Introduction

Only a few works in the history of philosophy are as inaccessible, enigmatic, and mysterious as Giambattista Vico’s *Principi di scienza nuova d’intorno alla commune natura delle nazioni* (Principles of the new science concerning the common nature of nations); yet few are as stimulating and fascinating. Vico’s unusually poetic language, vivid imagination, ability to reveal deep connections between different facets of human culture and civilization, and insight into the internal logic of the archaic *forma mentis* all instantly captivate his reader. Vico’s talent in recapturing long-forgotten worlds and exposing them to the light of day was so exceptional it even seems that he possessed the golden bough. That one of the most eloquent and unique works of modern literature owes its own development to the encounter with Vico’s archaic world of giants and heroes is thus hardly coincidental. The universality of Vico’s erudition—his studies of language, law, the state, art, religion, customs, and mentalities (above all, pertaining to the Greek, Roman, and medieval cultures and civilizations)—undeniably requires a broadly educated and cultured reader. But even such an educated, and good, reader could become discouraged when faced with this author’s baroque learning, deliberately archaizing style of thought, and labyrinthine prose.

Vico himself is somewhat responsible for the late onset of his reception—resulting from both the merits and the shortcomings of his
masterpiece. Even though he anticipated, as few others, many of the concerns later pertinent to nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and historical sciences, he was still a man of the seventeenth century—this being one of his most distinctive traits. Vico thus easily managed to lead his contemporaries—with respect to whom he was at least a century ahead—to view him as a passé humanist, and hardly the intellectual pioneer of his day. At first glance, Vico’s polemics—such as those against Cujas and Hotman—seem even more perplexing to us today. We must also continue to account for his innumerable errors. In his citations and references, Vico habitually depended on an evidently more creative than exact memory. If only a small fraction of his philological errors in the Scienza nuova were found in a single publication today, they would be enough to virtually end an academic career, even for a genius like Vico.1 Additionally, Vico is captive to biases—though certainly shared by a majority of his contemporaries—that now strike us as hopelessly irredeemable: I’m thinking, for example, of his chronological beliefs. Separating the true genius of his thought from the vast muddle of erudition characteristic of his times demands strict concentration on essentials. If the Vichian three-stage model of the stages of human development were applied to philosophy, it could certainly be argued that Vico’s sort of philosophy belongs, at heart, to the age of the gods (if philosophy itself, of course, were not a product of the age of men): it has the primitive force and energy of an intuitive-visionary, often even barbaric, kind of thinking that shuns neither logical contortion nor error in substance if buttressing his discoveries. Such force is what most clearly distinguishes Vico from the epigonic sophistication of the majority of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment’s followers.2

Indeed, often Vico truly opens to deeper comprehension only if the reader is willing to try to understand his arguments in the context of the debates and discussions to which they relate. While a philological approach concerned simply with identifying Vico’s sources and influences is unfruitful, careful study—for example, of Roman law, its reception, and discussion of it in the intellectual milieu of Vico’s time—is imperative for grasping the philosophical significance of his theory of law. A necessary corollary is a teleological examination of Vico, or rather an investigation of developments that, posterior to him—for the most part
independently—led to similar conclusions. Generally, only training in the modern social and historical sciences enables us to grasp the truths in Vico’s ideas, to ascertain the real problems—still vexing us—that Vico confronts, for example, when he takes up the question of the relationships subsisting between the institution of patron and client (*clientela*) in ancient Rome and medieval feudalism.

There is little sense, however, in approaching Vico’s works as a repository for extracting sundry intellectual materials—in a fashion all too characteristic of some North American Vico scholarship of the 1970s—often interpreted as mere prolepses of theories in vogue. *Vico’s* *Scienza nuova* intends to be *science*, that is, a system whose parts are meaningful only vis-à-vis the whole. Vico’s historical discoveries are explicitly rooted in his metaphysics, based in the framework of Christian Platonism. In this regard, the traditional Catholic reading of Vico that minimizes, if not completely ignores, the explosive force of his new ideas—reducing him to a mediocre heir of Augustine—is mistaken; equally so, the interpretation seeing in Vico an anticipation of the materialistic, and even irrationalist, tendencies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Vico’s grandeur and originality actually reside in his conceptualization of a rational theory of the irrational foundations of human culture and civilization. His deeper objective was this: to integrate the discovery of human nature’s bestial moments and human culture’s temporal dimension within the objective idealist system he believed uniquely capable of endowing such a discovery with scientific rigor. Whoever fails to grasp this objective fails to grasp both Vico’s place in history and his continuing relevance to contemporary philosophy. It has been shown that the theories of Feuerbach, Marx, Darwin, Weber, Frazer, Freud, Piaget, and Lévi-Strauss were both contained in him *in nuce* and—following their success in the educated elites of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—became responsible for the destruction of objective idealism. Nonetheless, still today Vico challenges contemporary philosophy to grasp not only that these theories are compatible with this objective idealism but also that on this basis they can attain a higher degree of consistency. Such a demonstration cannot be fully developed within the scope of this investigation. In the present work, rather, the first chapter will examine
Vico’s life, sources, and writings. The second and third chapters will discuss the concerns and problems of the *Scienza nuova*. The fourth chapter will trace the broader history of Vico’s reception and fortune. The intent is to prepare the reader for precise study of the *Scienza nuova*, to equip him or her with the necessary categories and context, and to familiarize him or her with the most important moments in the critical debate on Vico. Vico’s intellectual evolution presents, moreover, a truly remarkable example of a genius’s maturation in a hostile environment. Additional attention to this aspect is thus inherently valuable.