is regarded within the Aristotelian tradition as a preparatory tool for philosophy, an *organon*. Logic, with its principles and methods, such as truth tables, is also a mental fiction. However, it is true because we have created it. In contrast, metaphysics is regarded as the most exact philosophical science, as it deals with the entity in its utmost generality, encompassing both actual and possible entities, past ones, up to the cosmos's destruction. Its universality lies in its ability to transcend particularities, addressing them indirectly by centering on the most general principles of being. This position aligns with Jean Grondin's assertions regarding the nature of science in the contemporary era: "What interests science above all, in reality, it is only interested in this above all, is the regularity of things, from which it seeks to obtain laws and constants."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, metaphysics, as a human construct, is concerned with the laws and constants of being.

According to Vico, as demonstrated above, the criterion of truth is the creation of that which is known. The criterion, as is widely recognized, is the instrument that facilitates the discernment between truth and falsehood. Metaphorically, the criterion acts as a sieve separating the true from the false. In the moral realm, for example, the criterion classifies human actions as good or bad according to the moral norms that constitute it. A broad criterion permits a greater number of actions to pass, while a narrow one restricts them. A crisis, in its

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<sup>7</sup> Grondin, Jean, *La belleza de la metafísica*, Herder, Barcelona 2021, p. 88.

etymological sense, denotes a shift in the criterion, an instability in the sieve that impedes classification, as occurs when moral norms are not clearly delineated. According to Giambattista Vico, the criterion of truth can be conceptualized as a sifting process. In its most fundamental sense, this process entails the establishment of conditions that delineate what satisfies the criteria for true knowledge and what does not, thereby enabling that which meets these conditions to be regarded as true.

Vico's theory of knowledge is unambiguous: the criterion and rule of the true is to have made it. This suggests that for something to be considered true or for true knowledge to be attained, we must have created it ourselves. Mathematics, arithmetic, geometry, physics, and mechanics are examples of disciplines that humans have historically constructed. These concepts have not been bestowed upon us by a divine entity; rather, they are the products of our intellectual endeavors. Nevertheless, the clarity and distinctiveness of our conception of the mind does not serve as a sufficient criterion for comprehending other truths or for the act of knowing itself. This is due to the fact that, in its self-awareness, the mind does not create itself. Consequently, it lacks the capacity to comprehend the genus and manner in which it knows. In summary, the criterion of truth is generated in the mind; however, the mind is incapable of applying it to itself because it is not an object that the mind has created. The human mind operates through the process of abstraction, which involves the cognitive process of setting aside certain elements in order to grasp others. This operation is indicative of our cognitive capacity: we take a part of reality, mentally isolate it, and analyze it, setting aside the rest.

This abstraction has implications for the certainty of the sciences. Surely this is why the Neapolitan philosopher, rooted in tradition, expresses that

“sciences are less certain the more they delve into corporeal matter; thus, mechanics is less certain than geometry and arithmetic because it considers the external motion of circumferences, and physics the internal, of centers; ethics is less certain than physics because the latter considers the internal motions of bodies that belong to nature, which is true, and ethics investigates the motions of the soul, which are deeply hidden and, for the most part, stem from caprice, which is infinite (*iccirco scientiae minus certae, prout aliae aliis magis in materia corpulenta immerguntur: uti minus certa mechanicum quam geometria et arithmetica, quia considerat motum, sed machinarum ope: minus certa physice, quam mechanicum; quia mechanica contemplatur motum externum circumferentiarum; physice internum centrorum: minus certa moralis quam physica, quia physica considerat motus internos corporum, qui sunt a natura, quae certa est; moralis scrutatur motus animorum, qui penitissimi sunt, et ut plurimum a libidine, quae est infinita, proveniunt*).”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, according to Vico, sciences are less reliable the more they are linked to corporeal matter, that is, the more they focus on material individuals. This principle aligns with an Aristotelian concept: science does not concern itself with the particular, but rather with the universal. From a scientific perspective, particular events are deemed irrelevant. For instance, ascertaining whether an individual consumed a particular food, traveled, or acquired an object holds no scientific value. These observations, while potentially of personal or social interest, do not constitute the fundamental subject matter of science.

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<sup>8</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

Science requires the abstraction of individuals in order to formulate general laws applicable to all entities of a given category. Accordingly, philosophical anthropology does not describe a particular individual, but rather, it seeks to establish a general concept that encompasses all humans, thereby identifying what defines humanity as such, like rationality, rather than contingent particularities such as habits or possessions.

Sciences are less certain the more they relate to matter, as they lose universality. In Newtonian physics, for instance, the law of falling bodies is of interest, not a particular event like the fall of an apple, which serves only as a starting point to abstract a general law. This conceptualization is achieved through the use of mental fictions, such as the notion of “heavy body” or the mathematical formula for gravity, which represent mental constructs rather than observable realities in nature. The object of science is, thus, mental, though it originates in the observation of individuals. In this sense, it is fully understood that mechanics is less certain than geometry and arithmetic, as it deals with motion with the aid of machines, being more tied to matter. Physics, in turn, is less certain than mechanics because, according to Vico’s distinction, it studies the internal motions of bodies, while mechanics focuses on external ones, which are more susceptible to measurement. This distinction, though archaic, reflects the conception of nature as the principle of motion arising from an entity’s interior, in contrast to mechanics, which studies external motions. For Vico, *natura* implies a motion that originates from within, akin to the growth of a seed that contains the principle of its development inherent within itself, without the need for external intervention. In Latin, the term “*natura*” is related to birth (*nascor*), denoting that which springs forth from an entity’s center.

Ethics is even less certain than physics, as it investigates the motions of the soul, which arise from within man and are harder to verify. Whereas the field of physics is concerned with the internal motions of bodies that are observable and measurable, ethics pertains to human acts that stem from internal decisions. For example, an act like homicide has a moral dimension involving a free decision, but we can only observe the external act, such as the use of an instrument to cause harm, which can be explained mechanically. The internal decision-making process, the cognitive processes involved in deliberation, and the consciousness of the act are not directly observable, which makes ethics less certain than physics or mechanics. This distinction, characteristic of 18th- and 19th-century discourse, underscores that moral acts, depending on freedom and intention, escape objective verification. Instead, they are limited to their external manifestations, which fall within the realm of mechanics or physics.

However, while moral acts cannot be directly observed, Giambattista Vico does not refute their certainty; he merely acknowledges that they are less certain than acts studied by mechanics. Ethics explores the motions of the soul, which, in 18th-century terms, are regarded as profoundly internal and frequently influenced by *libido*, an aspect that eludes objective verification. In contrast, physics and mechanics achieve greater certainty because their objects of study can be subjected to experimentation. For example, in mechanics, we can activate a spring and repeatedly observe that a bullet is fired, allowing replication of the phenomenon and confirmation of its regularity. In ethics, however, conducting experiments on moral acts in a similar manner is not feasible, as they are contingent on

internal decisions that cannot be replicated or measured with precision.

Physics, by relying on experiments replicating natural phenomena, receives more unanimous approval than ethics. Opinions supported by experiments, through which we make something akin to nature, are widely accepted because they allow verification and reproduction of results, granting a higher degree of certainty. In the context of divine science, the true and the good are identified in accordance with the doctrine of the transcendentals, which posits that the entity, the true, and the good are the same under different perspectives: the true in relation to the intellect, and the good to the will. Vico distinguishes in the human soul the intellect and the will, reflecting this correspondence: the entity is identified with the truth in the intellect and with the good in the will.

As previously stated, human science emulates the divine, in which God, by knowing the true, eternally generates it *ad intra* (within Himself) and creates it *ad extra* (outwardly) in time (“*Et ita scientia humana divinae sit imitatrix; qua Deus dum verum cognoscit, id ab aeterno ad intra generat, in tempore ad extra facit*”).<sup>9</sup> In theological terms, *ad intra* generation refers to the Trinity, in which the Father begets the Son and the Holy Spirit in eternity, without departing from Himself, constituting an internal and eternal operation. On the other hand, *ad extra* creation is temporal, as creation itself initiates time. Prior to the act of creation, in a non-chronological sense, only eternity exists, understood as the simultaneous and intuitive vision of all things, a conception that avoids anthropomorphic views of God as a temporal observer of the cosmos.

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<sup>9</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

This distinction has roots in Neoplatonic theology, particularly in Proclus, where *hypostases*—a term equivalent to primary substances or individuals—are used to describe the three persons of the Trinity. From this perspective, God is outside time, and His knowledge is perfect because He eternally generates *ad intra*. In *ad extra* creation, God produces the cosmos from His own ideation, that is, from the ideas constituting His essence. These concepts are not external to Him; rather, they are His own thoughts, through which He creates the sensible world, including natural entities. Since God creates these entities, He knows them fully, analogous to how humans know mathematics because we have created it.

In this perspective, creation is an act of communicating goodness. This thesis has ancient philosophical roots, particularly in Plato and Neoplatonists like Plotinus. Plato introduces the concept of participation (*μέθεξις*), while Plotinus asserts that the One—equivalent to God—possesses such an excess of being that it overflows, creating entities by superabundance. This notion is encapsulated in the Latin *maxim bonum est diffusivum sui*, which posits that the good tends to diffuse or communicate itself. In Platonic terms, the good is participated, and in Christian theology, this translates into the assertion that God creates out of love, as reflected in *Genesis*, which Vico himself considers. Creation, therefore, is regarded as an act of divine benevolence, and for humans, the criterion of truth consists in having created the truths we know, thereby emulating the divine act.

6.

BETWEEN DOGMATISTS AND SKEPTICS

In order to ensure the robustness of these assertions, the Neapolitan philosopher concludes that they must be defended against dogmatists and skeptics. According to Vico, dogmatists include thinkers such as Descartes, who cast doubt on all truths, including those of daily life, physics, and mathematics while asserting that only metaphysics offers indubitable truth, from which all other sciences derive. In other words, dogmatists—represented by Descartes—question all truths, not only moral, mechanical, and physical ones but also mathematics. This skepticism is even extended to libertines, who reject mathematics as if it did not express truths. For dogmatists, metaphysics is the sole source of unquestionable truth, and from it, like a fountain, flow the secondary truths that underpin other sciences. Descartes, through his methodical skepticism, as is well known, seeks certain and indubitable truths, doubting all prior knowledge, from everyday teachings to mathematical truths.

In both his *Meditations on First Philosophy* and *Discourse on Method*, Descartes casts doubt on all that he had previously learned: the teachings of his teachers, the words of his parents, his previously acquired knowledge, and mathematical truths.

This exercise of methodical doubt leads him to a fundamental metaphysical position, namely, the certainty of thought and, intuitively, the certainty of his own existence. The Latin term *cogito* is not limited to “I think” but encompasses a broader spectrum of meanings, including feeling, affirming, and doubting. From this notion, Descartes derives the concept of doubt as an act of thought, concluding that by doubting, he cannot doubt that he doubts, thereby establishing the certainty of his existence.

“Considering that all the thoughts that come to us while awake may also occur during sleep, without any of them then being true, I resolved to pretend that all the things that had ever entered my mind were no more true than the illusions of my dreams. But I then noticed that, in wanting to think, in this way, that everything is false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking it, be something; and observing that this truth: I think, therefore I am (*Ego cogito, ergo sum, sive existo*), was so firm and certain that the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics could not shake it, I judged that I could accept it, without scruple, as the first principle of my philosophy” (*Discourse on Method*: p. 147).

It is imperative to underscore that this certainty does not stem from a logical deduction of the form “I think, therefore I exist.” Rather, it is an intuitive grasp of existence inherent in the act of thinking. This process presupposes a metaphysical residue, as Descartes cannot deny the principle of contradiction, a pillar of metaphysics. A more radical skeptic could repudiate this principle and assert that they doubt their own doubt. However, Descartes’ doubt is methodical, not radical, and thus cannot be denied. The impossibility of doubting the doubt itself led Descartes to ground knowledge in metaphysics,

which, according to an Aristotelian-rooted thesis, is the foundational science of all others.

For Aristotle, in fact, metaphysics—or first philosophy—is regarded as the mother of the sciences, not in a chronological sense but rather in a foundational sense. For the Stagirite, metaphysics studies the entity qua entity ( $\tau\omicron\ \delta\acute{\nu}\ \tilde{\eta}\ \delta\acute{\nu}$ ). By studying the entity qua entity, metaphysics adopts the most universal perspective possible, encompassing the principles that make an entity an entity, such as the principle of identity, the principle of contradiction, and the principle of the excluded middle. These principles are indisputable truths that underpin all sciences. For instance, the principle of identity posits that an entity is what it is; the principle of contradiction asserts that an entity cannot be and not be at the same time under the same aspect; and the principle of the excluded middle states that a thing must be or not be, with no middle ground. These truths, though evident, are the object of metaphysics; it thus deals with the most general principles applicable to all that exists, providing the foundations that particular sciences presuppose but do not demonstrate.

In the spirit of Aristotelian philosophy, secondary sciences do not begin by demonstrating these principles; they assume them implicitly. A biology treatise does not initiate with inquiries into the entity or the principle of contradiction. Rather, it operates under the assumption that a particular animal is such and not another, a distinction that is the purview of metaphysics, which studies essences through analysis. However, by not explicitly grounding their principles, secondary sciences lack the absolute certainty that metaphysics provides, as the latter assigns each science its specific foundations.

The fundamental distinction between dogmatists and skeptics resides in the first truth each upholds. Descartes, as the chief proponent of the dogmatists, asserts that man can doubt that he feels, lives, has extension, or even exists, resorting to the artifice of the evil genius, a figure that could deceive us in all our perceptions. This concept is not original to Descartes; it has antecedents in texts such as Cicero's *Academic Questions*, where a Stoic employs sleep as an artifice sent by a divinity to question reality, as Vico pertinently notes. The evil genius raises the possibility that a more powerful entity, even God, might deceive us, causing us to perceive something as green or pleasant when it is not.

However, Vico points out that neither dogmatists nor skeptics can doubt that they have consciousness of thinking nor that thinking arises from consciousness. As Espósito expounds: "The Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* was an attempt to evade skepticism through reason. However, Vico thought that this philosophical strategy inevitably led to the very skepticism Descartes sought to exorcize. Aware of Gassendi's critiques of the Cartesian *cogito*, Vico formulated a critique that went in a similar direction to the French priest: the consciousness of thinking could not be confused with the knowledge of the causes of thinking."<sup>1</sup> Descartes, indeed, concludes that the first truth is *cogito, ergo sum*, but Vico emphasizes that this assertion presupposes being. Consciousness is always consciousness of something; it does not exist in the abstract. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Espósito, Maurizio, *Manos que piensan y mentes que hacen: algunas reflexiones en torno a la epistemología de Giambattista Vico*, in: Díaz, Francisco (ed.), *Epistemología. Escritos compilados*, PEIP, Santiago de Chile 2021, p. 232.

Gentile's assertion that "Vico opposes Descartes precisely because his philosophy is not a philosophy of abstract intellect but a philosophy of the concrete mind, which lives and acts in the world of history and human institutions."<sup>2</sup> is indeed accurate. For instance, I am aware of standing or wearing a blue garment; however, this awareness presupposes prior knowledge, a *scientia*. In Latin, *conscientia* signifies "with knowledge," thereby implying that consciousness accompanies and is contingent upon knowledge. The existence of consciousness is predicated on the existence of prior content, and this content implies that being precedes consciousness. If existence depended on consciousness, it would lead to the absurdity of claiming that I exist only when conscious and cease to exist when not. Thus, Vico holds that being has ontological, gnoseological, and epistemological priority over consciousness: one cannot think without being.

Skeptics, such as the Pyrrhonists, also do not doubt that they think. Pyrrho, a contemporary of Aristotle in the 4th century BCE, represents a skeptical tradition known in his time, as Aristotle demonstrates in his *Metaphysics*, where he mocks skeptics, stating that even plants are not skeptical, as they seek the sun and not the shade, showing a natural preference that rejects absolute suspension of judgment. Skeptics, rather than doubting their existence, suspend assent (*epoché*) to avoid the inconveniences of opinions, yet they do not deny the certainty of their thought or being. In a manner similar to that of Sosia, a skeptic can confidently affirm their existence, defending it against any objection.

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<sup>2</sup> Gentile, Giovanni, *Studi vichiani*, Sansoni, Florence 1966 (3a ed.), p. 399.

Vico argues that this certainty of thinking is not a truth exclusive to great philosophers but a knowledge accessible to anyone. Science, understood as knowledge of the genus or form of a thing, involves classifying it within abstract categories, per the Aristotelian sense of an entity's structure. However, we are cognizant of things whose genus or form we cannot fully demonstrate. In practical life, particularly in the moral realm, when scientific reasons are unavailable to justify an act, consciousness is appealed to as a witness. For instance, when making claims of veracity without the ability to substantiate them, we depend on consciousness rather than on science.

The skeptic, while acknowledging the consciousness of thinking, disregards the causes of thought and how it occurs, thus denying science in the sense of knowing the ultimate reasons for things. This ignorance stems, in part, from the conception of the human soul as pure of all corporeality, thereby limiting our ability to explain thought processes in material terms. Consequently, Vico reorients his focus toward the theme of human nature and the union of the soul and body. The problem is highly complex, as Vico frames it:

“If thought were the cause of my existence, thought would be the cause of the body. But there are bodies that do not think. Rather, because I am composed of body and mind, I think; so that body and mind united are the cause of thinking; for if I were only body, I would not think; if I were only mind, I would understand. Indeed, thinking is not the cause of my being mind, but its sign (*Si cogitatio esset causa quod sim, cogitatio esset causa corporis. Atqui sunt corpora, quae non cogitant. Quin, quia corpore et mente consto, ea propter cogito; ita ut corpus et mens unita sint cogitationis causa: nam, si ego solum corpus essem, non cogitarem; sin sola mens,*

*intelligem. Enimvero cogitare non est causa quod sim mens, sed signum).*"<sup>3</sup>

The Neapolitan philosopher concedes that he addresses the difficulties grappled with by the most subtle metaphysicians of his time, namely the problem of the relationship between soul and body, as alluded to in the aforementioned statement. Consequently, the challenges that contemporary thinkers seek to address are presented, examining how the spirit influences the body and the body influences the spirit.

This problem constitutes one of the fundamental questions for modern philosophers in philosophical anthropology: what is the relationship between soul and body? Preceding philosophical currents have already offered various answers to this question. Two paradigmatic cases stand out: first, Plato's perspective, according to which man is essentially identified with his soul, while the body is conceived as a secondary element, an appendage resulting from an error or sin committed by the soul in the intelligible world, leading it to incarnate or precipitate into matter. This is Plato's response, so while there is a link between soul and body, the body does not properly constitute man. Neoplatonists have followed this line of thought. For example, to achieve the fullness of Platonic doctrine, Plotinus argues that the soul's sin lies in its desire to dominate some part of the material world. By attempting to exert that dominance, the soul precipitates toward matter. Thus, Neoplatonists explain the soul's fall and its union with the body. Nevertheless, this perspective maintains the traditional Platonic conception of the human being. According to this view, the body is perceived as a burden, a weight, something from

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<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 3.

which, ultimately, we should free ourselves. For Plato, philosophy largely consists in this process of liberation from the body. In his words, philosophy is a reflection on death, understood as the separation of soul and body, the ultimate goal. Neoplatonists, imbued with a markedly mystical character, reinforce this idea. In their era, philosophy takes on a deeply religious tone. They hold that moral virtues are the first steps toward freeing oneself from the body, followed by the cultivation of intellectual virtues that enable, as far as possible, union with the divine. Some Christian philosophers adopt this line of thought, considering that man lives awaiting his liberation.

An alternative, also traditional, proposal is offered by Aristotle. According to his doctrine, man is the synthesis of form and matter. All material entities are composed of matter and form. In the context of human beings,hylomorphism asserts that the soul is the form and the body is the matter. Consequently, the entity referred to as human is configured as the indissoluble union of soul and body. They cannot be separated, as doing so would cause the entity to cease to exist. In this sense, Aristotle's response differs radically from Plato's. For Plato, if the soul and body separate, man continues to exist, as his essence is the soul. For Aristotle, separating soul and body causes the entity known as human to cease, as its existence depends on that constitutive union. This does not imply that Aristotle denies the immortality of man in any way. This problem is both ancient and complex, and it is difficult to resolve. Aristotle addresses it ambiguously in his *De Anima*. In Book III of *De Anima*, the Stagirite specifically addresses the intellect, asserting its immortal character. However, it remains ambiguous whether he is referring to the individual's intellect or the collective intellect of humanity.

In antiquity, this ambiguity has already given rise to various interpretations, including those of Alexander of Aphrodisias and, subsequently, during the Middle Ages, to a renowned 13th-century dispute between Averroists and Thomists. Averroism, inspired by Averroes' ideas, holds that the agent intellect is unique to all humanity and that only this agent intellect is immortal. According to this perspective, the individual human would be mortal. Thomists, predominantly represented by the Dominicans, contend that the intellect is individual, and consequently, what persists beyond death is the individual. These constituted the conventional responses to this issue.

Thereafter, Descartes' proposal emerges, distinctly Platonic in character. What is man for Descartes? The French philosopher distinguishes between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. The *res extensa* is defined as the extended material thing, while the *res cogitans* is the thinking, non-extended thing by contrast. According to Descartes, the soul is non-extended, and thus cannot be considered either body or matter. From this premise, Descartes holds that the certainty of our existence comes from the soul. The act of thinking, or *cogitare*—a term that, as previously mentioned, encompasses various acts of the higher faculties—has an immaterial character. On this basis, Descartes concludes that man is a thinking thing, that is, non-extended.

However, Descartes also recognizes that, given the absence of an evil genius and the fact that God—who cannot deceive us as an evil genius would—is the guarantor of metaphysics and the cosmos, we are able to realize that we have a body. Consequently, man is also body. The question that naturally follows is how to unite these two realities, the soul and the body. How can *res extensa* be united with *res cogitans*? Here lies a fundamental difficulty, as both notions are antithetical: they

oppose each other. The *res extensa* is material, while the *res cogitans* is immaterial; one negates the other's properties. How, then, do they relate? To illustrate this, consider the following example: only bodies can touch or be touched by each other. This is readily apparent. Through thought, I can decide to touch the table and move it; however, only another extended thing can move the table, not something non-extended. The question then arises as to how the spirit can act on the body and the body on the spirit, given their mutual negation of each other. Confronted with this challenge, Descartes proposes a response that many have rejected: the nerves. From a physiological perspective, Descartes posits that nerves act as a conduit between the soul and the body. According to his theory, nerves excite the mind when stimulated by external objects, and the mind, in turn, tenses the nerves when it wishes to act. Therefore, nerves would function as the conduit through which interaction between both realities occurs.

This explanation fits within a broader framework that revisits Aristotelian principles. We observe that things move in the world: the table in the example moves if we displace it. Aristotle, in his physics, formulates a fundamental principle: *omne quod movetur ab alio movetur* (everything that moves is moved by another). If we were to trace the origins of this motion, we would find that we cannot extend them to infinity, as doing so would provide no explanatory value. It would be impossible to construct a discourse or develop a science. If we were to follow an infinite chain of causes, we might posit that the movement of the table was due to the displacement of my hand, my arm's movement was influenced by my desire to explain a doctrine, and this desire was shaped by the actions of my parents, and so on. We would never reach a conclusive

explanation. For this reason, Aristotle insists on the need to identify first causes to ground discourse and science. This principle is applicable to both physical and metaphysical causes. When it comes to metaphysical causes, the issue becomes more complex. What is the cause of the soul? What is the cause of thought? What is the cause of consciousness? What is the cause of the body? What is the cause of man? These questions direct us to inquire about the purpose and origin of man, thus entering the domain of metaphysics.

Returning to Descartes, his position poses a problem. He states: *cogito ergo sum*, suggesting that thought is the cause of his being and, in turn, of his body. This suggests that the existence of the body, which is material, is predicated on the existence of thought, which is immaterial. However, the body, by definition, is what does not think, as they are antithetical realities. Here lies Descartes' error, according to the critique we may formulate: thought cannot be the cause of being nor of the body's existence. At this juncture, Giambattista Vico's anthropological perspective emerges as an alternative. For the Neapolitan, man is a unity of body and spirit, not caused by thought or consciousness, but the reverse. Rather than asserting "*cogito ergo sum*", Vico proposed an alternative: Since I exist and am a thinking being, I think. In other words: given that I exist and have the capacity to think, I exercise thought. Thought is not the cause of my existence nor of my body, as this would lead to idealism, a current fully developed by thinkers like Fichte and Hegel.

If a radically Cartesian stance is adopted, it could veer toward idealism, as some later thinkers did. In Hegelian terms, the *res extensa* is said to be a product of the Idea. However, Vico had already intuited this shift in Cartesianism toward

idealism, though he lacked a precise term to name it. The term “idealism” was coined by the philosophers Fichte and Hegel. From an anthropological perspective, Vico posits that, since I exist as an entity with the capacity to think, I can think. Thought emerges from the interplay between body and spirit, signifying that the union of these elements is the underlying cause of thought. This is his central thesis. While the concept may appear rudimentary, its ramifications are immense. According to Vico, the fundamental cause of thought is the embodiment of the spirit, which is a corporized spirit. Why does this have such significant implications? Because this conception projects onto history. Humans do not, in fact, engage in abstract thought in the manner posited by Descartes, as if we could disassociate ourselves from our historical context and exist in a state of pure, disembodied thought. We conceptualize ourselves as embodied beings, and the existence of a physical body engenders a sense of temporal immersion in thought. Man’s proper time is history; consequently, we think as historical beings. This notion anticipates historicism, a current that Vico foreshadows but does not fully endorse, as he retains tenets from the Platonic tradition.<sup>4</sup> Later, in the 20th century, these concepts were further developed by historicist idealists, including philosophers Benedetto Croce and Giovanni Gentile. This underscores the intellectual affinities shared by both thinkers, who were profoundly influenced by Hegel.

Vico holds that man thinks within his historical context, which does not mean he cannot rise above that context in some

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<sup>4</sup> One of this elements is Providence, cf. Tessitore, Fulvio, *Sentido común, teología de la historia e historicismo en Giambattista Vico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 21-22, 2008, pp. 111-136.

way to develop a philosophy of history. Indeed, Vico bets precisely on a philosophy of history. In the 20th century, the recovery and recognition of this historical dimension was most prominent among hermeneuticists. The most prominent philosopher in this tradition is Hans-Georg Gadamer, who maintains that human knowledge is mediated by prejudices. According to hermeneutics, prejudices are a fundamental presupposition; that is, man does not think from nothing, detached from his context, but possesses certain preconceptions, called prejudices, given by tradition and cultural environment. Tradition is constituted precisely through history's course.

Nevertheless, historicism gives rise to significant issues of considerable complexity. The main one becomes evident: how is it possible, despite all the objective, traditional, and historical determinations conditioning man, to affirm something that transcends those limits and aims for objectivity? This predicament persists: how can we formulate objective statements when a significant portion of our cognition is subjective? The objective of every philosopher is to find ways to express objective truths that surpass their subjective limitations. In this context, a pivotal element emerges: language. By relying on ordinary language, which appears to encompass the movements of the originary, it is what enables things to "speak," to communicate something. We approach things by questioning them, in a process reminiscent of the Socratic dialogue. However, this discourse does not emerge from nothing. We approach things with our subjective cognitions, that is, we ask them questions, and they respond. The response of these elements constitutes the objective dimension. In other words, as Heidegger would assert, we must pay close attention to what things themselves tell us. He posits that there exists an originary language of

things, a “saying” of things that enables them to convey their essence.

In conclusion, it can be posited that if the subject were exclusively corporeal, it would not think; and if it were exclusively spiritual, it would not comprehend in the manner it does. In Vico’s perspective, thinking is not the cause of being spirit, but rather, it is its sign. It is an indicator of one’s own spirituality. Consider a more fundamental example: a person asleep or in a coma. Someone in such states does not cease to be human, despite the fact that they are not exercising human capacities at that moment. Reflect on the moral implications of this idea. If we assert that a thing is defined by its actions, then someone in a coma, due to their lack of cognitive activity, would not be considered human, as they are not engaged in active thought. However, the essence of the human being is independent, in this sense, of the activity of thinking. We may not be exercising that activity at a given moment, as when sleeping or in a coma, and yet we do not cease to be human. According to Vico, thought is considered a sign that we are thinking beings. However, it does not serve as the generator of the spirit; rather, it is the spirit that produces thought.

7.

SIGNS, CAUSES, AND CREATED TRUTH

In this section, we will examine the distinction between signs and causes, as outlined in Book I, Chapter 3 of *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*. According to the critique that can be leveled from Vico's perspective, Descartes confuses these concepts. A skeptic will not deny the certainty of signs but will question that of causes. Consider the classic example used in semiotics to discuss the natural sign: smoke. When smoke is perceived, it is important to determine whether it is the cause or the effect of something. It is the effect of fire. Although the presence of fire is not directly perceptible, the presence of smoke serves as an indication that fire is present. This demonstrates that we frequently remain at the level of the sign. Smoke signifies fire; it points to fire. There cannot be smoke without fire. However, some philosophers, such as Descartes, invert this logic. They observe thought and conclude that thought is the cause of the spirit. Vico rejects this Cartesian interpretation and maintains that it is the other way around: there is spirit, and consequently, there is thought, because thought is a sign of the spirit. This assertion bears resemblance to the previously cited example of a comatose individual, who, despite their

apparent lack of cognitive activity, does not cease to be an embodied spirit.

With respect to immortality, which is also associated with the distinction between body and spirit, the spirit is immortal, and this immortality is derived precisely from its spiritual nature. In order to comprehend this, it is imperative to differentiate between two concepts that have been meticulously analyzed by philosophers: the divine and God. In a philosophical sense, God is the infinite in every respect. He is infinite in His immensity, wisdom, will, power, and in all possible senses. Conversely, the divine is that which is infinite from a specific perspective. Traditionally, even in the 18th and 19th centuries, this distinction was employed to refer to man: what is divine in man? While it is often associated with the concept of the soul, the soul itself is defined by its faculties. What are the soul's faculties? According to Vico's own definition, the intellect and the will.

From an intellectual perspective, why is the soul said to be infinite? Because the intellect does not have an inherent limit to its capacity to know. There is no barrier that halts the intellect in its process to gain knowledge. It can perpetually acquire additional knowledge in an indeterminate manner, and this indeterminacy increases over time. This capacity of the intellect, devoid of any limitation that impedes its knowing process, is what is referred to as "infinite." In this sense, the intellect can be regarded as divine. In a similar vein, the will, defined as the capacity to desire, is also without limit. It can desire more without anything fully satisfying that aspiration. No finite thing can fully satisfy man, either intellectually or volitionally, in terms of knowledge, desires, or aspirations. This is what is meant by the divine in man. Why is it called divine? Because only an infinite

object could fully satisfy the intellect and will, which are faculties of an infinite character. This assertion is supported by a logical rationale. What is the quintessential infinite object? God. Only an infinite object can satisfy the infinite faculties of the human soul. Consequently, a profound association is established with concepts such as happiness. For St. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, the ultimate happiness consists in the vision of God, a vision that is never exhausted, though it voluntarily satisfies man in contemplating it.

Vico posits that skepticism can only be overcome by adopting the act of creating one's own concept of truth as the criterion of truth. In this thesis, Vico returns to the foundational principles of his own philosophy, reiterating his hallmark position: truth resides in the act of making, in the *factum*. According to Vico, "skeptics merely repeat that things seem to them in a certain way, but they confess ignorance of what they are in reality" (*Ii enim celebrant illud, res sibi videri; quid autem re ipsa sint, ignorare*).<sup>1</sup> In other words, they remain at the level of appearance, of the phenomenon—to use Kantian terminology. Skeptics recognize effects and admit they have causes but fail to comprehend them, as they are unaware of the genera or forms through which each thing is constituted. However, Vico points out that skeptics, by focusing solely on effects, fail to attain a comprehensive understanding of causality, as they neglect to consider the forms or genera that determine the constitution of things. For Vico, however, understanding causes involves knowing all the genera and forms underlying effects. Truth, for him, is the first truth, as it encompasses all causes, including the ultimate ones, and by comprehending them all,

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 4.

it is infinite. Nothing lies beyond its reach. This truth takes precedence over the body, which is its effect. Consequently, this truth is both human and spiritual, and it is identified with the Christian God.

According to this standard of truth, human truths must be measured, defined as the truths that humans produce; we contain them within ourselves and develop them infinitely through postulates. By composing them, we generate truths we know precisely because we have created them. This principle reflects Vico's central idea: we know how we create because we are the ones doing it.<sup>2</sup> To further explore this argument, one would need to read his complete work. However, it can be summarized as follows: understanding causes includes the genera and forms of things, leading us to adopt a perspective that could be called realist. From a realist perspective, the thing itself possesses its own inherent structure and specificity, which are not attributed by us. Vico employs the terms "forms" and "genera" in this context, employing these terms to express the following thesis: the thing has its own intrinsic structure, and this structure is, in turn, the cause of our knowledge. When we know something, what we know are its causes, that is, its own forms or structures.<sup>3</sup> When man grasps it, he knows the thing, provided what he conceives aligns with what the thing is in itself.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, I, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Here one can discern, though not with great clarity, the transition from the classical conception of science, which understands it as *cognitio certa per causas*, to the modern one, which understands it as *cognitio certa per leges*, according to Maritain's typology, cf. *Distinguere per unire*, Morcelliana, Brescia 1974, pp. 44-45.

Nevertheless, Vico continually warns that man cannot fully comprehend natural things because man does not create them. The human understanding of natural things is inherently constrained, implying that it can evolve indefinitely. A botanist, for instance, can dedicate their life to studying a particular plant species and never exhaust their knowledge. While the distinction between a pine and a palm is readily apparent to the uninitiated, experts continue to delve deeper, exploring the intricacies of these differences without attaining complete knowledge. This is because man has not created plants. Man never ceases to seek reasons, and this perpetual search drives the progress of knowledge. Finally, Vico introduces a Platonic twist: the forms and genera found in things are manifestations of the forms and genera existing in the Mind of God. In this sense, God possesses the Ideas of all things, as He has projected the cosmos from them and imbued each entity with its specific form or genus. This perspective establishes a connection between human truth and divine truth, positing that human knowledge, despite its limitations, mirrors the eternal Ideas inherent in God's Mind.

From the effect of the divine Mind, things are known. Consequently, it is acknowledged that the standard of truth, originating in God's Mind, must serve as the criterion for human truth. The Forms in God's Mind are revealed through things, which are their manifestations. Human truths, in turn, are derived from elements created by humanity, analogous to divine creation. As previously mentioned, certain things are also created, and these are the ones best understood. These include arithmetic and, most notably, geometry, which is the most abstract of the sciences produced by the human mind. These sciences are not observed in nature; rather, humanity

acts analogously to God in His creative act. It could be argued that, by establishing these sciences, humans act as creators on a small scale. However, Vico does not utilize this specific term. The idea, however, is implicit: we create the point, the line, geometric figures. We do not create trees, the sun, animals, or plants.

In Book II of *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, a significant expansion of the previously developed discourse is evident. The structure of an entity, understood as its form, is presented as independent of the material in which it manifests. In certain instances, matter is indispensable for the form to manifest, while in others, it is not. When is matter required? This occurs in human artifacts, where we act as co-creators. In such cases, a wide range of materials is available to embody a form, which can be concretized in multiple materials. In this particular context, Vico acknowledges two distinct meanings for the term “species”: the first being what the scholastics refer to as “*individuum*,” and the second being “*simulacrum*.” The term *individuum* refers to the individual, while *simulacrum* alludes to appearance, that is, the phenomenon. From a logical perspective, this distinction is easily clarified. The *genus* is defined as universal, the species as particular, and the individual as the concrete manifestation of that species. To illustrate, the *genus* “animal” comprises the species “man” as one of its categories. From an anthropological perspective, the genus *Homo* comprises a variety of species, including *Homo sapiens*, *Homo erectus*, and *Homo neanderthalensis*. Conversely, *simulacrum* refers to appearance, that is, the phenomenon. This term also has an Aristotelian and scholastic connotation, as “species” are the impressions that phenomena generate in the senses. When subjects are affected by things, the phenomenon is imprinted on

them through sensible species. For instance, the color red exerts an effect on the retina, and, in principle, does so through sensible species. The phenomenon communicates with sensibility, and this is called species or appearance: what appears is perceived as red. Similarly, intelligible species can be regarded as those presented to the intellect, or, in other words, the mind.

Philosophical schools universally acknowledge the infinite nature of genera. The ancient Italian philosophers, according to Vico, “held that genera were forms infinite, not in extension, but in perfection and, as infinite, existed only in God (*opinatos genera esse formas, non amplitudine, sed perfectione infinitas, et, quia infinitas, in uno Deo esse*).”<sup>4</sup> In other words, all ideas encompassing things would exist only in the Mind of God, as they are infinite in their perfection. In contrast, species or determined entities would be manifestations traced according to those forms. For the ancient Italian philosophers, the true was synonymous with the made (*verum ipsum factum*), suggesting that they prioritized understanding the genera of things, which they conceptualized as forms, rather than focusing on the universals of the scholastics. Though it may seem a dilemma, it is not. Scholastics, when speaking of genera, refer to forms that, in turn, are the ideas present in the Mind of God, not universals in the sense of human classifications. The classifications that we formulate do not necessarily correspond to the Mind of God, as we understand it only partially. However, we are able to observe its effects. Hence, we speak of “expressions” in things:<sup>5</sup> things are configured according to the forms existing in God’s Mind, not according to human universals.

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

The 12th century marks a seminal moment in the discourse surrounding universals, with Peter Abelard emerging as the preeminent philosophical figure of its first half. Renowned for his intellectual contributions, Abelard was a monk and a priest whose personal life contrasted with his logical rigor. His primary opponent was St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a prominent saint of the era and the leader of the anti-dialecticians, who rejected the utilization of philosophy, particularly logic, in theology. In contrast, Abelard, a representative of the dialecticians, defended the application of philosophical tools to theology, excelling as a logician. This debate was intricately intertwined with the issue of universals, a subject that was influenced by prominent scholars such as Roscelin of Compiègne and William of Champeaux—whom Abelard critiqued. He advanced conceptualism, a stance that aligns closely with Aristotelian realism which posits that universals are conceptualizations or mental representations derived from the correlation between individual realities. St. Thomas Aquinas later rejected the identification of the concept with an image, preferring a more nuanced distinction.

The issue of universals pertains to three fundamental inquiries: their existence *ante rem*, *in re*, or *post rem*. Abelard's conceptualism situates them *post rem*, regarding them as mental products derived from individual entities. Conversely, Platonic realism, which was predominant during this period, underwent substantial development in the School of Chartres, a cathedral school that placed significant emphasis on the study of natural philosophy. This school advanced the notion that nature possesses autonomous laws, operating independently of direct divine intervention, thereby offering explanations for natural phenomena without the constant need to invoke God.

A central issue was whether individuals contain or participate in universals. Plato argued that individuals participate in universals through *μέθεξις*, considering Ideas—characterized by immutability, ingenerability, and indestructibility—as exemplary causes of individuals, which, in contrast, are generated, corruptible, and perishable. Aristotle, on the other hand, held that forms, equivalent to universals, are concretized in individuals. He criticized Plato for positing a separate intelligible world with unnecessarily duplicated forms. This distinction between Platonic and Aristotelian positions remains fundamental for understanding the roots of the universals problem in medieval philosophy.

Plato distinguishes two worlds: the sensible and the intelligible, granting greater reality to the latter. In his philosophy, Ideas or Forms, constituting the intelligible world, are the true substances (*οὐσίαι*), while sensible world entities are so secondarily. According to Plato, the philosopher’s task is to ascend to the intelligible world through what he calls the “second navigation,” a metaphor implying an active effort—using the “oars” of dialectic—to rise from the sensible to the Ideas, until reaching, so to speak, the Idea of the Good or the One, which evolve in his writings but maintain a discernible conceptual identity from *The Republic* to *The Sophist*.

Aristotle, while acknowledging the concept of an intelligible world, redefines it. He critiques Plato for unnecessarily duplicating forms, contending that they need not exist separately in an intelligible world but are concretized in sensible world individuals. For Aristotle, universals are mental products, a stance that aligns with medieval conceptualism. However, Aristotle does not entirely deny the intelligible world: he identifies it with God, characterized as an unmoved Mover, a principle

grounding motion without being subject to it. God, understood through intellectual means rather than sensory perception, is conceived as the culmination of a demonstration initiated from physics, thereby serving as the foundation for elucidating motion and the dynamics of the tangible world.

The distinction between categories and predicables, which is pertinent in this context, originates from Aristotelian logic and metaphysics. In Aristotle's *Categories*, categories are defined as the broad classifications of the entity, including substance and accidents. Predicables, such as genus and *species*, are described as modes of predication, though in medieval philosophy, species can possess other context-dependent meanings (e.g., in the theory of knowledge). In the 12th century, Peter Abelard posited the notion that metaphysics ought to be regarded as independent of logic; an opinion that was by no means universally held in his era.

Metaphysics classifies and differentiates entities, a process that involves discriminating, that is, separating or distinguishing. This act of distinguishing is not equivalent to exerting violence. Metaphysics, being purely theoretical, studies fundamental principles, such as the principle of contradiction: a thing cannot be and not be at the same time under the same aspect. In contrast, logic concerns itself with predicables, that is, the modes of attributing properties to an entity, situating it strictly in the gnoseological plane. Aristotle identifies four predicables, yet tradition recognizes five: genus, difference, species, property, and accident. The genus is a broad, common category; for example, man's genus is animal. The distinction, akin to rationality, differentiates specific entities within the genus. The combination of genus and difference forms the species, in this case, man. Properties (*propria*) are essential

attributes not always in act, like sociability or risibility, which depend on rationality. Certain philosophical sciences focus on properties. For instance, political philosophy analyzes sociability, ethics examines human acts in relation to the pursuit of happiness, and the philosophy of art addresses artistic production. Sociability, happiness, and artistic creation are also derived from rationality. The accident is variable, like an individual human's height or weight.

For Vico, the concept of *genus* encompasses broad classifications of entities, distinct from the individual. For him, genera are universal forms that cause the individual, revealing the strong influence of Plato's thesis of the exemplary cause. According to the ancient Italian philosophers, these forms are infinite in perfection and exist in God, rather than being exhausted in concrete individuals. In the *Timaeus*, Plato expounds his cosmology's principles: Ideas, which are perfect and infinite forms; *chōra*, formless, pre-existing matter; and the Demiurge, who shapes the cosmos using Ideas as archetypes. The idea of man, infinite in perfection, is not exhausted in individuals like John or Peter, who are limited manifestations of that form. Mosaic philosophy, as exemplified by Philo of Alexandria, introduces a transformation in Platonism by proposing that God, the Platonic Demiurge, contains the Ideas in His mind, thereby establishing them as His thoughts or creations. Unlike Plato, in whose philosophy Ideas subsist independently, in Philo, Ideas cannot exist except in the divine Mind, akin to how human ideas depend on their conceiver. This revolutionary thesis in Platonism's history influences medieval monotheistic philosophies (Christian, Jewish, and Islamic), which hold that Ideas, as productive forms, reside in God's Mind.

These metaphysical forms, infinite in perfection, are the cause of individuals, which are mere reflections or traces of them. No individual, and neither does humanity in its entirety, fully embody the Idea of man. Only God, by creating forms, possesses a complete understanding of nature, which for humans is only partially accessible, albeit open to study. Vico explicitly distinguishes between metaphysical and physical forms.<sup>6</sup> The former, such as the Idea of man, embody all possibilities and are perfect. The latter, when actualized in individuals, are constrained, as they are incapable of encompassing all determinations simultaneously (e.g., an individual cannot be tall and short at once) In his use of the potter metaphor, Vico portrays God as an artisan creating from metaphysical forms, while physical forms, akin to individuals, are imperfect, mutable copies subject to corruption.

When applied to the sciences, this doctrine suggests that disciplines such as geometry, painting, and architecture, which operate with exact forms, are more precise than conjectural ones, including oratory, politics, and medicine. Geometry, for instance, commences with general principles (e.g., the straight line is the shortest distance between two points) to construct exact figures. In contrast, sciences such as medicine are contingent on other factors. For a medical diagnosis to be accurate, medicine relies on chemistry, which is more precise. To corroborate their hypothesis or interpretation, physicians require the collaboration of chemists, as without clinical analyses, their diagnoses remain hypothetical. From Galileo's perspective, which Vico seems to inherit, medicine is a conjectural science, unable to achieve certainty alone. Galileo, for instance,

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

considers medicine to be an inexact and unsatisfying pursuit for his intellectual curiosity, leading him to pursue physics.<sup>7</sup> An experienced physician functions as a hermeneut, interpreting clinical signs based on decades of practice. Through the accumulation of experience derived from repeated analogous cases, physicians are able to identify patterns and achieve a certain degree of precision. However, medicine, with its own instruments, does not attain the precision of other sciences, as it relies on conjectures about external realities that man does not create. Vico and Galileo concurred that the exact sciences, such as geometry and arithmetic, are superior in terms of certainty because they are predicated on principles intrinsic to the human mind, such as the point and the unit, which man organizes and fully apprehends. Conjectural sciences, like medicine, deal with external forms whose nature escapes human control.

The Vichian doctrine posits that “sciences and arts, the more they rise above genera, not Platonic but Aristotelian, the more they confuse forms, and the grander they become, the less useful they are.” For this reason, Aristotle’s physics is ill-regarded today, as it is too universal (*scientiae artesve quanto plus supra genera, non platonica, sed aristotelaea insurgunt, magis confundunt formas, et quanto magis magnificae evadunt, tanto minus utiles fiunt. Quo nomine Aristotelis Physica odie male audit, quod nimis sit universalis*).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the more general a scientific discipline, the more it tends to obscure particular forms and the less practical it becomes. Metaphysics, as the most general science, is the most useless from a practical

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Vanni Rovighi, Sofia, *Storia della filosofia moderna*, La Scuola, Brescia 1976, pp. 31-63.

<sup>8</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

perspective, as it deals with contemplative issues, like the properties of the entity, without directly applying its principles; otherwise, it would betray its speculative nature. For Aristotle, indeed, the philosopher seeks to understand the ultimate causes of things, not for utility but for the pure desire to know, constituting *θεωρία* or contemplation.

Aristotle's physics, theoretical and deductive, lacks validity in modernity due to its reliance on universal notions. Aristotle, for instance, expounds on the descent of heavy bodies due to their predominant earth composition, which natural place is the ground. In contrast, celestial bodies are composed of aether, exclusive to the supralunar world. Fire tends upward, seeking aether, per this cosmology. These explanations, rooted in natural places, are too general to account for specific phenomena and have been surpassed by modern experimental physics, particularly developed in the Italian philosophical context by Galileo, who utilizes mathematics and observational tools to explain natural phenomena. Nonetheless, Aristotelian metaphysics appears to maintain its pertinence within Vico's conceptual framework, particularly with respect to the distinction between matter and form.

In jurisprudence, a good jurist is not one who memorizes general laws but one who, with penetrating judgment, identifies the *peristasis* or particular circumstances justifying exceptions to the universal norm. Applying a law without considering context, like condemning someone for a crime without evaluating circumstances, is ineffective and can produce injustice. A competent jurist does not mechanically apply laws but instead identifies the particular circumstances of each case to determine whether the accused individual merits an exception to the prevailing norm, thereby averting the possibility of an

unjust conviction or disproportionate punishment. A similar phenomenon occurs in the case of the scientist. A scientist does not merely accept universal laws, such as the fall of heavy bodies due to earth composition, but rather seeks exceptions that challenge these laws. This process, which is related in modernity to “falsification,” as masterfully described by Karl Popper, drives scientific progress by questioning general laws through the identification of particular cases that contradict them.

Similarly, in the domain of oratory, the most distinguished orators, according to Cicero, eschew commonplaces and craft original speeches tailored to their specific topic. In the same vein, the most esteemed historians do not merely narrate events superficially or limit themselves to citing general causes. Instead, they investigate the underlying circumstances of historical events and unearth the particularities of their causes. The emphasis on the particular is particularly beneficial in disciplines such as politics, economics, and imitative arts, including painting, sculpture, and poetry. In these arts, creators enhance archetypes derived from nature by introducing new traits or aspects, thereby transforming them into unique objects that surpass mere copies.

As previously mentioned, for Platonic philosophy, Ideas are regarded as archetypes that transcend their individual manifestations. These Ideas are arranged in a hierarchical structure, with each Idea progressing toward the Idea of the Good, which is regarded as the pinnacle of perfection, as outlined in *The Republic*. For Plato, ideal Models always surpass copies, as they contain the essence in its purest, mutation-free form. This principle finds application in the sciences, wherein universals facilitate comprehension of higher realities through an ascending process toward perfection. However, wisdom, as defined by

Aristotle (particularly in the Nicomachean Ethics) and Vico, does not consist solely in the comprehension of universal principles but in their adaptation to novel circumstances. The wise, thanks to extensive experience in what is right and useful, develop a mind capable of grasping new things as they are in themselves. Vico termed this faculty *fantasia* or imagination,<sup>9</sup> which enables individuals to derive novel principles from circumstances or apply traditional principles to unprecedented contexts. Vico uses these words: “The wise, through long and continuous experience in what is right and useful, prepares their mind, so to speak, to draw the images of new things as they are in themselves, and is ready to speak and act impromptu in any circumstance with dignity, just as the courageous have their spirit prepared for any unforeseen terror (*sapiens a longo et multo rerum honestarum et utilium usu mentem quasi subactam reddit, quo novarum rerum, uti sunt in se ipsis, expressas excipiat imagines; et non aliter paratus sit ex tempore loqui, et agere in omnibus rebus cum dignitate, ac fortis comparatum habet animum ad omnes terrores inopinatos*).”<sup>10</sup> *Fantasia* does not imply the creation of arbitrary images; rather, it signifies the capacity to adapt knowledge to the particularities of the present moment, acting with dignity and precision in unforeseen situations.

The intellectual, whether jurist, scientist, or philosopher, must possess the knowledge needed to address novel issues,

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Croce, Benedetto, *La forma fantástica de conocer: la poesía y el lenguaje*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 36, 2023, pp. 153-166. From the perspective of the *Scienza Nuova*, the earliest humans did not rationalize but fantasized, cf. García Mancilla, Carlos, *La Ciencia Nueva de Vico. De la metafísica al hombre*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 17-18, 2004, p. 84.

<sup>10</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

such as the exposition of philosophical theories or the response to unanticipated inquiries. For instance, a philosopher must be prepared to engage in discourse concerning Aristotle's metaphysics or the ideas of other thinkers, adapting their principles to the context without resorting to preconceived answers. Nevertheless, universal genera, the object of metaphysics, have limitations. Metaphysics, in its abstract nature, does not offer practical guides for specific tasks. Scholastics posit that genera are the objects of metaphysics, as they enable the mind to abstract general forms and comprehend the universal. However, this abstraction hinders its application to particular cases. The erudite, who have been instructed in metaphysics, are tasked with the synthesis of the universal and the particular, with the objective of integrating these two levels through experience to comprehend specific circumstances.

Metaphysics differs from physics in terms of their respective methods and objects of study. Modern physics, by studying particular phenomena, yields results through experimentation, a method Vico describes as *resolutio*, in the medieval sense. Metaphysics, comprising the most perfect form in the genus or Idea, focuses on the universal. Despite the advantages of universals, their use has drawbacks. According to Vico, speaking in universal terms is characteristic of those lacking intellectual refinement. Indeed, he is harsh in his assessment: "Speaking with universal words is proper to children or barbarians (*Loqui universalibus verbis infantium est, aut barbarorum*)."<sup>11</sup> In jurisprudence, it is considered an error to apply conventional law or general rules without taking into account particular circumstances. For instance, the implementation of a law that imposes

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<sup>11</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

a uniform penalty on all thieves, without taking into account the particulars of the crime, has the potential to result in injustices, as previously indicated. The risk of injustice underscores the necessity to integrate universal principles with meticulous examination of *peristasis*, thereby striving to reach equitable and suitable resolutions. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Jean Valjean steals bread due to extreme poverty and the need to feed his cousins, an exceptional circumstance. The imposition of a twenty-year prison sentence, in accordance with general law, is manifestly unjust, as equity demands a comprehensive evaluation of who steals, why and in what context. This principle, with Aristotelian precedents, emphasizes analyzing particularities to issue just judgments, avoiding errors of conventional law.

In the medical field, practitioners who adhere to general theories tend to prioritize the coherence of theoretical systems over patient healing. In instances where a particular case appears to contradict the general theory, it is incumbent upon the physician to adapt their approach to the patient's specific circumstances, rather than disregarding evidence to uphold the theory's validity. This error of privileging the general over the particular is evident in daily life, where explanations based on general propositions, such as attributing current economic problems to distant historical events, are ineffective. These generalizations, which Vico refers to as "general themes," are commonly accepted principles that offer neither practical solutions nor profound explanations.

Vico applies these considerations to philosophy: "All errors in philosophy arise from homonyms, commonly, equivocations (*Omnes in philosophia errores ab homonymis, vulgo*

*aequivocis, nascuntur*).<sup>12</sup> In logic, fallacies frequently arise from the improper distribution of the middle term, as illustrated by the following example: “All cats are felines.” If “cat” is used in one case for the animal and in another for a servant [apart from the animal, a cat is a pejorative term for a “servant” in Spanish], the argument commits an equivocation, as the term does not consistently maintain one meaning. Vico observes that genera, as universal categories, serve as the origin of these equivocations, as they abstract forms and generate confusion when applied to the particular. “Without genera, there would be no equivocations (*nam sine generibus aequivoca non essent*).”<sup>13</sup> Genera, then, confuse forms and generate imprecise ideas, like prejudices obscuring interpretation. In philosophy, medicine, and jurisprudence, disputes and errors originate from genera. In physics, terms such as “matter” and “form” are excessively broad; in jurisprudence, the notion of “just” encompasses multiple interpretations; in medicine, concepts like “healthy” and “corrupt” lack precision; and in daily life, the idea of “useful” is indeterminate. These generic categories, by not capturing particularities, induce errors.

Toward the end of Book II of *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Vico emphasizes that, in the Latin tradition, the term *certum* has a dual meaning: the indubitable, related to epistemological certainty, and the particular, in opposition to the common. For example, the certainty that a wall is black is based on direct observation, making the particular *certum*. On the other hand, *verum* and *aequum* are determined in specific circumstances. In the case of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*,

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<sup>12</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

<sup>13</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, II.

though general law states all thieves must be punished, equity, based on his situation's particularities, indicates he is not morally guilty. Thus, the just emanates from circumstances, not solely from the universal genus, which can be false if applied without nuance.

In metaphysics, Vico, following tradition, argues that man cannot conceive nothingness in itself but as the negation of being. Blindness, for example, does not exist as an independent entity but as the absence of visual function in the eyes. Similarly, the infinite is not understood directly but through negations of the finite. In geometry, the assertion that all triangles have angles summing to two right angles derives from the universal form of the triangle, an archetype not infinite in itself but serving as a model for countless particular triangles. Claiming a rod or meter is infinite because it can measure all distances is improper, as its measuring capacity is finite and depends on its application to the particular.

In the final section of Book II of *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, Vico underscores the dualistic nature of the term *certum* in the Latin tradition: it signifies both the indubitable, pertaining to epistemological certainty, and the particular, juxtaposed with the common. For instance, the conviction that a wall is black is substantiated by direct observation, thereby establishing the specific *certum*. Conversely, *verum and aequum* are determined in specific circumstances. In the case of Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, though general law states all thieves must be punished, equity, based on his situation's particularities, indicates he is not morally guilty. Consequently, the concept of justice emanates from specific circumstances rather than solely from the universal genus, which can be inaccurate if applied without contextual refinement.

In metaphysics, Vico, adhering to the prevailing tradition, posits that man is incapable of conceiving of nothingness in itself, but rather as the antithesis of being. To illustrate, blindness does not exist as an independent entity; rather, it is the absence of visual function in the eyes. Similarly, the infinite is not directly comprehensible; it is understood through the negation of the finite. In geometry, the assertion that all triangles have angles summing to two right angles derives from the universal form of the triangle, an archetype not infinite in itself but serving as a model for countless particular triangles. The assertion that a rod or meter possesses infinite measuring capacity, based on its ability to measure all distances, is erroneous, as its measuring capacity is finite and contingent upon its application to the particular.



## CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND THE METAPHYSICAL POINT

Book III of *De antiquissima italorum sapientia* begins with the assertion that the terms *causa* (cause) and *negotium* (work or operation) are conflated in the Latin language, while *effectum* (effect) is understood as that which arises from the cause. According to Vico, the concept of cause implies that of effect, and vice versa, as they are reciprocal notions. This doctrine posits that the true (*verum*) is synonymous with the made (*factum*). For Vico, knowing the cause allows one to explain the effect, since the one who produces something knows it by virtue of their creative act: thus, being a cause is the same as effecting a *negotium*, a work.<sup>1</sup> Demonstrating through causes is equivalent to making, as by accounting for causes, one understands the generated effect. Aristotle defines scientific or epistemic knowledge as knowledge of a thing through its causes. Within this system, sciences are classified according to the causal phenomena they study and their degree of elevation. Sciences addressing higher causes, those with greater scope over effects, are considered superior. Metaphysics, by studying the highest causes of the entity—understood as that which is—

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, III.

stands as the most universal and elevated science, as all entities depend on these causes.

The entity, defined as *id quod est* (that which is), gives rise to inquiries regarding its nature. In the classical tradition, particularly the Thomist school of thought, the entity is understood to encompass both essence and being, drawing from Avicenna and Boethius. The essence delineates the nature of the entity, while being refers to its existence. These two dimensions are not separable: there is no essence without being, nor being without an essence to concretize it. However, different metaphysics prioritize one component over the other. Essentialist metaphysics posits that being is an accident of essence, thereby implying that essence serves as the foundation and being is superimposed on it. Conversely, metaphysics emphasizing being maintain that it is concretized in an essence, which acts as a delimitation restricting the act of being to a specific form, such as that of a bird or a man. Thus, a bird cannot become a dog, as its essence limits it.

In metaphysics, it is imperative to differentiate between entity and being. The entity, by concretizing in an essence, is but a particular manifestation of being, which is broader and transcends the entity. Metaphysics, by studying the causes of being, encompasses all effects, as every effect is a form of being concretized in an entity; in this way, the essence of the entity in universal terms, which is all-encompassing, is concretized, so to speak. In other words, this universality gives metaphysics its omnipresent character, as all things, insofar as they are, depend on the causes it studies. Consequently, metaphysics is distinguished as the highest science, dealing with the ultimate causes of all that is.

In the Latin tradition, the term “*esse*” (to be) differs from “*existere*,” though in the later scholastic tradition, such as that represented by Suárez, there is some equivalence between the two. *Esse* denotes the intrinsic act of being, while *existere*, derived from *ex* (out) and *sistere* (to stand), implies a dependent permanence on something else. In numerous metaphysical systems, the assertion of God’s existence is often met with skepticism, as His being does not require the intervention of another cause. Consequently, it is more appropriate to speak of God’s *esse*, emphasizing His absolute and independent being. This distinction, which traces back to Avicenna and medieval metaphysics, exerts a significant influence on modern ontology and underscores the importance of precise terminology when addressing the entity and its causes. As previously suggested, demonstrating through causes is equivalent to making from Vico’s perspective, as knowing the cause involves understanding the effect by producing it. This doctrine finds particular application in the exact sciences, such as geometry and arithmetic, where cause and *negotium* constitute a single operation, and the made (*factum*) corresponds to the true. In the practical mindset of the Latins, *negotium* reflects productive action. Thus, one who performs a work knows the causes of its effects, such as the germination of a plant or the tartness of a cherry for a coffee planter.

In metaphysics, the ultimate cause is defined as the author or supreme principle, encompassing all effects. In the philosophy of nature, the primary causes are matter and form, as established by the Aristotelian-scholastic tradition that Vico follows. Aristotle’s hylomorphism posits that a natural entity is constituted by matter (the substrate) and form (the defining structure). In ethics, Vico elucidates that the primary cause is

the end (*telos*), as human action (*praxis*) is teleological, oriented toward a purpose. This notion of intentionality, which is central to ethics, emerges in the medieval tradition, particularly in the work of Peter Abelard, who in the 11th century argues in *Scito Te Ipsum* that morality resides in the intention to fulfill or violate the norm.

In contrast to arithmetic and geometry, where the human mind generates principles, in nature, man is not a creator. For instance, although water is described as H<sub>2</sub>O, this formula does not exhaust its nature, and man cannot create it from nothing; he can only manipulate it. The causes of natural entities reside in God, who possesses infinite potency to create both an ant and the universe. The creation of any entity, whether an ant or the universe, necessitates the same infinite potency, as it entails the production of something *ex nihilo*. Given the fact that man is not endowed with this capacity, he is incapable of fully understanding natural entities. Consequently, only exact sciences, based on mental principles, allow reliable demonstrations, while the philosophy of nature and, more recently, physics, depending on external causes, are limited in their probative capacity. In other words, Vico holds that man, since he is not God, cannot fully comprehend nature. Although he possesses a certain understanding of natural entities, his knowledge is both partial and limited. For instance, man can observe certain aspects of an orange, such as its shape or color, but not its complete essence. This is due to his inability to perceive it in all its dimensions simultaneously, as a being with omniscient or penetrating vision would. However, Vico does not deny that man can know; he asserts that human knowledge, though not absolute, is real and valid within its limits. This principle, which is linked to the theory of knowledge,

recognizes that man accesses partial truths about nature, but not its total comprehension, which is reserved for God's infinite potency. This position can even extend to mystical and theological knowledge. In the context of ascetic discourses, religious sages, distinguished by their profound knowledge of divinity and moral rectitude, often transition from contemplating a simple entity, such as a flower, to reflecting on God. Philosophically, St. Bonaventure is highly coherent in explaining this transition. In the creation of that flower, the Creator's infinite potency is revealed, at least as a *vestigium*. This process synthesizes the foundational principles of mysticism: from any element of creation, regardless of its apparent simplicity or humility, it is possible to ascend to the ultimate Cause. Giambattista Vico posited in *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, drawing upon his *De nostri temporis*, that the objects of geometry are intelligible because humans create them, while physical objects, if demonstrable, would also be intelligible because humans could create them. Physical objects, characterized by their opaque, finite, and delimited nature, akin to a rock, reflect the light of metaphysical truth, though limitedly. They manifest a reflection of divine truth, illuminating creation and allowing the human mind to rise from the sensible to the transcendent: "The clarity of metaphysical truth is quantitatively like that of light, which we know only through opaque things (*Metaphysici enim veri claritas eadem est numero ac illa lucis, quam non nisi per opaca cognoscimus*)."<sup>2</sup>

In scholastic philosophy, the term *essentia* is used as an equivalent to *vis* and *potentia*. It is a widely held belief among philosophers that essences are eternal and immutable. This

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<sup>2</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, III.

assertion, though presented with rhetorical flourish, does not necessarily reflect absolute unanimity; rather, it highlights their fundamental character. Essences, however, do not primarily reside in sensible, concrete entities, as these are neither eternal nor immutable. For instance, a concrete, real tree possesses the essence of a tree, yet the tree itself is perishable and mutable, indicating that its essence cannot be found in it in a primary sense. According to the Platonic perspective, essences reside in the *τόπος οὐράνιος*. In Christian philosophy, essences exist eternally in God's Mind, where they are immutable and reflect His divine perfection. According to Aristotelian and scholastic philosophy, the essence constitutes the limit defining an entity, acting as a sort of sieve, so to speak, delimiting its being. Aristotle holds that essences are indivisible, a principle scholastics interpret from the perspective of indivisibility. This suggests that, in the entity's primary act—that which constitutes it as such—the essence does not permit either augmentation or reduction. For example, the primary act that establishes an entity as human is its essence as human, which remains invariable: there is no greater or lesser degree of humanity when one is human.

In contrast, secondary acts related to the entity's accidents allow for some variability. Qualities such as color, height, or relation manifest differences within certain limits. However, man cannot exceed the natural limits of these accidents. In the primary act — that is, the act of defining the essence — there is no gradation: a man is a man, with no possibility of being more or less in his essence. This indivisibility underscores the notion that the essence is what makes it precisely what it is, without admitting division or variation in its fundamental core. In classical philosophy, essences are characterized as eternal,

immutable, and indivisible. Plato, following Pythagoras, posits that science is concerned with the eternal and immutable, that is, the essences in their universal character, rather than the particular manifestations of entities. For example, medical science studies the essence of health, not an individual's particular conditions of illness or health. Similarly, in political philosophy, the notion of peace is analyzed in its essential nature, not whether a specific people enjoys it, as particular cases are anecdotal and lack scientific value. As Aristotle posits, science is an endeavor focused on the universal, as particularities preclude the formulation of universal principles, in contrast to essences, which constitute the proper object of scientific knowledge.

According to Giambattista Vico, the ancient Italian philosophers regarded these essences as eternal and infinite potencies, which the Latins designated as *vis* or *potentia*, as they function as the causes of individuals. In Platonic terms, as expounded in the *Timaeus*, the sensible world—comprising men, rocks, etc.—exists because it participates in Ideas, like the Idea of man or rock, constituting their essences. This phenomenon of participation elucidates the underlying reason why entities, despite exhibiting individual diversity, belong to the same natural class. Vico, renowned for his contributions to the philosophy of law, underscores that the universality of laws is rooted in the existence of common, eternal, and indivisible essences. A given law may be applicable to all individuals because they share a universal nature, thereby enabling the scientific character of the law to be built on universal principles rather than individual particularities. Without this universality, each individual would require a separate law, contradicting legal practice, which operates with national or general declarations.

For the educated, as opposed to the common populace, which linked these eternal potencies with immortal gods, essences indicate a singular divinity, as in Christian philosophy, where Ideas reside in God's Mind. Consequently, metaphysics, as the science of universals, is regarded as the paramount discipline, encompassing eternal potencies that remain constant. In this sense, metaphysics differs from physics: while physics analyzes bodies and motion, metaphysics deals with potencies, like the *conatus* and the capacity for extension, its proper objects. Vico introduces an analogy between *punctum* and *momentum*, Latin terms denoting the indivisible. In geometry, the point is the indivisible element forming the basis of all figures, as without it, lines or shapes could not be drawn. In physics, the *momentum* or instant is analogous to this notion, representing the indivisible moment at which motion begins. This equivalence underscores the notion that, in both geometry and physics, the indivisible constitutes the foundation of their respective structures. Mechanically, to draw a figure like a triangle, an initial moment is required to set the action in motion, starting from an indivisible point. In summary, the point, as an indivisible vertex, gives rise to geometric figures, while the moment, as an indivisible instant, marks the initiation of motion in mechanics. It is not possible to divide a point into smaller points, nor can a moment be divided into smaller moments, as these represent the ultimate limit of divisibility.

In metaphysics, as posited by Giambattista Vico, essence plays a role analogous to the point or moment, being indivisible, eternal, and immutable.<sup>3</sup> The investigation of the cause of a point or moment would result in an infinite regress, which,

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 1.

according to Aristotle, renders the explanation of reality impossible. Therefore, the ancient Italian philosophers posit that the *vis*, understood as an indivisible potency, lacks extension or motion. This thesis, transmitted through Italy and Greece, is renewed by Zeno, who proposes the concept of the *punctum metaphysicum* as the vertex of all reality. It is an indivisible principle from which all reality arises and to which it returns. *Henological* metaphysics, inspired by Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, prioritize the One as the principle, unlike ontological metaphysics, which place Being as the foundation, or agathological ones, centered on the Good. Metaphysics, by studying indivisible essences, considers the source of all reality, thus surpassing subordinate sciences such as geometry and arithmetic. These, although rigorous, originate from the point (in geometry) and the unit (in arithmetic) as indivisible foundations. Through synthetic methods, geometers extend their lines to infinity, thereby enabling the discussion of metaphysical questions, such as the notion of infinite parallelism, which transcends sensible reality and connects with metaphysics by dealing with the unlimited.

Metaphysics, as a foundational and fundamental science, provides geometry and arithmetic their essential principles: the potency of extension and the potency of numeration, respectively. In geometry, the *punctum* is the indivisible origin of all figures and, as it lacks parts, it is the foundation of extension. The line, divisible by nature, originates from the point, which is non-extended. Consequently, divisibility is negated at its origin. Analogously, in natural philosophy, the extended has its root in the non-extended, that is, the indivisible, which acts as its primary cause. In arithmetic, the analogous principle is the unit, the one, whose essence is equally indivisible. Although

arithmetic pertains to divisible operations, such as addition or multiplication, it cannot exist without the one, which engenders number without being a number itself. Thus, the point, non-extended, generates extension, and the unit, not a number, gives rise to numeration. These potencies—extension in geometry and numeration in arithmetic—stem from metaphysics, where essence, as the indivisible, underlies all reality.

Inspired by Zeno of Elea's school, Vico proposes that the point is an indivisible principle underlying extension and motion, transcending its geometric dimension. Vico argues that the point and the conatus must be conceived metaphysically, following Zeno's approach. According to Zeno's disciples, the point is not a physical entity but a mental model enabling thought of the indivisible in extension and potency in motion. This conception is grounded in the notion of unity, understood as that which lacks division. Metaphysically, unity implies indivisibility: the one is that which cannot be fragmented without losing its essence. This thesis establishes an ontological hierarchy, positing that the greater an entity's degree of being, the less divisible it is. For instance, a rock, which is more divisible than a human, possesses a lesser degree of being, as it can be split into two rocks without altering its nature whereas a human cannot be divided without ceasing to be human. This perspective, drawing upon Neoplatonic thought, posits the concept of the One, that is, God, as utterly indivisible, while matter, in its pure state, as prime matter, represents the ultimate degree of divisibility. As one moves down the scale of reality—from metaphysical intelligence, through the soul, to the corporeal world and pure matter—divisibility and multiplicity increase. Consequently, entities that are furthest from the One are more divisible and less perfect.

Accordingly, Vico, aligning with Zeno, asserts that the point signifies the metaphysical principle of extension. There cannot be extended things without an indivisible foundation, which he calls the “potency of extension (*extensionis virtutem*).”<sup>4</sup> “ This notion stands in contrast to the Aristotelian conception, which considers the point to be a physically divisible entity in an infinite state of potentiality. For Aristotle, any extended object, including the point, can be divided infinitely, placing it in the physical realm. Vico holds that Aristotle misinterprets Zeno’s point by treating it as physical, when it is a metaphysical principle characterized by indivisibility: “And Aristotle’s demonstrations against the Zenonians concerning metaphysical points would not have such great authority among their followers if, for the Stoics, the geometric point were not a sign akin to the metaphysical point, and the metaphysical point were not the potency of the physical body (*Neque Aristotelis contra Zenonios demonstrationes super punctis metaphysicis tantam apud eius asseclas haberent auctoritatem, nisi Stoicis punctum geometricum signum ad instar metaphysici, et punctum metaphysicum corporis physici virtus esset*).”<sup>5</sup>

This distinction is fundamental: Aristotle addresses the point from a physical plane, while Zeno conceives it as a metaphysical principle. For instance, when Aristotle contends that the point can be divided infinitely through geometric demonstrations, such as dividing a line, he is addressing a physical representation, not Zeno’s indivisible point. According to Vico, Zeno’s disciples asserted that geometry is the science that addresses matter with the greatest rigor, as it concerns itself with

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

the potency of extension, originating in the metaphysical point. In this sense, geometry does not abstract the point from matter, as Aristotelian scholastics hold; rather, geometry conceives of the point as the foundation of pure matter. The fundamental assertion is that the principle from which all extension is generated possesses an indivisible character, thereby rendering it an essential metaphysical concept. Vico emphasizes that this perspective refutes the belief that geometry purifies its object by abstracting it from matter. In contrast, geometry, as understood by Zeno, concerns itself with matter in its purest form, regarded as the potency of extension originating from the point.

Within this framework, Vico classifies philosophers into four categories based on their approach to explaining reality. The first category includes distinguished geometers, such as Pythagoras, who study physical principles through mathematics and seek to explain reality via geometry and number. Pythagoras, a renowned geometer and mathematician, employed these principles to interpret the structure of the cosmos. Secondly, metaphysicians who possess knowledge of geometry, such as Aristotle, who study the principles of things without resorting to geometric hypotheses, yet whose metaphysics remains anchored in the physical. Vico critiques Aristotle's failure to fully disengage from the principles of physics, as evidenced by his hylomorphic theory, which conceptualizes physical entities as matter and form. For Aristotle, metaphysics stems from physics, limiting its scope. For instance, his concept of God as the unmoved Mover is a pure form but is derived from physical analysis, as evidenced by his hylomorphism, wherein entities are matter and form, with metaphysics being constructed through the elimination of matter to focus on

form. Thirdly, materialists, such as Epicurus, who are devoid of knowledge in the domain of geometry and who repudiate metaphysics, thereby reducing everything to extended matter. Vico regards their philosophy as rudimentary, yet he recognizes certain merits in it. Epicureans, with their *clinamen* (atomic swerve) theory, introduce chance to explain freedom. However, their mechanistic approach limits their metaphysics. The *clinamen*, by virtue of its unpredictability, enables Epicureans to uphold freedom within a deterministic cosmos. However, their explanation remains physical in nature. Finally, ancient cosmologists, who identify things' principles with elements like earth, water, air, or fire. Though their philosophy is primitive, Vico considers it less culpable than Epicurus's, as it arises in an early philosophical context, when philosophers worked with available elements. These thinkers, through their observation of the body and its components, propose an elemental philosophy that is less crude than that of the materialists.

Vico explicitly aligns with Zeno and Pythagoras, adopting the point as a geometric principle and the number as a mathematical one, both understood metaphysically. He cites Zeno as *summus metaphysicus*, explaining the principles of things through points, and Pythagoras, explaining them through numbers. This affiliation is delineated in the subsequent scheme: Zeno represents geometry, whose principle is the point; Pythagoras represents mathematics, whose principle is the number. Both principles, being metaphysical, enable constructing a metaphysics transcending the physical, based on the human spirit's purest creations: geometry and mathematics. In contrast, Vico's critique of Descartes is characterized by his accusation of a methodological shift towards an Epicurean approach, whereby nature is explained through mechanical

figures and motions rather than metaphysical principles. According to the Neapolitan philosopher, Descartes errs by focusing on motion and element formation, akin to Epicurus, who explains phenomena through atomic collisions and the *clinamen*. Vico holds that, by starting from figures and motions, Descartes and Epicureans construct a closed metaphysics, which is incapable of grasping the universal principles of point and number.

Vico introduces the concept of *conatus* as the potency of motion, analogous to the point as the potency of extension. In the corporeal world, characterized by extension and motion, the point and *conatus* are metaphysical principles that underpin these properties. In God, as the purest Mind, extension and motion find their foundation in the non-extended and immovable. Vico argues that admitting anything extended in God would be sacrilege, as the extended is subject to corruption and becoming, while God is perfect and indivisible. He writes:

“Extended things are in nature; in God, it is sacrilege to admit anything extended. We measure the extended; the infinite rejects measure. It is entirely proper to think that God contains the potency of the extended in an eminent degree. Thus, just as the *conatus* is the potency of motion and, in God, the author of *conatus*, is rest, so the first matter is the potency of extension, which, in God, the creator of matter, is the purest mind (*Extensa quidem in natura sunt; in Deo quid extensum memorare nefas: extensum metitur, infinitum dimensionem indignatur. Extensi vero virtutem eminenter, ut nostri theologi loquuntur, in Deo contineri fas omnino est. Igitur quo pacto conatus virtus movendi est, et in Deo, conatus*

*authore, quies; ita prima materia est extensionis virtus, quae in Deo, materiae conditore, purissima mens est).*"<sup>6</sup>

This can be understood in Neoplatonic terms: the One is not extended, but all corporeal, extended entities derive from It. Consequently, the extended is grounded in the non-extended, and motion in rest. Vico elucidates that the *conatus*, as the principle of motion, pertains to matter, not as an independent entity but as a mode of matter. He states the following: "The *conatus*, not being a thing (*quid*) but something belonging to a thing (*cuius*), namely, a mode of matter, necessarily had to be created with the very creation of matter."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, matter and motion are created simultaneously, and the *conatus* is the potency that enables motion in the corporeal world.

However, the human mind's limitations in the presence of the divine Mind are immense. The former, being finite and formed, must delimit and classify to discern a defect rather than a virtue. In contrast to the divine Mind, which knows everything intuitively and wholly, the human mind knows fragmentarily, in steps. This limitation manifests in the inability to grasp the indefinite, such as metaphysical truths or pain, which transcends the limits of the concrete: "The human mind, however, is finite and formed, and thus cannot understand indefinite and unformed things, though it can think them, which in our native tongue we would say *può andarle raccogliendo, ma non già raccôrle tutte* (*Mens autem humana finita est et formata; ac proinde indefinita et informia intelligere non potest, cogitare quidem potest: quod vernacula lingua diceremus: «può andarle*

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<sup>6</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

*raccogliendo, ma non già raccôrle tutte»).*<sup>8</sup> The human mind, in knowing, divides and classifies, as if organizing things into categories (biology, geometry, medicine), reflecting its inability to grasp reality wholly. In contrast, the divine Mind perceives everything simultaneously, akin to a sun that illuminates all things, while the human mind functions as a lantern that illuminates only a portion of reality, leaving the rest in darkness. Vico illustrates this with a powerful metaphor: “The divine Mind sees things in the sun of its truth. While seeing one thing, it knows infinite things along with the one it sees. The human mind, when it knows a thing distinctly, sees it at night with a lantern. While seeing it, nearby things vanish from its view (*Mens divina in suae veritatis sole res videt; hoc est, dum rem videt, infinitas res cum re, quam videt, cognoscit: mens humana, cum distincte rem cognoscit, eam noctu cum lucerna videt, quam dum videt, adsita aspectu amittit suo*).”<sup>9</sup> “ This cognitive limitation manifests in experiences such as pain, which focuses attention and obscure the rest of reality.

Finally, Vico emphasizes that metaphysics, unlike physics, is a universal discourse encompassing all that is, without limiting itself to a specific group of entities. While physics deals with determined forms and things, metaphysics treats principles like the point and conatus, applicable to all things. For instance, the metaphysical point is the principle of all extended things, not a particular group, making it a universal concept: “The clarity of metaphysical truth is qualitatively the same as that of light, which we distinguish only through dark bodies. Metaphysical truths are clear because they cannot be confined

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<sup>8</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

within any limit nor distinguished by any formed thing (*haec metaphysici veri claritas eadem est numero ac illa lucis, quam non nisi per opaca distinguimus: metaphysica enim vera illustrata sunt, quia nullo fine concludi, nulla re formata distingui possunt: physica autem sunt opaca, quibus metaphysicarum rerum lucem distinguimus*).”<sup>10</sup> “In this sense, metaphysics transcends the limitations of physics, which describes particular objects, and rises to a universality encompassing the entity’s totality. To illustrate, while the field of biology is dedicated to the study of living entities, anthropology focuses on rational ones. Metaphysics, in contrast, is a comprehensive discipline that encompasses all that is, without being confined to a specific domain. Vico concludes that extended things, being in the corporeal world, are imperfect as they are subject to becoming and corruption. Conversely, non-extended, indivisible things, such as ideas in the intelligible world, are characterized by perfection and infinite efficacy. This distinction reflects the Neoplatonic hierarchy between the sensible world, characterized by multiplicity and imperfection, and the intelligible world, characterized by unity and perfection. Consequently, Vico defends a metaphysics based on indivisible principles, such as the point and conatus, which enable understanding of extension and motion from a universal perspective. His alignment with Zeno and Pythagoras, in conjunction with his critique of Aristotle, Descartes, and the Epicureans, underscores the necessity to transcend the physical in order to achieve a profound comprehension of reality. The human mind, constrained by its finite nature, can only approximate these truths through metaphysical reflection, thereby unveiling the universal principles that

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<sup>10</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 2.

underpin the corporeal world. Metaphysics, in its capacity to encompass all that is, offers a framework for interpreting reality in its totality, thereby surpassing the limitations of particular sciences.

## CONATUS, MOTION, AND THE MIND OF GOD

In Giambattista Vico's *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, the philosopher expounds his philosophy of nature, which serves as a bridge to his metaphysics, with the concept of *conatus* being a central element in this transition. Framed within his conception of physics, Vico holds that extended bodies, whether homogeneous or heterogeneous, do not possess *conatus*. He is emphatic in his assertion: "It seems indubitable that extended bodies cannot have a *conatus* for anything (*Nam sane extensa non videntur quicquam conari posse*)."<sup>1</sup> In homogeneous bodies, where parts mutually oppose each other with equal resistance, the potency for motion is not generated. In heterogeneous bodies, where some parts exhibit resistance and others yield, true motions occur. However, these do not constitute *conatus*. For instance, the movement of nerves tensing, as in striking a wall, or a fish swimming against a current, are genuine motions, not *conatus*. The latter term is employed as a metaphysical principle of motion, analogous to the *punctum*, which is not physical but the foundation of the physical.

The *conatus*, conceived as the indefinite potency of motion, transcends physics and thus belongs to the realm of

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 3.

metaphysics. Vico posits that all natural phenomena are explained by motion, not by *conatus*. For instance, vital motion, associated with “vital spirits” (related in his philosophy to the soul and air), is not *conatus* but a motion that exhausts itself when nerves fatigue. According to Vico, nature is characterized by extension, which is delimited by extremes, traversed through motion and time, and is comprised of categories exclusive to the physical. In contrast to Giordano Bruno, who advocates for the infinitude of extension, Vico and Descartes regard it as finite, constrained by a “container” whose purpose is specifically to contain. This approach elucidates certain problems inherited from scholastic physics, such as the possibility of the extended expanding into a void. However, Vico’s focus is on the metaphysical characterization of extension rather than on theoretical physical issues. Motion, understood as the passage from one point to another, is measured through time, and without motion, there is no time. These categories, however, do not pertain to being in a metaphysical sense but to nature as *res extensa* (extended thing). In Vico’s conception, being seems immutable, reminiscent of Parmenidean being, which is eternal and imperishable, situated beyond the physical. The *conatus*, understood as the principle of motion, does therefore not reside in nature; rather, it transcends it, originating in an infinite and immovable Mind, that is, God.

Vico’s critique targets Aristotelian physical explanations that rely on concepts such as attraction, repulsion, or occult qualities to explain motion.<sup>2</sup> For example, the Aristotelian idea that an object falls because earth “calls” to earth is rejected by Vico’s contemporary physicists, who seek more empirical

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 3.

explanations. In this sense, Vico insists that *conatus* must be studied metaphysically, not physically, as the principle enabling motion in nature. His words are as follows: “Nature is motion; the indefinite potency of moving in this motion is *conatus*; it is excited by an infinite Mind at rest in itself, God (Natura est motus; hujus motus indefinita movendi virtus *conatus*; quam excitat infinita mens in se quieta, *Deus*).”<sup>3</sup> The conception of God as an infinite and immovable Mind finds its roots in a long philosophical tradition. Anaxagoras defines God as  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\delta\varsigma$ , separate from nature, an idea influencing Plato and Aristotle, who conceives Him as the unmoved Mover in pure act. Vico appears to draw on this tradition, asserting that *conatus* serves as a mediating force between the immovable (God) and the movable (nature), acting as a secondary cause that initiates motion without affecting the immovability of the First Cause. This approach resolves the metaphysical problem of how the immovable generates motion, a recurring issue in the history of philosophy.

The etymology of *conatus*, derived from *cum* and *natus*, reinforces its metaphysical character. Vico associates it with the impulse accompanying nature’s birth, akin to a seed requiring a principle to germinate. Without *conatus*, the development of nature is impeded, as it is the “germ” from which motion springs. In this context, air, linked to vital spirit and the soul, acts as a coadjutant of motion, though its ultimate origin is the divine Mind. Additionally, Vico expounds on the composition of motion, elucidated through Latin concepts such as *unde* (whence), *qua* (whereby), and *quo* (whither). However, his critique of Aristotle, particularly the idea that sublunar entities

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<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 3.

move in a straight line, seems unjust.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle does not imply a strictly linear physical motion but that sublunar entities, being perishable, have a beginning and end, unlike supralunar entities, which move in circles and are incorruptible. It appears that Vico misinterprets this distinction, taking “straight line” literally, although his analysis underscores nature’s finitude against the eternity of divine being. In Platonic terms, sensible things, subject to incessant motion and change, are *prope nihil*, when compared to intelligible realities, which possess full consistency, especially God. This idea, developed in Christian philosophy by St. Augustine, drawing on the Church Fathers’ brilliant insights, emphasizes creatures’ fragility, whose being is drawn from nothingness and does not participate in divine being, avoiding pantheism. In Vico’s metaphysics, nature, in its created state, lacks intrinsic consistency and is contingent on an external principle, God, who bestows upon it being in motion through *conatus*.

Vico’s philosophy of nature posits that motion is the fundamental category of physics, while *conatus*, as the principle of motion, belongs to metaphysics. This principle, originating in an infinite and immovable Mind at rest, establishes a link between nature and its divine foundation, reflecting Neoplatonic and Aristotelian influences and thereby consolidating the transition from physics to metaphysics in Vico’s thought. Sabetta’s assertion regarding the existence of a parallelism between rest, *conatus*, and moment in things, and God, matter, and extended body, is therefore valid. Natural things are brought to

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, IV, 4.

completion by motion, but they are through *conatus*, which finds its foundation in God.<sup>5</sup>

Vico's metaphysics is situated in a historical context that absorbs medieval and Renaissance ideas, the latter of which is deeply influenced by Neoplatonism. Renaissance thinkers such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola adopted the Neoplatonic thesis of a single principle (the One) from which all reality emanates, a concept that resonates with Vico's conception of God as an infinite and immovable Mind, the origin of *conatus* and motion. Platonism, with its conceptualization of a dichotomy between the mutable sensible world and the immutable intelligible world, underlies Vico's perspective of nature as finite and fragile in the presence of the divine. Aristotelianism, particularly as expressed through Francisco Suárez's scholasticism, contributes the notion of form and matter. However, Vico criticizes the scholastic idea that form remains static in motion, arguing that nature undergoes constant transformations. In a broader sense, Vico's thought anticipates elements of Hegelianism, which, though emerging later, shares Neoplatonic inspiration by positing a single principle (the Idea in Hegel, analogous to the Neoplatonic One) that organizes reality. Spiritualist philosophies, including neo-Hegelianisms, reflect the imprint of these traditions. Accordingly, Vico proffers a philosophy that integrates conventional metaphysics with a dynamic perspective of nature, centered on motion.

Vico begins section 5 of Book IV of *De antiquissima* with the following laconic statement: "Rest is a metaphysical thing, motion is a physical thing (*Quies res metaphysica est, physicus*

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 130.

*est motus*).”<sup>6</sup> He establishes a fundamental distinction between immovability, proper to metaphysics, and motion, characteristic of physics. Immovability is associated with God, who is conceived as a non-extended, incorporeal being, exempt from motion. Conversely, nature, as *res extensa*, is characterized by motion, thereby facilitating the composition, life, and dissolution of things. This conception synthesizes the principles of Vico’s doctrine. Etymologically, nature is defined as the process through which things are composed, live, and dissolve, including humans as part of it. Motion, for Vico, is incommunicable, proper to each entity and non-transferable between bodies. It is not possible for one body to occupy the space of another body, nor can the motion of one body be directly transmitted to another, as each entity possesses its own distinct motion mechanism.<sup>7</sup> Vico attributes a central role to air as a common medium facilitating motion in nature, from a plant’s growth to an animal’s movement or a flame’s burning. However, the ultimate origin of motion is attributed to God, who, as the author of all motion, excites the *conatus*, the metaphysical principle underlying nature’s dynamics.

Vico introduces a crucial distinction between *anima* and *animus*, concepts often equated in everyday language but with differentiated meanings in Italic philosophy. The *anima*, associated with air and vital motion, is the principle of life, present in all living beings, including plants. The Latins referred to *anima* as air, considering it nature’s most mobile element and associating it with the act of living, as evidenced by the act of breathing, which moves the heart, arteries, and blood. The

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<sup>6</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, IV, 5.

*anima* is passive, receiving motion, and is rooted in the corruptible body, making it dependent on physical mechanisms. In contrast, the *animus* is defined as the active principle of motion, associated with nerves and “animal spirits,” which are proper to animals and, to a greater extent, to humans. The Latins denominated *animus* as the “active and virile” motion, not in a sexual sense but as a principle engendering motion from within the entity. In humans, the *animus* transcends the corporeal, being linked to freedom and the desire for the infinite, thus establishing the foundation of immortality.<sup>8</sup> While the *anima* is tied to automatic bodily functions (like blood circulation), the *animus* is the seat of free will, enabling humans to act against bodily desires, like resisting the temptation to eat through rational decision.

This distinction has profound metaphysical implications. Vico posits that *animus* motions are unrestrained, arising from free will, in contrast to *anima* motions, which are contingent on the body. This freedom, which distinguishes humans from *bruta* (so-called for lacking free will), appears to be grounded in the patristic concept of *imago Dei*: humans, created freely by God, reflect divine freedom in their *animus*. In contrast, animals are “immovable” due to the fact that their movements are determined by external objects, such as an automatic mechanism. In contrast, humans possess an internal motion principle, the *animus*, which grants autonomy.

Vico thus establishes a fundamental distinction between *anima* and *animus*, referring to different aspects of life and sensibility. In Aristotelian physics, motion is attributed exclusively to extended entities, defined as material beings that are subject

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, V, 1.

to change and generation. Living beings have a motion principle called the soul, specifically referring to animals' sensibility, their capacity to perceive and react to external stimuli, but some entities possess animus. In the Latin tradition, *brutus* denotes creatures that possess sensibility but are devoid of the rational and volitional capacities that distinguish humans. This distinction prepares the ground for the analysis of the singularity of the human soul.

The fundamental distinction between beast and man is predicated on the principle of motion. In accordance with the scholastic philosophical tradition that Vico seems to adopt, humans possess the capacity to initiate their own motion, a faculty paradigmatically manifested in *liberum arbitrium* (free will). In contrast, animal motion is more mechanical in nature, responding to external stimuli or natural instincts, without conscious deliberation. It is important to note that this mechanicity does not align with Descartes' perspective, which posited the absence of a soul in animals, reducing them to mere automata or natural machines devoid of inner life. Vico aligns with scholasticism, recognizing animals' life and sensibility. Animals are endowed with a sensitive soul, yet they lack the intellectual and rational soul that is characteristic of man.

For Vico, free will represents the most evident expression of the internal motion principle in humans. This self-determination capacity distinguishes man as a rational and moral agent, capable of choosing actions through deliberative processes. In the scholastic tradition, free will is the will's faculty to choose between action paths, guided by reason and oriented toward the good in its generality. However, this conception gives rise to a number of philosophical and theological complexities, particularly with regard to occasionalism and

interpretations that challenge human autonomy against divine will.<sup>9</sup> Occasionalism, developed by thinkers such as Nicolas Malebranche, posits that human actions are merely occasions for God's action, potentially constraining human freedom. Vico addresses this issue by recognizing the necessity of human freedom to reconcile with divine omnipotence and omniscience. This tension is also relevant to Spinozism, which poses a challenge to the reconciliation of individual freedom with the ontological necessity of a universe determined by the sole divine substance; man, at most, is a mode of the substance. Vico, cognizant of these issues, defends a conventional perspective that upholds free will while situating it within a theological framework in which human action responds to the divine call, as explored later.

The localization of the human soul, which is referred to as the "seat of the soul,"<sup>10</sup> constitutes a central theme for Vico. According to Vico, ancient Italian philosophy places the soul in the heart, which is considered the center of prudence,

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<sup>9</sup> Franck, Juan F., *La causalidad humana en la filosofía de la historia de Giambattista Vico*, «Sapientia», 54, 1999, pp. 117-138.

<sup>10</sup> Classical theme of philosophical anthropology. Plato and Democritus, according to Plutarch, locate it throughout the head; Strabo, in the space between the eyebrows; Parmenides, throughout the body; Empedocles, in the blood; Epicurus and the Stoics, in the whole heart or the spirit of the heart; Pythagoras places the sensitive soul around the heart and reason and mind around the head. Some moderns teach similar ideas: Descartes locates the soul in the pineal gland; Malebranche, in the brain itself; and others, finally, in the medulla oblongata. Aristotle, the Church Fathers, and all scholastics unanimously declare that the soul is wholly in the whole and wholly in each of its parts, cf. Hugon, Eduardo, *Philosophia naturalis. Secunda pars: biologia et psychologia*, q. 4, a. 1, 1.

intentions, and concerns.<sup>11</sup> The Latins associated the heart with inventive acuity and practical virtues, particularly prudence, understood as the rational capacity to choose morally appropriate means to achieve an end. In this context, prudence is not an emotion or sensible inclination (though it may relate to such realms) but belongs to the practical realm of reason, mediating between sensibility and moral deliberation. This stands in contrast to audacity, which involves the selection of means without moral considerations, as evidenced in Renaissance philosophy, particularly Machiavelli's reinterpretation of *prudenza* as a strategic skill for maintaining power and its detachment from moral connotations, emphasizing political efficacy.

In contrast, Descartes famously proposes that the soul resides in the pineal gland, a thesis, though not entirely novel, generating controversy and rejection among contemporaries. Vico refutes this Cartesian thesis, contending that the heart, as the core of circulation and vitality, constitutes a more congruent seat for the soul. This stance draws on ancient conceptions viewing blood as life's vehicle, circulating through the heart and connecting the soul to the body. Vico fortifies his argument with Latin expressions that establish a connection between the heart and the soul's faculties. For instance, *ex corde* (literally "out of the heart") was understood to mean folly, thus suggesting that an absence of judgment or discernment was indicated by the heart's absence. This underscores Vico's conception of a soul deeply tied to the body, which opposes Descartes' dualism separating *res cogitans* (thinking thing) from *res extensa* (extended thing).

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, V, 3.

Vico's critique of Cartesianism is predicated on the radical separation between mind and body. By situating the soul within the pineal gland, Descartes disassociates the mind from the corporeal, thereby engendering a disjunction between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* that Vico perceives as problematic. For Descartes, mind-body interaction occurs in the pineal gland, a hypothesis that Vico deems unconvincing both philosophically and physiologically. Vico posits that the brain, with its limited blood supply and copious mucus,<sup>12</sup> is an implausible location for the soul. Conversely, the heart, which pumps and distributes blood throughout the body, is core of life and passion, rendering it a more plausible candidate. This perspective reflects not only an ancient view of blood as life's carrier but also physiological observations: intense emotions, like sadness or excitement, affect heart rate, suggesting a close heart-soul connection. By reintegrating the soul into the corporeal, Vico seeks to overcome Cartesian dualism, proposing a more unified view of man, where mind and body interact inseparably. This assertion carries profound anthropological and metaphysical ramifications, positioning man as an integrated being whose soul manifests through passions and bodily motion. Accordingly, Vico thus positions the soul within the heart, rather than the brain, thereby proposing a metaphysics that accommodates the body<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, V, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Megale, Claudia, *Com Vico nos subterrânos da alma*, en: Lomonaco, Frabrizio- Sertório de Amorim e Silva Neto, Humberto Guido (eds.), *Metafísica do gênero humano: natureza e história na obra de Giambattista Vico*, Universidade Federal de Uberlândia, 2018, pp. 213-225.

Vico holds that passions are soul motions rooted in the heart, physiologically mediated by blood and bile: “Blood seems to be the vehicle of concupiscence, and bile of anger; the primary seat of these two humors lies in the heart and nearby viscera (*et sanguis concupiscentiae, bilis irae vehiculum esse videtur; utriusque liquoris sedes in praecordiis praecipua*).”<sup>14</sup> These passions, situated in the heart and nearby viscera, have the capacity to distort truth perception by introducing subjective valuation to objects. For instance, an object may evoke intense passion in some, while leaving others unmoved, suggesting that passion resides in the subject rather than the object. This subjectivity hinders the perception of reality in its objective truth, as judgment is swayed by emotion. In order to achieve truth, Vico proposes the necessity of ridding oneself of passions, which obscure the essence of things. From a gnoseological perspective, truth is predicated on judgment, defined as the attribution of a predicate to a subject. A passion-free judgment approaches objective reality, while a passionate one is prone to error. This has moral implications, as decisions driven by sensible passions can lead to moral or practical errors, like choosing inadequate means to an end.

Vico adopts the traditional conception of passions, deriving from sensible appetites, which are divided into two fundamental categories: the concupiscible and irascible appetites. These notions, which are deeply rooted in Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and have been broadly adopted by scholastic anthropology, are essential for understanding how passions influence human behavior and reality perception.

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<sup>14</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, V, 3.

The sensible appetite is defined as the soul's inclination toward goods that are within the purview of sensory perception, that is, present, immediate objects that elicit emotional or desiderative responses. Unlike the intelligible appetite, directed toward abstract goods grasped by reason (like justice, truth, or health), the sensible appetite is limited to the concrete and tangible. Vico emphasizes that these rational inclinations are mediated by the heart, as blood is the vehicle of concupiscence and bile of anger, physiologically linking passions to the body. The concupiscible appetite seeks immediate union between subject and desired object, without significant obstacles. It is activated by sensible goods generating attraction or pleasure, like food, drink, or pleasurable sensory stimuli, available without considerable effort. Passions derived from the concupiscible appetite include love, desire, and pleasure, arising when the sensible object is perceived as good. Conversely, when perceived as detrimental or harmful, it elicits strong emotions such as hatred or pain. Vico emphasizes that these passions are immediate and are linked to the physical presence of the object, distinguishing them from rational or intellectual inclinations.

The irascible appetite is activated when obstacles or difficulties arise in attaining a desired object or avoiding a harmful one. It is associated with struggle, effort, or resistance toward an arduous good or potential evil. The passions derived from the irascible appetite include anger, fear, boldness, and hope. For instance, fear emerges when an object is perceived as potentially dangerous but not immediately present, thereby allowing for emotional or physical distance. It is imperative to draw a distinction between anger as a passion and the irascible appetite as a faculty. According to Vico, anger is a passion

derived from the irascible appetite, which manifests as an intense emotional reaction when evil is nearly imminent. However, the irascible appetite itself is not a specific passion but rather the disposition to confront obstacles. This distinction is fundamental in philosophy to avoid conflating the soul's faculties with their emotional manifestations.

Vico's positions suggest that concupiscible and irascible appetites pertain exclusively to sensible goods, not intelligible ones. As previously indicated, "sense goods" are defined as items that are perceived through direct sensory experience. Conversely, intelligible goods are abstract, apprehended by reason, and include concepts such as health, honesty, truth, and fidelity. For instance, health is not a tangible entity that can be directly touched or perceived; rather, it is an abstract concept that guides human actions through rational deliberation. To illustrate this phenomenon, consider physical exercise. An individual may engage in physical exercise motivated by the desire for health, which is defined as an intelligible good that is not immediately perceptible. In contrast, the desire to eat food is associated with the concupiscible appetite, as the object is present and elicits an immediate sensible inclination. This distinction appears to be pivotal in comprehending the manner in which Vico intertwines passions with the heart and rational decisions with the mind.

As evidenced by recent citations, Vico associates sensorial appetites with the heart, thereby elucidating why this organ, the core of circulation, functions as the seat of these inclinations. This physiological association is not merely a matter of anecdotal evidence but rather reflects Vico's conceptualization of an integrated human being, in which the body and the soul interact closely. According to Vico, passions derived from

sensorial appetites have the capacity to distort perception of truth by introducing subjective valuation to objects. Thus, Vico holds that shedding passions is necessary to attain truth; truth lies in rational judgment, the attribution of a predicate to a subject, and only a passion-free judgment approaches objective reality.

In the chapter dedicated to the mind,<sup>15</sup> Vico explores the origin of the term *mens*, derived from Latin and linked to thought (*pensiero*). In accordance with Latin tradition, the gods are believed to imbue humans with thought, thereby suggesting the existence of an intrinsic connection between the human mind and the divine. Vico posits that ideas, conceived as eternal and immutable thoughts, are not the product of the human mind but are of divine origin, thus aligning with the Platonic perspective. Ideas possess divine characteristics: they are eternal, immutable, indestructible, and ungenerated, as Plato posits in his theory of Ideas. Conversely, man is a perishable, mutable, finite being, which prompts the question of how he accesses universal truths. Vico responds that Ideas are not created by the human mind but infused by God, the source of all truth.<sup>16</sup> For instance, the concept of “four” or “beauty” does not originate from empirical experience; rather, it is discerned by the mind and received from a divine source. Drawing on the distinction between the intelligible and sensory worlds, Vico argues that the human mind, by grasping ideas, connects directly with the divine, transcending sensory experience’s limitations.

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<sup>15</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.

Vico examines three historical interpretations of the nature of the mind, all of which are unsatisfactory: the Aristotelian agent intellect, the Stoic ethereal sense, and the Socratic genius. These theses attempt to explain how the human mind accesses knowledge. However, Vico critiques them from a Platonic perspective, prioritizing the divine origin of ideas. He rejects the Aristotelian explanation in particular, which holds significant weight in the philosophical tradition filtered through monotheistic religious thought. In *De anima*, Aristotle distinguishes between the passive and active intellects, which are essential for explaining the cognitive process. The passive intellect is the mind's receptive faculty, tasked with receiving intelligibles—the objects of understanding or ideas. In Aristotelian terms, the passive intellect is like a blank slate (*tabula rasa*), receiving intelligible contents. The agent intellect is the active faculty that transforms intelligibles in potency—present in *phantasmata* (representations) derived from sensations—into intelligibles in act, or ideas comprehended by the mind. Aristotle compares this to light which activates color perception.

The Aristotelian cognitive process unfolds in stages. First, sensation occurs through the external senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste), capturing information from the sensory world and generating sensations. Second, the imagination (*phantasia*) transforms these sensations into representations or *φάντασμα*, which are not limited to visual images, but include all sensory representations (tactile, olfactory, gustatory, etc.). Through abstraction, the agent intellect extracts intelligibles in potency from *phantasmata* and converts them into intelligibles in act. Finally, man gains knowledge as these intelligibles are deposited in the passive intellect, enabling comprehension and judgment. According to Aristotle, the shift from potency to act

requires an active principle that is already in act—like fire, which is hot in act and heats water in potency. The agent intellect, always in act, fulfills this role by activating intelligibles without altering its nature.

Since antiquity, and especially during the Middle Ages, the doctrine of the agent intellect has been widely debated, resulting in at least two main interpretations. The more widespread of these is the Averroist interpretation, which holds that the agent intellect is a unique, universal entity shared by all humans. This interpretation raises theological issues, as it denies individual soul immortality, which is problematic for Christian, Jewish, and Islamic religious philosophies. The other interpretation is the Dominican interpretation, represented by St. Albert the Great and, most notably, St. Thomas Aquinas. This interpretation holds that the agent intellect is individual and inherent to each human soul. This thesis draws on empirical observation of intellectual capacity differences: some comprehend quickly, others struggle despite effort. Aquinas argues that, if the agent intellect were universal, there would be no variations in intellection (*hic homo intelligit*, he repeatedly states), contradicting experience. These interpretations shape medieval philosophical anthropology and serve as a reference for Vico when evaluating the Aristotelian doctrine.

Influenced by Platonism, Vico rejects the Aristotelian explanation of the agent intellect as insufficient to account for the origin of ideas. To Vico, ideas have divine characteristics, whereas the sensible world, which is captured by the senses, is perishable, mutable, and destructible. Therefore, he argues that it is impossible for imperishable ideas to arise from the sensible world through Aristotle's process of abstraction. Rather than accepting that the agent intellect extracts ideas from

sensible *phantasmata*, Vico proposes that ideas have a divine origin. As the source of all truth, God infuses ideas into the human mind, enabling a connection with the eternal and immutable. This Platonic perspective emphasizes the human mind's dependence on God and contrasts with the autonomous agent intellect functioning as an active principle within the soul, as proposed by Aristotle.

Vico also rejects Stoic and Socratic positions. The Stoic "ethereal sense" conceives the mind as a faculty linked to a subtle material principle or *πνεῦμα* spread throughout the universe. For Stoicism, *pneuma* is the basis of perception and thought, linking humans to the order of the cosmos. However, for Vico, this explanation is unacceptable because it reduces the mind to a material phenomenon (as in Stoic physics and ultimately, their metaphysics). It fails to account for the immaterial and eternal nature of Ideas. The Socratic "genius" refers to Socrates' *δαίμων*, an inner voice guiding the individual, often interpreted as moral conscience or divine inspiration. Vico does not dwell on these positions, as the Aristotelian thesis carries greater weight in the philosophical tradition, sifted through monotheistic religious thought.

Vico's critique of these theses reinforces his belief in the Platonic view, which prioritizes the divine origin of Ideas over naturalistic or empiricist positions. By rejecting the Aristotelian doctrine, Vico highlights the limitations of the senses in generating universal, eternal truths. He proposes that the human mind accesses ideas through divine intervention. This distinguishes him from Cartesian rationalism, which places the source of knowledge in autonomous reason, and empiricism, which derives it from sensory experience. In *De antiquissima*, Vico also seems to establish a distinction between discovering

and producing ideas. Ideas, such as those of a triangle or truth, are not created by the human mind, but rather discovered. This complicates the notion of an opening to the divine because ideas transcend human finitude and reflect God's perfection.

Vico pays special attention to Nicolas Malebranche's philosophy,<sup>17</sup> who, per Vico, accepts Descartes' first truth, the *cogito*: "From the fact that God creates ideas in me, I should rather infer: Something thinks in me; therefore, it exists; in thought, I recognize no idea of my body; thus, what thinks in me is the purest mind, namely, God (*cum ex eo quod Deus in me ideas creat, conficere potius debeat: Quid in me cogitat; ergo est: in cogitatione autem nullam corporis ideam agnosco: id igitur quod in me cogitat, est purissima mens, nempe Deus*)."<sup>18</sup> Thus, God is the true agent of human thought. This stance, known as ontologism, implies immediate knowledge of God without mediation because the human mind would directly participate in the divine Mind while thinking. Though influenced by Malebranche and his *Recherche de la vérité*, Vico does not fully adopt ontologism. He argues that if ideas are created by God, the *cogito* would prove God's existence rather than the self's, which weakens human autonomy. Instead, Vico proposes a more traditional interpretation, recognizing God as the first cause of bodily motions (*res extensa*) and the soul (*res cogitans*) without denying human freedom.

Vico's position is expressed as follows: "What we accept is that God is the first author of all motions, whether of bodies or souls (*Quod autem in nobis recipimus illud est, quod Deus omnium motuum, sive corpus sive animorum, primus*

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Costa, Gustavo, *Malebranche y Vico*, cit., pp. 79-80.

<sup>18</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.

*auctor*).<sup>19</sup> Conceiving of God as the First Cause raises theological difficulties, particularly with regard to the problems of evil and error. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and veracious, then how can imperfections, falsehoods, and defects exist? Vico addresses this problem, known as theodicy, by arguing that human imperfections stem from the finite and complex nature of the mind, which contrasts with the simple and actual nature of divine understanding. In God, knowledge is simple, complete, and eternal, while the human mind must gather (*andar raccogliendo*) information fragmentarily, making it prone to error. However, Vico asserts that even in error, humans do not lose sight of God because human actions, though mistaken, reflect a pursuit of the good, albeit through imperfect judgment.

Vico explores the relationship between divine will and human free will, which is a central theme in Christian philosophy. God is omniscient and omnipotent and possesses a simple, immutable will that is free of limitations. In contrast, the human mind is complex, mutable, and imperfect. It produces errors, falsehoods, a lack of objectivity, and wrong decisions. Despite this disparity, Vico follows St. Augustine in holding that God draws man toward Him, but man must respond freely and willingly. God not only leads man to Him, but He does so with pleasure and satisfaction. This implies human freedom is exercised in the voluntary response to the divine call, reconciling divine will's constancy with human free will's liberty: the latter can occasionally stray from pursuing the divine, as is evident. However, Vico emphasizes that man does not lose sight of God even in sin; though erroneous, human actions reflect a pursuit of the good under the appearance of the false or finite. "We

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<sup>19</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.

embrace the false under the guise of the true, evils under the image of goods; we see finite things, feel ourselves finite; but that itself leads us to think the infinite (*nam falsum sub veri specie, mala sub bonorum simulacris amplectimur: finita videmus, nos finitos sentimus; sed id ipsum est, quod infinitum cogitamus*).”<sup>20</sup> Moral evil, for example, can be seen as a judgment error where man mistakes a finite good for the infinite good—ultimately, happiness. This error is not a denial of the innate tendency toward the good, but rather a lack of prudence or knowledge that can be corrected through proper metaphysics. Thus, Vico conceives happiness as a natural human vocation—an innate tendency that drives man toward the Supreme Good. This pursuit is guided by a divine call toward lasting, genuine happiness. Evil results from ignorance or inexperience, which can be overcome through reflection. Metaphysics provides a framework for understanding truth and goodness. It guides the correction of errors and the orientation of man toward his ultimate end. Hence, he says: “Metaphysics deals with indubitable truth because it concerns a subject where, if we doubt, err, or are deceived, we can be certain (*Ideo metaphysica de indubio vero tractat; quia de argumento est, de quo si vel dubites, si vel erres, si vel fallaris, certus fias*).”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.

<sup>21</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VI.



## 10.

INGENUITY, PRUDENCE,  
AND THE *VERUM-FACTUM* PRINCIPLE

Building on previous insights, Vico turns to the study of *facultas* (faculty) and its connection to metaphysics and everyday life, particularly with regard to prudence. The Neapolitan philosopher and rhetorician asserts that faculty derives from the Latin *facultas*, which stems from *facilitas*, meaning ease.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, a faculty is understood as an ability that is ready and disposed to perform something. This conception, which resonates with the scholastic tradition and ultimately with Aristotle, defines a faculty as a disposition. In *De anima*, Aristotle associates this idea with the concept of δύναμις, which he understands as an inherent capacity in the subject applicable to various domains for performing an activity. This capacity does not reach full actualization, but rather acts as a disposition that prepares for it. Thus, it is a pre-existing ability in the subject, broadly applicable to carrying out an activity. Vico emphasizes that a faculty is defined by its act, aligning with the scholastic tradition. He does not stray from the School in asserting that a faculty is related to the act. Indeed, potency is only knowable in relation to the act; otherwise, its presence remains unknown.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 1.

More positively, a disposition is only noticed if there is a pre-conception of the act toward which it is directed.

Take the sensation of colors, for example. In order to sense colors, one must have a predisposition called the faculty of vision. This faculty is not the eye itself, though in humans and other animals, it is realized through this organ. How can we know that man has the visual faculty? Through the act of seeing; otherwise, it remains unknown. During Vico's time, some authors proposed new faculties, such as the *sensus moralis*, which is the ability to sense morality or obligation. It was common at that time to propose new faculties that, in retrospect, seemed previously unnoticed. Conversely, Vico adheres to tradition by recovering faculties that can be traced back to antiquity. These faculties encompass both external and internal senses. These sensitive faculties are associated with sensory organs—the eyes, nose, tongue, skin, and ears—enabling contact with the sensory world. The *sensus* is thus linked to the *sensibilis*, or sensible, and their existence is perceived in the encounter between sense and sensible. The union of sense and sensible produces sensation. In the visual faculty, for instance, the sensible is color, not the image, since an image is a broader concept that includes other senses (a blind person can sense an object's shape through touch). Only sight senses colors, and vision occurs when the visual faculty encounters color. Therefore, it is confirmed that a faculty is defined in relation to its act.

Beyond external senses, there are internal senses and faculties surpassing the merely corporeal, even though the body is utilized. Sensing is a faculty of both the soul and the mind. Vico explains that the soul is a potency, or a faculty that disposes one toward certain acts. Vision, for example, is an act; the sense of sight is a faculty of the soul, embodied in the ocular organ.

Scholasticism properly calls sensibility, imagination (*phantasia*), memory, and intellect faculties of the soul. However, scholastics and moderns disagree significantly regarding *sensibilia*. Scholastics hold that properties such as color or taste exist in things. Modern philosophers, including empiricists and rationalists, argue that these qualities are not strictly in the object, but rather, they are stimuli for the sensitive faculties. Vico aligns with this modern perspective, holding that color arises from the visual faculty. This means the subject produces the sensible. Thus, by asserting that senses produce sensations, Vico opposes scholasticism, which claims sensations exist in things. Vico argues that the senses are faculties that produce qualities such as color, taste, and sound. He uses the Latin term *olfacere* (to produce smell) to demonstrate that the subject generates the sensible. In the Italic tradition, Latin sages knew that sensibilities were produced by the subject. Therefore, smell does not exist without olfaction, nor does a female scorpion's trail exist without the male's ability to detect it.

For Vico, imagination (*phantasia*) is a key faculty that is defined as the capacity to form images or representations of the sensible. Unlike sensation, which is direct, imagination involves mediation because images are not always faithful to reality and incorporate additional elements from various sources (like memory), which Vico does not mention. An image is any representation of something sensible that is distinct from the external object. For instance, reading a person's name often prompts the formation of an image of them, though not of all their characteristics, but rather a mediated image. This is a representation, not direct sensation. In the *Scienza Nuova*, Vico grants imagination a central role, considering it an elemental function of civilization and a characteristic of the "poetic age."

In *De antiquissima*, he outlines this idea, but does not expand on its importance.

Intellect is another faculty whose act is comprehension or intellection. However, it is apparent that when man understands, it is because he does so. Thus, the intelligible is such because it is grasped by the intellect, by *mens* (mind). Through the intellect, man produces “human truths,” as in arithmetic, geometry, or mechanics, creations of human ingenuity. These establish the principle that truth exists because we create it. However, God is the only one who possesses true faculties because in Him, faculties are pure acts. Man engenders modes of things, images, and human truths by applying his spirit, but this ability is limited. God engenders divine truth by understanding, creating truth. Thus, while it is improper to say that statues and paintings are “thoughts of their authors,” it is proper to say that all things are thoughts of God.<sup>2</sup> Unlike God, who creates the cosmos and nature, the human intellect is limited to producing from what is given, not *ex nihilo*.

According to the Latins, *sensus* is not restricted to the external senses (vision, touch), but also includes the internal senses (imagination, memory, pain, pleasure, discomfort). In the Italic tradition, it also includes judgments, deliberations, and desires.<sup>3</sup> Vico emphasizes that judging or desiring is considered an ethereal sense, which is proper to reason. For example, the colloquial expression “I feel this shouldn’t be so” reflects a synonymy between feeling and judging. Expressions like *ita senseo* (“thus I judge”) literally mean “thus I feel.” *Sententia* (judgment) derives from *sensus*, denoting judgment as a

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 2.

sense. *Ex animo tui sententia* (“according to your understanding”) literally means “from your soul’s sentence.” Vico asks whether this is because ancient Italic philosophers believed, like Aristotelians, that the soul perceives nothing except through the senses; like Epicureans, that the soul is only sense; or like Platonists and Stoics, that reason is an ethereal *sensus*. Vico leans toward Platonism, considering reason an ethereal *sensus* that requires the presence of the intelligible. The intellect does not exist without the intelligible, which distinguishes it from mere representations. As a Christian philosopher, Vico asserts that, unlike pagan philosophies such as Epicureanism, the human mind is incorporeal. Following Malebranche, Vico holds that bodily organs are moved by God and that reason, as an ethereal *sensus*, surpasses the corporeal dimension. “Our religion teaches that the mind is entirely incorporeal, and our metaphysicians affirm that when bodily sensory organs are moved by bodies, on that occasion, they are moved by God (*nostra religio eam prorsus incorpoream esse docet: et nostri metaphysici confirmant, dum a corporibus corporea sensus organa moventur, per eam occasionem moveri a Deo*).”<sup>4</sup>

Within the discourse on faculties, it becomes clear that Vico considers *ingenium* (ingenuity) a faculty, characterized by uniting separate and distinct elements into one (the capacity for invention and composition, as Sabetta explains<sup>5</sup>): “Ingenuity is the faculty of uniting separate and distinct things into one (*Ingenium facultas est in unum dissita, diversa coniungendi*).”<sup>6</sup> The Latins describe it as either sharp (*agudum*, penetrating

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VII, 2.

<sup>5</sup> Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, p. 139.

<sup>6</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VII, 4.

quickly) or dull (*obtusum*, acting slowly). Vico explains this with geometric analogies: Sharp ingenuity unites disparate things, such as lines forming an acute angle, while dull ingenuity does so slowly, like an obtuse angle. Thus, ingenuity is the anthropological faculty of human *cogitare* (thinking), epistemologically expressed in the *verum-factum* principle.<sup>7</sup> In Latin, *ingenium* relates to *natura* because it is innate (*ingenitus*). Human ingenuity is human nature because it perceives what is appropriate, convenient, beautiful, or ugly—capacities denied to animals. Just as nature creates physical objects, human ingenuity engenders mechanical ones, making man a reflection of God — an *imago Dei* — for artificial things.

In art, ingenuity adjusts elements proportionally, as in a statue where the arm harmonizes with the head. In geometry and arithmetic, the most studied of the sciences, ingenuity produces truths aligned with ideas. Those who excel in these sciences are called “*ingegneri*” (engineers)—those who apply ingenuity to unite diverse elements and create something new. In Italian, *giusto* (just) means adjusted, reflecting proportion. The task of human science is to make things correspond with beautiful proportion, a task for men of ingenuity. While Descartes also speaks of ingenuity, Vico further elaborates on it in this context. In Latin American Spanish, “*aguzado*” (or, colloquially, “*abusado*”) is used to describe sharp ingenuity. Vico links this term to the sharp mind that unites diverse elements.

Vico asks which faculty is proper to man for knowing, given his innate *ingenium*. Man perceives, judges, and reasons, yet he often perceives falsely, judges blindly, and reasons

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<sup>7</sup> Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, p. 140.

crookedly.<sup>8</sup> How can these natural faculties allow for error? Unlike vision, which is common to many animals and does not lead to error, man errs in judgment and reasoning. Vico's thesis is that the Greek philosophical schools hold that these faculties are granted for knowing and that each is guided by a peculiar art. The issue lies not in the faculties themselves, but in how they are employed. The arts that guide their proper use are topics for perceiving, criticism for judging, and method for reasoning. In Aristotle, topics are a logical taxonomy that classifies entities (substance, quality, quantity, relation, etc.). This enables distinction; for example, a blue color as a quality. Without topics, humans confuse things, such as mistaking a person for a bear due to an erroneous perception. A scholastic would say the error lies in judgment, not topics; however, Vico is not strictly scholastic. Criticism involves forming a criterion for judging, such as evaluating whether a law is just. Man errs if the criterion is ill-informed; for example, if one ignores the entirety of a law. Vico reflects Baroque influences in both exposition and doctrine.<sup>9</sup> Finally, method is the art of reasoning and structuring logical deductions. The ancients did not transmit methodological precepts in their dialectics as children learn them through geometry. Thus, according to Vico, there are no ancient treatises on methodology.

Vico critiques rationalism, particularly the geometric method of Descartes and Spinoza, though he does not name them directly. He notes that the ancients considered prudence

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VII, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Understanding the term "Baroque philosophy" as that which focuses more on persuasion, engaging the reader, than on providing deductive arguments, cf. Sabetta, Antonio, *I lumi del cristianesimo*, cit., p. 14.

to be distinct from geometry and ungoverned by a discipline. There is no method for prudence, which is more hermeneutic, attentive to circumstance and historical moment (*καιρός*). According to Vico, applying the geometric method to practical life is akin to striving to be “reasonably mad,” as exemplified in Terence’s *The Eunuch*. Human life is full of caprice, temerity, opportunity, and chance, which limits the geometric method. The prudent do not follow a straight line, but rather adapt by circling a tree instead of passing through it. Vico anticipated Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics, which emerged shortly after Vico’s death in 1744. Prudence responds to historical context like a holistic interpretation of a text, a hermeneutic principle that was remotely present in the work of Vico. Only artisans teach sequential order (first this, then that), but this trains workers, not prudent men. There is no guide for prudence, which is essential in daily life. Rather than deducing conclusions from premises, prudence attends to the opportune moment, rooted in history.

Political discourse cannot follow the geometric method, either. Structuring political discourse geometrically offers nothing sharp nor teaches anything that is not already evident. It treats listeners like children by offering only digested content instead of persuading them as an orator would. Vico questions why Demosthenes is considered the model of eloquence if the geometric method is recommended. Demosthenes, the leader of the anti-Macedonian league during Aristotle’s time, is not the ideal. Vico proposes Cicero because his oratory is more persuasive. Cicero first presents things, then makes them seem natural, leading the audience to agree. His seemingly disordered style uses hyperbaton, as noted by Dionysius Longinus, the most discerning rhetorician. As a university rhetoric professor,

Vico emphasizes that eloquence persuades, not deduces geometrically. He presents an argument, veers to a seemingly unrelated topic, and then finds similarities. In Vico's Baroque language, these are his "eloquent rays," which strike fiercely because they are unforeseen, like life itself. Rhetorical flashes are eloquence's strength, like a catapult, he says. He argues that antiquity's lack of method as a distinct mental operation does not imply imperfect reasoning. For Vico, method is not a fourth mental operation, but rather a discipline of the third: reasoning and ordering rational processes.<sup>10</sup> The classical mental operations are apprehension, judgment, and reasoning, which are studied in logic and epistemology. Apprehension involves grasping concepts, judgment involves forming propositions, and reasoning involves chaining judgments to reach conclusions. Far from being an autonomous operation, as modern philosophers seem to believe, method is a logical tool that organizes reasoning.

Vico emphasizes that scientific progress does not depend solely on the geometric method, but rather on invention, which is mediated by ingenuity and imagination. Science does not repeat past syllogisms, but rather generates new knowledge through creativity. He cites: "Neither can invention be certain without judgment, nor judgment without invention (*neque enim inventio sine iudicio, neque iudicium sine inventione certum esse potest*)."<sup>11</sup> Vico critiques Descartes' criterion of clear and distinct ideas, arguing that scientific knowledge is often nebulous and relies on imagination. Some physical theories and modern genetic laws, for example, are not clearly understood

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VII, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VII, 5.

but conceived through imagination, which supplements what the intellect cannot directly apprehend. Mathematics is the most certain because it is a human creation, while the fundamental components of matter, such as protons and neutrons, exist independently and are known only partially through imagination.

Ingenuity, defined as the ability to connect separate and distinct things, is essential for scientific discovery. Vico illustrates this with childish examples: children call any man “father” and any woman “mother,” identifying similarities among distinct entities. They play at building houses, mimicking cars with mice, or riding reeds, seeking similarities among differences. This mental openness, typical of childhood, enables the connection of distant ideas, in contrast to rigid syllogistic logic. Ingenuity, linked by the Latins to *argutum* (sharp), is manifested by detecting arguments and middle terms that unite premises in a syllogism. A poorly distributed middle term generates fallacies, but sharp ingenuity identifies these relations, fostering invention and the advancement of knowledge.

Vico argues that Aristotelian logic, which is based on syllogisms and topics, is inadequate for generating new knowledge because it only explains what the premises contain. For example, the syllogism “all men are mortal, Socrates is a man, therefore Socrates is mortal” produces no new knowledge but unravels the implicit. He critiques deductivists like Lull and Kircher and their followers for focusing on syllogisms that stifle creativity. He also rejects the clear and distinct criterion of the Cartesians. Vico believes that the geometric method limits ingenuity and denies men the use of language.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *Primera respuesta*, p. 129.

He values human language and individual experience over abstractions, emphasizing topics—the art of finding arguments for the particular—over criticism or rational/geometric analysis.<sup>13</sup> The scientific method must address fundamental questions: Does the study object exist? What is it? What is its quantity (extension, weight, or number)? What are its qualities (color, taste, texture)? Combined with experimentation, these questions enable induction based on similarity, driving discovery. Vico compares scientists to eloquent orators who find reasons in distant places to persuade. He cites: “The best observers can come from the same sources as eloquent orators (*ut ex iisdem fontibus, ex quibus copiosi oratores et observatores etiam maximi provenire possint*).”<sup>14</sup> Like an orator, an ingenious scientist detects unexpected relations, surpassing Descartes’s criterion of clear and distinct ideas, which ignores essential elements of reality. Science advances through imagination, enabling hypotheses that are not immediately evident, such as subatomic particle interactions or the primordial explosion of the universe.

For Vico, Galileo is a prime exponent of Italic philosophy, building on the work of Pythagoras and Plato by using experimentation and mathematics to explain natural phenomena. Considered a philosopher, Galileo employed ingenuity in particular experiments, such as those involving falling bodies, thereby advancing physics without relying on the geometric method. “The greatest geometers studied physical principles

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Marín, José Antonio, *Nada existe donde faltan las palabras: la quidditas retórica de Vico y la metafísica de la evidencia*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 7-8, (1997), p. 78.

<sup>14</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 5.

from mathematical principles, like Pythagoras and Plato among the ancients, and Galileo among the moderns (*Maximi geometrae principia physicae ex principiis matheseos spectarunt, ut ex antiquis Pythagoras, Plato, ex recentioribus Galilaeus*).<sup>15</sup> Galileo explained specific natural phenomena through experimentation, demonstrating that scientific truth is produced by creating, according to the *verum factum* principle. Vico immediately asserts: “Physical truths will be true for me when they are made, just as geometric truths are true for men because they make them (*tunc mihi physica vera erunt, cum feceris; ut geometrica ideo hominibus sunt vera, quia faciunt*).”<sup>16</sup> Repeated experiments, such as those involving falling bodies, generate physical knowledge by establishing laws based on similarity, surpassing rigid deductive methods. Vico proposes that education should cultivate ingenuity and imagination by fostering connections between creative ideas. This pedagogical approach aims to educate students capable of innovation, not just the repetition of syllogisms. Like contemporary technoscience, science intertwines knowledge and technique, advancing through imagination and experimentation, as seen in artificial intelligence and engineering. Human ingenuity’s supremacy lies in discovering new relationships, making induction a driver of scientific progress.

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<sup>15</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 5.

<sup>16</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italarum sapientia*, VII, 5.

NUMEN, FATUM, CASUS, AND FORTUNA  
 IN VICO'S METAPHYSICS

In Book VIII, Vico analyzes four Latin terms—*numen*, *fatum*, *casus*, and *fortuna*—that encapsulate his conception of truth and the made. These terms reflect the distinction between divine and human perspectives. *Numen* signifies divine force or power and is associated with the mind of God, which orders reality with perfection. *Fatum* denotes fate, the absolute determination of events from the divine perspective. In contrast, *casus* and *fortuna* describe the human perception of these events, which appear random or fortuitous due to our limitations: “These four Latin words, *numen*, *fatum*, *casus*, *fortuna*, align with what we have said about the true and the made, that truth is the gathering of a thing’s elements, all in God and the external ones in man, that the word mind is proper to God and improper to man, and that faculty is the capacity for things we do skillfully and easily (*Cum his, quae de vero et facto disseruimus, et quod verum sit collectio elementorum ipsius rei, omnium in Deo, extimorum in homine; et verbum mentis proprium in Deo, improprium in homine fiat; et quod facultas sit eorum, quae facimus, et quae solerter et faciliter facimus, haec quatuor Latinorum*

*verba, «numen» et «fatum», «casus» et «fortuna», consentiunt).*"<sup>1</sup>

From a divine perspective, everything is determined by *numen* and *fatum*, reflecting a perfect order. For humans, events are *casus* and *fortuna*, perceived as chance or subject to luck, as we cannot grasp the totality of their causes. This distinction highlights the limitation of the human mind, which knows only in fragments, compared to the divine Mind, which intuits everything. Human truth, produced through invention and ingenuity, is partial, yet it reflects the *verum-factum* principle by generating knowledge through creative action. In sum, Vico links these notions to his conception of divine truth as absolute and determined versus human truth as limited by perception of the random and fortuitous. The section concludes with Vico's responses to objections about the equivalence of *verum* and *factum*. He uses examples from Latin comedies to support his thesis.

Vico distinguishes between *fatum* and *factum* to clarify the divine and human perspectives on events. *Fatum*, or fate, represents the eternal order of things in God's mind, where everything is predetermined and unchanging. According to Vico's Christian conception, God intuitively knows the totality of reality without temporal succession, so events are part of a preestablished plan. In contrast, *factum* refers to what is made, or produced truth, which, in the case of man, involves creation and action, as in mathematics or experimentation. This distinction is crucial for the *verum-factum* principle, which holds that truth is what is made. However, from the divine perspective, *fatum* ensures that the made aligns with the determined. Since

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<sup>1</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 1.

humans lack the ability to intuitively grasp the totality of reality, they view events as random and fortunate, either positively or negatively. However, for God, these events are part of the eternal order. Vico ties this perception to human ingenuity, which enables creative solutions to chance. Man's ingenuity against chance and fortune enables action by creating practical truths that imitate God's unity. As the faculty of detecting similarities, ingenuity equips man to adapt to fortuitous circumstances. For example, man invents air conditioners in response to heat and heaters in response to cold, thus emulating, albeit limitedly, divine creativity.

Vico then examines *numen*, which the Latins associated with the will of the gods, understood as a divine power that acts swiftly and easily, "in the blink of an eye." He writes lucidly: "The Latins called *numen* the will of the gods, as if God signified His will by the very act (*Deorum voluntatem dixere «numen», quasi Deus Opt. Max. suam voluntatem facto ipso significet, et tanta celeritate et facilitate significet*)."<sup>2</sup> For the Latins, *numen* is the creative force realizing God's will, with no gap between will and action, as described in Genesis: "He spoke, and it was done" (*Dixit, et facta sunt*). In humans, however, there is a gap between the desired and the accomplished, reflecting their finitude. Vico connects this to divine goodness, which creates without obstacles and produces good things by nature. He writes: "Divine goodness makes the things it wills by willing, with such ease that they seem to arise by themselves (*Divina enim bonitas, volendo res, quas vult, facit, et tanta facilitate facit, ut eae ex seipsis existere videantur*)."<sup>3</sup> The term

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<sup>2</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 2.

*numen* also applies to artists, such as poets and painters, whose ease in creation is considered divine. Vico explains that this “naturalness” in artistic creation, which Cicero described as spontaneous and diffuse, reflects a rare gift that emulates divine creativity. Artists with ingenuity produce works with apparent ease, earning the title “divine” for creating without obstacles. Unlike God, however, they require human effort.

In the following section, Vico analyzes *dictum*, *fatum*, and *factum*, establishing equivalences with *certum* and *determinatum*. *Dictum*, meaning what is said, is synonymous with *certum*, and *certum* equates to *determinatum* (determined): “*Dictum*, what is said, is the same as *certum*, and *certum* is the same as our *determinatum* («*Dictum*» *Latinis idem ac* «*certum*»; *certum idem ac nobis* «*determinatum*»)."4“ *Fatum*, meaning fate, is that which is determined by the eternal order, while *factum* and *verum* are reciprocal and linked to the *verbum* (word). In Christianity, the *verbum* is God’s word; his speech creates reality, as in the Gospel of John. Latins used the phrase “*dictum factum*” to denote a completed act, which was preserved in Spanish as “*dicbo y becho*” (said and done). Conversely, *casus* is the outcome of things and words, perceived by humans as chance. For God, however, it is part of *fatum*. Vico conceives *fatum* as the eternal order of things and *casus* as the occurrence of the eternal order of causes, which appears fortuitous to humans. Facts are God’s words and chance is the occurrence of things and the words God pronounces.<sup>5</sup>

In section four, Vico discusses *fortuna*, which can be either prosperous or adverse and is derived from the word *fortus*

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<sup>4</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 3.

(good). Originally, *fortuna* connoted something positive, but in Latin usage, it became neutral, encompassing both good and bad luck. For Vico, however, *fortuna* is a human category, not a divine one, as God experiences no surprises: “*Fortuna* is a God who, from determined causes, acts beyond our expectation (*Fortuna autem Deus est, qui ex certis caussis praeter nostram spem operatur*).”<sup>6</sup> From the divine perspective, everything is good, proceeding from God’s will, but humans, prioritizing their particular good, perceive some events as evils. Vico responds to Augustine’s question “*Unde malum?*” (Whence evil?), arguing that evil is a human perception stemming from discomfort and not a reality in the divine plan. He asserts that by attending to ourselves rather than the universe, we deem things that discomfort us as bad, even though they are good because they benefit the world’s community.

Though Vico does not use this simile, it may clarify his position: imagine a painting where the luminous center stands out due to shadows at the edges. These shadows are not black, just less illuminated. Particular evils, such as suffering, are “shadows” that are necessary for the universal good to shine. Particular evil is the public good; the bad that affects us contributes to the universe’s overall good. In the cosmos, God acts like a monarch who prioritizes the common good, while individuals seek their own good and perceive inconveniences as evils that contribute to universal well-being in the divine economy. *Fortuna* is not arbitrary chaos, but rather a manifestation of divine causal order. Thus, it is always good. This rational *logos* permeates the universe, making even evil part of an intentional order.

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<sup>6</sup> Vico, Giambattista, *De antiquissima italorum sapientia*, VIII, 4.



## CONCLUSION

In his final conclusions, dedicated to Paolo Mattia Doria, Vico summarizes the central themes of *De antiquissima*. He proposes a metaphysics suited to human frailty: “*metaphysicam humana imbecillitate dignam*”, which neither affirms all truths (like dogmatists) nor denies them all (like skeptics) but recognizes some, aligning with Christian moderation. This metaphysics distinguishes divine truth, which is absolute and eternal, from human truth, which is partial and mediated by hypotheses. Human truths are measured by God’s thought, not human thought. This reflects a distinctly Platonic perspective: Things are not measured by human thought; things are measured by God’s thought.

Vico’s metaphysics supports experimental physics, like Galileo’s, considering true that which can be replicated through experimentation; we consider nature to be true when we can replicate it through experiments. He summarizes the key principles of this *metaphysica* in the following points: (i) Truth and making are the same (*verum-factum*). (ii) God knows physical objects because He creates them, while man knows mathematics because he produces them. (iii) Neither do dogmatists know everything, nor do skeptics ignore everything. (iv) *Genera* are perfect ideas in God and imperfect in man. (v)

Demonstrating through causes is making what is demonstrated. (vi) God creates with infinite potency, while man requires effort. (vii) Essence is potency and being is act. (viii) The metaphysical point is the origin of extension and motion (*conatus*). (ix) As the purest Mind, God produces the extended from the non-extended and motion from rest. (x) The human soul contains the *animus* and the mind, which are linked to the divine. (xi) Ingenuity enables knowing and making. (xii) God creates with His word, which humans perceive as *casus* or *fortuna*.

Vico concludes that divine truth is the criterion for human truth and that, by seeking meaning in chance, ingenuity reflects the human capacity to imitate divine creativity, albeit in a limited way. Thus, Acri is absolutely correct in stating that “With the eye of reason, it receives God’s light; a light emanating from ideas, the eternal true, which the mind discerns by virtue of clear notions: and, contemplating that light or true, it contemplates God Himself.”<sup>1</sup> Vico’s metaphysics integrate Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, and modern philosophy to offer a framework for understanding reality as a rational order in which evil is a human perception within a divinely good plan.

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<sup>1</sup> Acri, Francesco, *La teoría de las Ideas según Giambattista Vico*, «Cuadernos sobre Vico», 38, 2024, p. 32.

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