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The Occasions of Community:
Giambattista Vico and the Concept of Society

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By

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M.A., Emory University, 2011
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An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
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Abstract

The Occasions of Community:
Giambattista Vico and the Concept of Society
By Timothy D. Harfield

This dissertation provides a systematic account of the development of Giambattista

Vico's conception of society as it is presented primarily in his *Inaugural Orations*,

Universal Law, and *New Science*. Three claims remain constant between these three

works: (1) Humans are essentially social, (2) Humans do not cause society, but rather

occasion it, and (3) the task of the philosopher is to promote humanity's social nature in

the face of the otherwise destructive and anti-social impulses brought about as a result of

original sin. Many additional features of Vico's conception of society anticipate the

modern conception of society that made the social sciences possible. As with modern

conceptions of society, Vico's is as a thing separable both from the state and from the

individuals that make it up. But Vico's theological commitments prevent him from being

interested in society for its own sake. A defining feature of the modern concept of

society is a secularism that finds explanations for social phenomena in society itself.

Vico is unwavering in his theological commitments. For Vico, society is not an active

agent that produces social effects, but is rather a passive aggregate of individuals that is

acted upon by a force that is outside of itself: Divine Providence. For this reason, it is

argued that Vico's conception of society is not yet modern.

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I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge the importance of the house at Nelson Ferry Road, and my roommates Sam Timme, Katie Homan, Julia Haas, and Craig Henchey. Sharing in the lives of these philosophical friends has afforded a kind of intellectual stimulation rarely

otherwise encountered, as well as an important source of moral support on a journey that one must live to understand.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Elisa Wallace, for her patience and perspective. She is a constant reminder of the materiality of existence, and the importance of always attending to the here and now.

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Abbreviations

A   *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*. Translated by Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983.

FNS   *The First New Science*. Translated by Leon Pompa. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

NS   *The New Science of Giambattista Vico.* Translated by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984.

OI-VI   *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707).* Translated by Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.

SM   *On the Study Methods of our Time.* Translated by Elio Gianturco. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990.

AW   *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. Translated by Jason Taylor. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

UL   *A Translation from Latin into English of Giambattista* Vico's Il Diritto Universale/*Universal Law.* Translated by John D. Schaeffer. Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011.

HM   "On the Heroic Mind." In *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Michael Mooney and Donald Phillip Verene, 228-45. Atlantic Heights, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979.

Citations to **FNS** and **NS** are by page number according to the volumes above, along with paragraph enumeration introduced in the "Laterza Edition" of Vico's works, *Opere di G. B. Vico*, 8 vols. in II (Bari: Laterza, 1911-1941).

Unless otherwise noted, all original Latin and Italian citations are taken from the Laterza edition of Vico's works.

Introduction

The question of society's ontological status is as old as the discipline of sociology itself, and is at the center of a debate that has been reignited in recent years by Roy Bhaskar,[1] Rom Harré,[2] Michel Freitag,[3] Niklas Luhmann,[4] Bruno Latour,[5] and others. Despite disagreement about the nature of society and the extent to which it is legitimate to talk about it as a real entity with features and effects that are separable from the individual actors that make it up, a fact about which each of these thinkers agree is that, as a modern concept, society was unthinkable until the middle of the eighteenth century.

In their *Encyclopédie,* Diderot and d'Alembert insist that "social" is a "mot nouvellement introduit dans la langue, pour désigner les qualités qui rendent un homme utile dans la société, propre au commerce des hommes."[6] Strictly speaking, Diderot and

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[1] Roy Bhaskar, *Reclaiming Reality: A Critical Introduction to Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1989).

[2] Rom Harré, "Rom Harré on Social Structure and Social Change: Social Reality and the Myth of Social Structure," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 1 (2002).

[3] Michel Freitag, "The Dissolution of Society within the `Social'," *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 2 (2002).

[4] Niklas Luhmann, "The Concept of Society," *Thesis Eleven* 31, no. 1 (1992).

[5] Bruno Latour, "Gabriel Tarde and the End of the Social," in *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences*, ed. Patrick J. Joyce (London: Routledge, 2002).

[6] "Social," in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert (Elsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1969).

d'Alembert were not correct, since in French alone it is possible to trace the term back to at least the mid-fourteenth century.[7] Erroneous though their observation may have been, as a sentiment, it is nonetheless revealing of the fact that the late seventeenth century saw a small explosion in the use of terms related to 'society' and 'social,' followed in the eighteenth century by a steady increase in the use and discursive importance of a constellation of related terms.

In 1994, Daniel Gordon queried the ARTFL database of French language texts[8] to produce a summary table of the occurrences of the terms "société(s)," "social(e)(es)(-aux)," "sociable(s)," and "sociabilité" during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[9] Although not strictly representative, the table, also used by Keith Michael Baker,[10] is very helpful in visualizing the suddenness and intensity with which the terms came into common use in French. Since 1994, the ARTFL database has increased its collection of seventeenth-century works from 300 to 489, and its collection of eighteenth-century

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[7] The *Oxford English Dictionary* finds the term 'social' used in Middle French to describe both military alliances as early as 1350, and behavior becoming of a citizen (i.e. a member of *société civile*) by a1380. If we seriously consider the connection of the term to the Latin *societa civilis*, however, which was the dominant Roman translation of Aristotle's *koinōnia politikē*, or to the distinction between *societas* and *communitas* in the Roman legal tradition, then the term can be found to have a very long history indeed.

[8] http://artfl-project.uchicago.edu/

[9] Daniel Gordon, *Citizens without Sovereignty: Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670 - 1789* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

[10] Keith Michael Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," in *Main Trends in Cultural History: Ten Essays*, ed. Willem Melching and Wyger Velema (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994), 97.

works from 500 to 799. It, therefore, seems appropriate to include an updated version of

the table here:

Table 1. Frequency (per 10,000 words) of 'social' and related terms per 10,000 words in
the ARTFL French Language Database (as of March 11, 2013)

Decade	Count	Frequency	Decade	Count	Frequency
1600-09	8	0.08	1700-09	144	0.52
1610-19	17	0.09	1710-19	188	0.52
1620-29	5	0.01	1720-29	146	0.84
1630-39	6	0.03	1730-39	323	0.6
1640-49	8	0.03	1740-49	516	1.82
1650-59	86	0.2	1750-59	1442	2.95
1660-69	25	0.16	1760-69	1723	3.48
1670-79	19	0.08	1770-79	2781	5.37
1680-89	169	0.6	1780-89	1595	3.04
1690-99	140	0.51	1790-99	3328	6.46

Another helpful tool for visualizing the sudden rate of increase in the use of the

language of the social, and one that makes it possible to see that this phenomenon is one

that is not uniquely French, but is rather a pattern seen in English, German, and Italian as

well, is Google's Ngram Viewer.[11] Questions about the representativeness of the Google

Books dataset (which includes eight million books, or 6% of all the books ever

published),[12] in addition to errors introduced as a result of optical character recognition

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[11] https://books.google.com/ngrams

[12] Yuri Lin et al., "Syntactic Annotations for the Google Books Ngram Corpus"
(paper presented at the 50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational
Linguistics, Jeju, Republic of Korea, 2012).

(OCR), incorrect metadata, and changing language use over time, should cause one to question the tool's use for anything other than the most general of historical observations. At this most general level, however, it is striking to observe, with Gordon and Baker, that the language of the social and of society entered into Western literature suddenly in the late eighteenth century, and demonstrated incredible fecundity before reaching a relatively stable and secure place in written language by 1850.

Figure 1. Google social Ngram frequencies from 1600 to 1900, in Italian, French, English, and German.
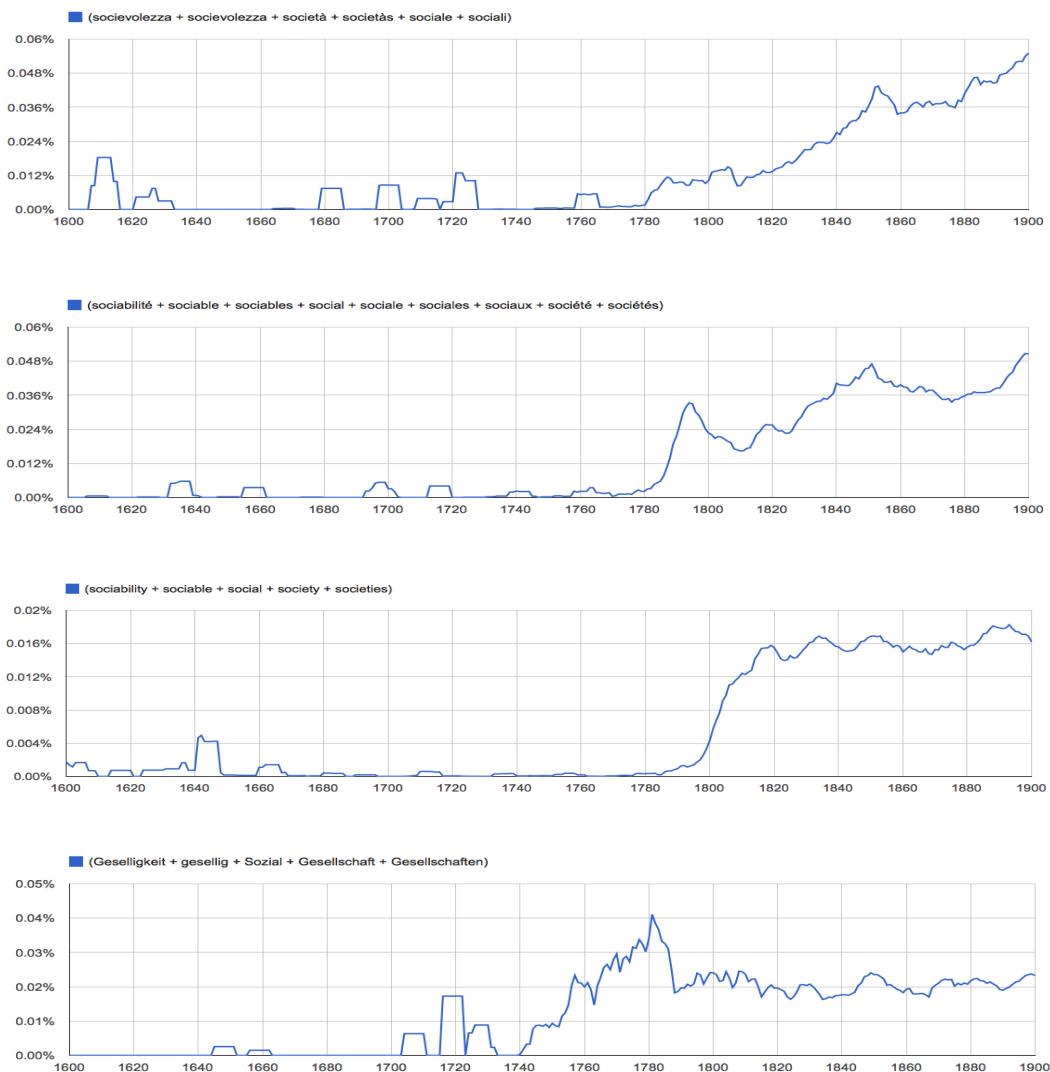
More striking than the mere increase in frequency in the years between 1750 and 1850, is a sudden shift in what 'society' means. Not only do we find writers in French, English, German, and Italian talking more frequently about society, we also find them talking about society in new ways. Reinhart Koselleck has identified a "saddle period" between 1750 and 1850, during which time the experience of time itself was denaturalized and reconstituted. As Koselleck observes,[13] well into the seventeenth century, history was reckoned in terms of large (typically theologically pre-given) ages that culminated in an experience of the present as merely a chronological succession of events in what was the world's final age. Historical consciousness of antiquity and the Middle Ages led to a remarkably stable and static view of the world, in which "every single day brings something new, but the new is not fundamentally different from what has already happened before it or what has been heralded. Each modern (*moderne*) time or such expression opens up an additive, annalistic, or chronologically structured linear time within whose sequence individual histories (*Historien*) can be registered."[14] Beginning in the eighteenth century, dramatic socio-political changes that took place during the Renaissance and the Reformation, the rapid shift from feudalism to capitalism, the French Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution led to a new form of historical consciousness.

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[13] Reinhart Koselleck, "The Eighteenth Century as the Beginning of Modernity," in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, ed. Todd Samuel Presner (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 160-61.

[14] Ibid., 161

In contrast to an experience of time that was stable and cumulative, the "saddle period" saw a shift to a temporal experience marked by acceleration, an open future, the importance of centuries, the non-simultaneity of the diverse, historical perspective, and transition.[15] The beginning of Modernity (*Neuzeit*), for Koselleck, is quite literally the beginning of a new time (*neue Zeit*).

Along with this new historical consciousness came a remarkable conceptual shift, as old words came to take on radically new meanings in the face of a newly opened future:

> The slow decline of Aristotelian semantic content, which referred to natural, repeatable, and therefore static historical time, is the negative indicator of a movement that can be described as the beginning of modernity. Since about 1770, old words such as *democracy*, *freedom*, and *the state* have indicated a new horizon of the future, which delimits the concept in a new way; traditional topoi gained an anticipatory content that they did not have before. A common denominator of the sociopolitical vocabulary can be found in the increased emergence of criteria pertaining to movement. The productivity of this heuristic anticipation is demonstrated by a series of ideas that thematize concepts of movement themselves, such as progress, history, or development. Although these

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[15] Ibid., 161.

words are old, they are almost neologisms, and since about 1770, they

have had a temporal coefficient of change.[16]

In Koselleck's view, the "saddle period" saw a change in the experience of historical time

that found itself also reflected in the reconceptualization and increasing importance of a

constellation of older terms. Important among these modern 'neologisms' is the term

"society," which, by association with an equally novel conception of "economy," came to

be thought for the first time as a unit of analysis that was separate from both the state that

supports it, and the individuals that make it up. By the middle of the nineteenth century,

society had become thinkable as a thing that could develop and progress; reducible

neither to the state nor to its members, society had become vitally important by virtue of

its ability to affect both.

Koselleck's account of the "saddle period" is helpful for identifying the period out

of which the modern conception of society emerged, and locating it with respect to other

related concepts. An easy criticism of his account would be to say that his interest in

changing experiences of historical time is too reductive, that it doesn't fully grasp the

complexities of the period and too easily confuses causes and effects. Why, for example,

should we consider time the most important variable in determining conceptual change?

Why not, instead, see it as merely a member of that very constellation of changing

concepts that Koselleck uses it to explain? Indeed, there does appear to be an idealist

slant to Koselleck's work that would privilege the power of concepts as vehicles for

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[16] "On the Need for Theory in the Discipline of History," 5-6.

change rather than material conditions, and he would perhaps benefit from greater attention to more concrete historical phenomena like the various revolutions taking place during this period (political, scientific, industrial). Yet, this is indeed an easy criticism, and one that he anticipates in his affirmation that "Any historical statement is a reduction if measured against the infinity of a past totality that is no longer accessible as such. In the vicinity of a naive-realistic naively realist theory of knowledge, any compulsion toward reduction is a compulsion to lie. However, I can dispense with lying once I know that the compulsion toward reduction inherently belongs to our discipline."[17] In other words, reduction is a condition of the practice of history, and the price one must pay for intelligibility.

Why Society?

Society did not exist until the eighteenth century. Until that time, the word merely served to describe a group of individuals who have entered into relationships of exchange. But with modernity, society was suddenly ontologized and imbued with a power to affect human activity as a force distinct from nature, law, and the autonomous activity of others. On the one hand, society became like nature and, as such, was subject to the same kind of prediction and control as was aspired to by the natural sciences. Auguste Comte, who famously coined the term *sociologie*, aspired to a social physics

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[17] Ibid., 16

capable of discovering laws as robust as that of gravity. Following Comte, Hebert Spencer and Lester Ward each recommended a view of society in terms of social forces. Others, like Espinas, Worms, Lilenfeld, and Novicow favored a more biological view of society. Adopting a view that would find persistent favor in the structural-functionalist paradigm that dominated American sociology in the mid-twentieth century, these French thinkers preferred a view of society as an organism. As Barberis explains, society was

> a natural product, like a plant or an organism, which was born, grew and developed by virtue of an internal necessity. Society constituted no mere *être de raison*, no concept or idea – it was a real thing, a living being, often perceived as having its own conscience or will. It did not exist outside of the individuals that formed it, and yet it was more than the sum of its parts. Each society was a totality, a whole, an entity with its own attributes and laws. French sociological organicism did not choose to emphasize the independence of the individual cells, but rather their interdependence. Society was an organism with each part efficiently performing its particular functions.[18]

Whether conceived on the model of physics or biology, the eighteenth century saw society as a kind of anonymous agent that was made up of individual human beings, but that nonetheless also had the power to effect the lives of individuals in accord with laws

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[18] Daniela Barberis, "In Search of an Object: Organist Sociology and the Reality of Society in Fin-De-Siécle France," *History of the Human Sciences* 16, no. 3 (2003): 56-57.

that functioned consistently, immutably, and regardless of the choices that individuals may make as autonomous agents.

As a new-found force that served to regulate the moral lives of human beings, there is a strong sense in which society also functioned in the place of the divine. It is an embarrassing fact that, by the end of his life, Comte referred to himself as the High Priest of Humanity (even going so far as to detail the costume to be worn by him and his disciples), but the religious qualities of the modern conception of society should hardly be minimized. As Baker observes, the rediscovery of pyrrhonian skepticism and the serious entertainment of the possibility of God's non-existence that arose during the Enlightenment left a moral vacuum, and an urgently felt need for something to support and justify peaceful and harmonious modes of moral action that did not require metaphysical support.[19] Freitag, too, puts the problem in these terms. Up until the Enlightenment, the justification of norms had always been done by appeal to a transcendental dimension of existence. Skepticism made it possible to think the death of God, but it did not sufficiently weaken the belief that norms had to be transcendentally justified. With the 'death of God,' then, comes the need for some *thing* to takes His place, and it is exactly this problem that the concept of society was called upon to solve.[20]

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[19] Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," 119.

[20] Freitag, "The Dissolution of Society within the `Social'," 191.

Historically, the concept of society is important because of its ideological role in explaining and justifying sets of normative assumptions about who we are as people and how we should behave with respect to one another. It also served to address feelings of helplessness in the face of revolutionary events and a rapidly industrializing world suddenly characterized by flux. The discipline of sociology finds its origin in the discovery of a new object, but it was also motivated by a moral impulse to mitigate alienation, to provide assurance that the world still made sense. Although sociological organicism was relatively short lived (by 1897, strong organist conceptions of society had all but disappeared),[21] it nevertheless functioned importantly in establishing society as a real, transcendent object that produced real effects. Durkheim, for example, wrote that

> The great difference between animal societies and human societies is that in the former, the individual creature is governed exclusively from *within itself*, by the instincts. […] On the other hand human societies present a new phenomenon of a special nature, which consists in the fact that certain ways of acting are imposed, or at lease suggested *from outside* the individual and are added on to his own nature: such is that character of the 'institutions' (in the broad sense of the word) which the existence of language makes possible, and of which language itself is an example. They take on substance as individuals succeed each other without their

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[21] Barberis, "In Search of an Object: Organist Sociology and the Reality of Society in Fin-De-Siécle France," 64.

succession destroying their continuity; their presence is the distinctive

characteristic of human societies, and the proper subject of sociology.[22]

Strongly influenced by Durkheim, sociology in France and America continued to

embrace a strongly ontologized conception of society up until the late twentieth century.

The German tradition, on the other hand, has consistently avoided the tendency to adopt a

transcendent view of society, opting instead for a view of society as the sum total of

interactions between individual agents. In the view of Georg Simmel, for example,

> What palpably exists is indeed only individual human beings and their
>
> circumstances and activities: therefore, the task can only be to understand
>
> them. Whereas the essence of society, that emerges purely through an
>
> ideal synthesis and is never to be grasped, should not form the object of
>
> reflection that is directed towards the investigation of reality.[23]

In Simmel's view, the ontologization of society is a consequence of mistaking causes for

effects. To the extent that society is conceived as a thing, it is certainly the case that it

will be perceived as having real effects. As W. I. Thomas would famously observe in

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[22] Emile Durkheim, *The Rules of Sociological Method*, trans. Steven Lukes (London: MacMillan, 1982), 284.

[23] Georg Simmel, *Über Sociale Differenzierung* (Liepzig: Dunker & Humbolt, 1890), 9. Qtd. in David Frisby and Derek Sayer, *Society* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1986), 56.

1928, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."[24] In other words, regardless of an idea's ontological status, the fact that it is conceived of as real will mean that it will produce effects as if it were. For Simmel, it was a mistake to view society as if it was real. Instead, to the extent that it is perceived as real, it is a phenomenon that sociology should aim to understand as a function of the ways in which meanings are negotiated and exchanged. Weber, too, warned against viewing 'society' as a thing with any real degree of explanatory power. For Weber, society is a collective concept that has power to affect behavior by virtue of its meaningfulness, but that is itself in need of sociological analysis:

> These concepts of collective entities which are found both in common sense and in juristic and other technical forms of thought, have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority. This is true not only of judges and officials, but of ordinary private individuals as well. Actors thus in part orient their action to them, and in this role such ideas have a powerful, often a decisive, causal influence on the course of action of real individuals.[25]

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[24] W. I. Thomas and D. I. Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928), 571-572.

[25] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 2 vols., vol. I (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 14.

For Weber, collective concepts like society and the state do have real effects, but only as a function of more basic processes involving the negotiation of shared meanings.

Debates over the nature and ontological status of society are as old as the discipline of sociology itself, and are arguably as intense today as they were at the time that the field first took shape. Regardless of what a particular thinker might say about the existence and nature of society, the importance of society as a concept is undisputed. Not only is it clearly the case that the man on the street continues to attribute all manner of causal power to society, but among sociologists there is a strong appreciation of the fact that, even if society does not exist, the conceptual place occupied by society must be taken seriously. Just as the death of God leaves a vacuum by virtue of a perceived need for a transcendental moral ground, so too does the death of society. When Frisby and Sayer observe that "Where sociology is not grounded in society as an object, we must necessarily raise the issue of what it is that takes its place,"[26] they are not speaking from the perspective of a discipline whose existence is contingent upon the presumption of the existence of a particular kind of object. They are not speaking to the fact that sociology was made possible only by virtue of the discovery of a new kind of object, and the fact that the non-existence of this object serves to call the legitimacy of the discipline into question. They are rather asserting that the proper object of sociology is not a thing, but rather a conceptual space of normative justification. As they continue, "it is at least plausible to argue that where the question 'what is society?' has disappeared, the concept

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[26] Frisby and Sayer, *Society*, 9.

of society nonetheless returns, often in a more threatening guise."[27] The concept of

society, then, is a space of conflict between competing normative grounds. In spite of

internal squabbling about the nature of society, the discipline of sociology finds its

importance and ongoing relevance as a result of its agreement about the importance of

society's place, and commitment to the activity of continually interrogating any and all

claims to it.

Why Vico?

Since the 1960's, Giambattista Vico has been extensively cited as an important

figure in the history of the social sciences. Whether claimed as an influencer whose ideas

stand at the origin of various disciplines and social scientific paradigms, or as an

untimely progenitor whose thought anticipated contemporary social theory but who was

nonetheless largely ignored by the dominant tradition, Vico's life and works have earned

him a legendary place in the history of social science.[28] In light of Vico's legendary

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[27] Ibid.

[28] The body of literature citing Vico as an important progenitor of the social
sciences is vast, and it is outside of the scope of this paper to describe it here in full. A
primary source for this kind of work, which dominated the early days of Vico studies in
English, is that series of conference proceedings edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo between
1968 and 1983. Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Hayden V. White, eds., *Giambattista Vico: An
International Symposium* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press 1968). Giorgio
Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene, eds., *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*
(Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Giorgio Tagliacozzo, Michael
Mooney, and Donald Phillip Verene, eds., *Vico and Contemporary Thought* (Atlantic

status, it is remarkable that his own social theory, and in particular his conception of society, would be almost entirely ignored. Such lack of attention to the particularities of Vico's social theory belies an apparently widely held assumption that Vico's main significance is as an historical curiosity, a figure who anticipated much of the modern social scientific tradition, but whose most important ideas have already been appropriated. From this perspective, any ideas that have not already become variously appropriated may rightly be disregarded as irrelevant and arcane artifacts of a mind caught at the intersection of the ancient and the modern.

In forgoing a systematic exploration of Vico's thought, interpreters of Vico's social theory have unfortunately failed to apply the basic hermeneutic principle, that the parts can only be understood relative to the whole. They have uprooted the trees from the forest of Vico's thought and planted them into the forests of more dominant thinkers and traditions. Ironically, the effect of this approach to Vico has been to ignore Vico's own warning against the conceit of scholars. In focusing on Vico's similarity with later modern traditions, even well-meaning critics intent on highlighting Vico's importance as a social thinker have nonetheless used him to demonstrate that "what they know is as old as the world" (NS 61, §127). In failing to adopt a systematic approach to the interpretation of Vico's social theory, critics have failed to understand that Vico's conception of society is, itself, central to, and only interpretable in light of, Vico's system. The concept of society plays a central and foundational role throughout Vico's

Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979). Giorgio Tagliacozzo, ed. *Vico and Marx: Affinities and Contrasts* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanitites Press, 1983).

intellectual development, but it is itself the subject of a tremendous amount of change and evolution.

In adopting a holistic, developmental, and systematic approach to understanding Vico's conception of society, this present work will make an effort to better highlight its similarities with the tradition that came before it and the tradition that came afterward, while at the same time also bringing to light several important differences, differences that make Vico's conception of society and social theory as a whole relevant to contemporary debates about the existence of society and the future of disciplines that have traditionally held it central. A systematic exploration of the various ways in which Vico conceives of society is important, not simply because it addresses an obvious gap in the field of Vico studies, but also because of the ways in which Vico's account can contribute to contemporary debates about the nature society and the continued relevance of sociology as a discipline.

A History of the Concept of Society

Interest in human association is not new. In fact, as Cassirer argues, the earliest mythological and religious thought records a recognition of the power of custom as a force that binds and determines individuals from outside. In the Gilgamesh epic, the Vedas, and the Egyptian account of creation, there is a shared conviction that both the natural and the ethical were established at the same time by a creator-god as equally necessary to the task of producing order from chaos, that there are moral limits established on human behavior that cannot be crossed without also going unpunished. Paradoxical as it may sound, there is a sense in mythological thought that, to the extent that they have a profound impact on a community, even the acknowledged productions of human hands are attributed to a sacred origin: "For everything that man creates, and that comes forth from his own hands, still surrounds him as an incomprehensible mystery. When he considers his works, he is very far from suspecting himself as their creator. They stand far above him; they are not only far beyond that which the individual is able to achieve but also beyond everything that the species is able to achieve."[29]

An interest in human forms of association, and a recognition that the ethical lives of human beings are in part determined by external forces, are not the same as positing an object capable of explanation. Myth is primordial and originary. In the words of Lévi-

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[29] Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, trans. S. G. Lofts (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 2000), 2-3.

Strauss, "Myths get thought in man unbeknownst to him."[30] In contrast to philosophical

thought, which begins by assuming a difference between the knower and a thing to be

known, Cassirer argues that myth is a function that makes abstract objective thought

possible, but in a way that is in itself unmotivated either metaphysically – as if thought

served to mirror some pre-existing reality – or psychologically – as a mirror of subjective

psychic states or as a response to some set of pre-existing drives. In myth it is "Language

itself [that] initiates such articulations and develops them in its own sphere."[31] The basis

of mythological thought is metaphor, or the transmutation of one cognitive or emotional

experience into a medium that is foreign to that experience.[32] Mythical thought is not

representational. It is a function by which relationships between experiences are

spontaneously generated in such a way that allows those experiences to come into view.

The ability to conceive the world of human culture as an object that requires

explanation is something that becomes possible only with the inauguration of discursive

thinking by Greek philosophy. In contrast to mythological thought, which arrives at an

understanding of the world by what Lévi-Strauss describes as the "shortest possible

means,"[33] achieving an "undetermined multiplicity of mythical attempts at explanation,

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[30] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Five Talks for Radio by Claude Lévi-Strauss* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 2.

[31] Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. Susanne Langer (New York: Dover, 1946), 12.

[32] Ibid., 87.

[33] Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning: Five Talks for Radio by Claude Lévi-Strauss*, 17.

which turn sometimes toward one phenomenon and sometimes toward another,"[34]

philosophical thinking instead favors the concept, which collects sets of particulars on the

basis of fixed properties in order to elaborate a universally valid system of knowledge.

Conceptualization is a necessary precondition for the concept of society, and the concept

is a Greek innovation.

Aristotle

Although some have sought to identify the origins of the concept of society with

the early Greek sophists,[35] and it is most certainly possible to see certain elements of our

modern conception of society in Plato's *Republic*, what most clearly marks the original

source of Western thinking about civil society is Aristotle's concept of *koinōnia politikē*.

Tracing the history of the translation of Aristotle's term, we find that the most common

translation of *koinōnia politikē* into Latin was as *societas civilis*, which becomes *société*

civile when rendered into French and 'civil society' when rendered into English.

Etymologically, then, it is fairly easy to trace a direct lineage from our modern concept of

society to the concept as it was originally developed by Aristotle. In spite of the fact that

the history of the term society can be traced back to early Latin translations of Aristotle's

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[34] Cassirer, *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences: Five Studies*, 3-4.

[35] Boris DeWeil, "A Conceptual History of Civil Society: From Greek Beginnings to the End of Marx," *Past Imperfect* 6 (1997).

koinōnia, however, the history of the concept of society is in large part the history of its deviation from what Aristotle originally envisioned.

Liddell and Scott translate *koinōnia* as "communion, fellowship, intercourse.[36] According to Riedel, the term refers merely to an association or union.[37] As a concept, then, *koinōnia* is a genera that admits of a number of different species. As Irwin and Fine explain, *koinōnia* for Aristotle is created by every type of friendship, and so includes loose alliances and casual relationships in addition to closer-knit communities and societies.[38] *Koinōnia* is a cognate of *koinos*, meaning "common." As Kalimtzis explains, it implies a kind of collaborative possession in activity, or *metechein*: "The word [*metechein*] strongly implies that participants possess something in common that forms a condition for their 'communion,' yet that simultaneously serves their individual interests separately as well. All types of *metechein*, even the most impersonal, are in a sense personal, because they are all cases of possession of some common good to which individual activities are shaped."[39] In other words, *koinōnia* is association formed as a

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[36] Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, "Κοινωνία," in *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1871).

[37] Manfred Riedel, *Between Tradition and Revolution: The Hegelian Transformation of Political Philosophy*, trans. Walter Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 133-34.

[38] Terence Irwin and Gail Fine, "Glossary," in *Aristotle: Selections* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1995), 573.

[39] Kostas Kalimtzis, *Aristotle on Political Emnity and Disease: An Inquiry into Stasis* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2000), 72.

result of friendships which, by definition, involve a sharing of resources for the sake of a shared interest in pursuing a common good.

Aristotle opens the *Nicomachean Ethics* with an inquiry into the definition of the good. He observes that every activity pursues some good as its end, but that these goods vary widely according to their corresponding activities. He also observes that, in most cases, the goods pursued are subordinate to other higher goods, as in the case of bridle-making, for example, whose immediate end is the production of a good bridle, but is subordinate to the higher activity of horsemanship. Excellent horsemanship is that for the sake of which one pursues excellent bridle-making. Consequently, the higher activity is the standard by which the excellence of the lower is measured. The excellence of a bridle is measured by its ability to facilitate excellence in horsemanship. Based on these observations, that every activity is oriented toward the good, that goods differ by activity, and that most goods are nether complete nor self-sufficient, since they are for the sake of higher activities and, correspondingly, higher goods, Aristotle wonders if there might not be a highest good for human beings that is both complete (since it is pursued as an end in itself, and not for the sake of something higher) and self-sufficient (since the pursuit of this good comprehensively encompasses all of those things necessary to making a life worth living). Not only would this highest good serve to reconcile all of the lower goods, for each of them would ultimately be for its sake, but it would also serve as the standard against which each of the lower goods might be evaluated.

For Aristotle, the good of a thing pertains to its specific function. For example, the good of a hammer is its ability to drive nails. An excellent hammer is one that drives nails well. The unique function of human beings, a function that is specific to them and

not shared with any other object or living creature, pertains to their unique capacity for reason. Like plants, argues Aristotle, human beings are driven by nutrition and growth. Like animals, they share the capacity for sense perception. Unlike all other forms of life, however, human beings are capable of thinking and reasoning, and so it is here that the function of human beings is to be found. The function of human beings, says Aristotle, is "activity of the soul in accord with reason or requiring reason,"[40] and the highest good for human beings is therefore to reason well and finely. In human beings, nutritive and perceptive goods are still important, but they are not ends in themselves as they are in plants and animals, but rather subordinate to the highest good which is the exercise of reason.

For Aristotle, man is a rational animal (*zōon logon echon*).[41] But he is also a political animal (*zōon politikon*), for it is only through life in an effectively ordered *polis* or city-state, unencumbered by the concerns of bare life, that it is possible for him to flourish in his capacity for reason. *Koinōnia politikē* is a natural and necessary form of human association because it is only in this type of community that individuals become capable of pursuing individual excellence in their activity (*metechein*) as rational animals: "it is evident that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal. And he who by nature and not by mere accident is without a state, is

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[40] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Terence Irwin, Second ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999), 9.

[41] "Metaphysics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1638.

either a bad man or above humanity; he is like the 'Tribeless, lawless, heartless one,' whom Homer denounces—the natural outcast is forthwith a lover of war; he may be compared to an isolated piece at draughts."[42]

In the *Politics*, Aristotle offers a brief history of the emergence of political communities that mirrors his account of the soul in the *Ethics*. In the *Ethics*, Aristotle argues that in the soul, the non-rational part concerned with nutrition and perception is necessary, but exists for the sake of the rational part, whose activity is the proper function of human beings. In the *Politics*, Aristotle argues that the most basic form of association is the family, the union of male and female without which the survival of the human species would be impossible. Hence, the family is a natural form of social organization that exists for the sake of the non-rational soul: "there must be a union of those who cannot exist without each other; namely, of male and female, that the race may continue (and this is a union which is formed, not of choice, but because, in common with other animals and with plants, mankind have a natural desire to leave behind them an image of themselves), and of natural ruler and subject, that both may be preserved."[43] As a form of association that is shared with plants and animals, a form that is necessary to the preservation of bare life and the reproduction of the species, and by virtue of that fact is formed in the absence of deliberation, the family is strictly a function of the activity of the non-rational soul.

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[42] "Politics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 1987-1988.

[43] Ibid., 1986.

A second, more complex form of association is the village, which is formed from the union of multiple families and "aims at something more than the supply of daily needs."[44] This form or association corresponds to the perceptive / appetitive part of the non-rational soul, in Aristotle's account, that participates in reason by virtue of the fact that it involves making choices based on the desire to pursue pleasure and avoid pain.[45] Villages are made up families, and so continue to pursue nutritive and reproductive goals, but these goals are no longer for their own sake, but for the sake of pursuing additional pleasures and comforts. But the village is nonetheless an intermediate form of association, because it is still oriented toward non-rational goods, goods that are shared by humans and animals alike, but not the highest good for man, which is activity of which man alone in capable. Put differently, the family and the village are forms of association that exist for the sake of life. Only the state, or *polis*, exists for the sake of the good life: "When several villages are united in a single community, perfect and large enough to be nearly or quite self-sufficing, the state comes into existence, originating in the bare needs of life, and continuing in existence for the sake of a good life."[46] Only in the *polis* is it possible for man to dedicate himself to activity of the soul in accord with reason.

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[44] Ibid., 1987.

[45] *Nicomachean Ethics*, 29.

[46] "Politics," 1987.

In light of Aristotle's account of the good life and how the parts of the soul are mirrored in the basic forms of human association, the most significant distinction in Aristotle's mind is not that between society and the state, as indeed it is in more modern conceptions of society, but rather between the state and the household, the *polis* and the *oikos*. *Koinōnia politikē* is a form of association that is only possible in the context of the *polis*. It is an association of free and equal citizens bound together in the state by a common pursuit of the good life, a common commitment to pursuing the end of man as a rational animal. In order to dedicate themselves fully to rational activity in the public sphere, citizens within the *polis* must be freed from a concern for the necessities of mere life, which are managed within the private sphere of the *oikos*. Consequently, the equality between citizens in the *polis* is bought at the expense of structured inequality in the economic sphere. The free citizens who participate in political forms of association are also those who dominate the unfree (slaves), not yet free (children) and the free with fewer rights (women) within the economic sphere of the household, as master, father and husband, respectively. According to Aristotle, it is natural that men would participate in political forms of association, since *koinōnia politikē* is necessary to the full activation of man's rational powers, but it is also natural that these same men would dominate others: "that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule."[47]

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[47] Ibid., 1990.

Putting aside the fact that the common Latin translation of *koinōnia politikē* as *societas civile* demonstrates a direct line of descent from Aristotle to modern concepts of society, several commentators have argued that political association and civil society are radically different, that the conceptions of society that emerged in the eighteenth century and that made it possible to study society as an object distinct from the state are of a fundamentally different character from the concept of society employed by Aristotle. In other words, there was no such thing as 'society' before the eighteenth century, and so a history of the concept need not begin before that time. The most influential proponent of this position is Hannah Arendt, who argued in *The Human Condition* that "the emergence of the social realm […] is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation-state."[48] In contrast to Aristotle, whose account of political association makes a radical distinction between the private economic sphere of the household and the public discursive sphere committed to rational speech, Arendt argues that the modern concept of society emerged as a result of the erosion of the distinction between private and public, and the increasingly economic concerns of the nation-state. Where the *polis* sought to free itself from the concerns of mere life by committing those concerns wholly and entirely to the household, Arendt argues that the nation-state is most fundamentally an economic form of association and refers to "The emergence of society [as] the rise of housekeeping, its

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[48] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 28.

activities, problems, and organizational devices."[49] As such, what marks the modern concept of society is not its continuity with the Aristotelian tradition, but rather its discontinuity.

Others, like Runciman, have made similar observations, noting fundamental differences between the modern concept of society and the idea of political association in Aristotle: "the crucial contrast in Aristotle's mind is not between society and the State but between the private or familial and the political-cum-social."[50] If Aristotle did not make a distinction between society and the state, but modern conceptions find such a distinction essential, then it indeed appears that we are talking about two very different things, and that the history of society consists of tracing the process whereby civil and political society come to be viewed separately where in Aristotle they were treated as the same.[51] As Koselleck explains, however, the astounding etymological continuity between *koinōnia politikē* and contemporary terms like *bürgerliche Gesellschaft, société civil,* or civil society, which are all translations from the Latin, should not be dismissed as containing nothing of a conceptual heritage. To the contrary, in spite of apparently fundamental differences, there is much that has been retained from Aristotle throughout the history of society's conceptual transformations:

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[49] Ibid., 38.

[50] W. G. Runciman, *Social Science and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 25.

[51] DeWeil, "A Conceptual History of Civil Society: From Greek Beginnings to the End of Marx."

However much the economically determined emergence of a civil society

was a product of our recent history, the ancient meaning conceptualized by

Aristotle of the *koinōnia politikē* as a self-ruling community of citizens

was never lost. The opposite was the case. This model—that the earlier

citizenry (*Bürgerschaft)* of the polis or the Roman Republic was such a

community of free citizens—not only guided the French revolutionaries

and the German idealists but even the Scottish moral philosophers.

Moreover, the Stoic public ethic (*Bürgerethik*) and the Christian spiritual

principle of the equality of all citizens in a theocracy remained present as a

legacy. They were merely transformed and merged to become inner-

worldly. These constitutional designs already take shape and gain in

penetrating power prior to the social repercussions of industrialization,

that is, in the age of the Enlightenment, vindicating all human beings who,

as citizens, participate in political power and general self-determination.[52]

In contrast to Arendt and Runciman, Koselleck here argues that there is indeed a strong

sense of continuity between modern conceptions of society and the tradition inaugurated

by Aristotle in the *Politics*. Regardless of the transformations that the concept may have

taken since its start as the Aristotelian *koinōnia politikē*, and regardless of its relationship

to the state (i.e. whether it is coincident with it, as in the case of Aristotle, or independent

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[52] Koselleck, "Three *bürgerliche* Worlds? Preliminary Theoretical-Historical Remarks on the Comparative Semantics of Civil Society in Germany, England, and France," 213; 208 - 209.

as in more contemporary conceptions), civil society has always relied on the imagery of citizenship marked by a strong commitment to equality among its members and the capacity for autonomous self-determination as a group. What this means is that the concept of society did not arrive *ex nihlo* as a pure manifestation of the revolutions that mark the Enlightenment, but rather that it was modeled on a tradition of civic thinking that predated it, and with which it is continuous.

Roman Law and Stoic Cosmopolitanism

The history of the concept of society can be viewed as the history of the progressive separation of the world of human association from the life of the state, or *polis*. There is ample evidence to suggest that there is something particular to the period beginning in the mid-eighteenth century that allows the concept of society to emerge in full force, as a separate and efficacious entity distinct from both the state that supports it, and the individuals that make it up. Between Aristotle and Modernity, however, there are several key historical moments that condition the possibility of the thinking society separately from the state. First, beginning in the first century BCE, and coming to completion in 212 CE, Roman rights of citizenship were progressively extended to all the free inhabitants of Imperial Rome. It is in the context of this extension of Roman citizenship that we see stoic cosmopolitanism emerge for the first time. If human beings could simultaneously be citizens of their local community and of the Roman Empire, why not also humanity as a whole, as members of the *societas humana*?

Diogenes the Cynic famously claimed to be a "citizen of the world."[53] In *De Otio*, Seneca writes about "two communities: one that is truly great and truly common […] in which we look neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun; the other, the one to which we have been assigned by birth."[54] In Nussbaum's view, the stoics viewed human individuals as at the center of a series of concentric circles, and insisted upon a concern for progressively increasing their sphere of concern and obligation until it included all of humanity:

> The stoics stress that to be a world citizen one does not need to give up
> local identifications and affiliations, which can frequently be a great
> source of richness in life. Hierocles, a Stoic of the first-second centuries
> AD (using an older metaphor also found in Cicero's *De Officiis*), argued
> that we should regard ourselves not as devoid of local affiliations, but as
> surrounded by a series of concentric circles. The first one is drawn around
> the self the next takes in one's immediate family; then follows the
> extended family; then, in order, one's fellow city-dwellers, one's fellow
> countrymen. Outside all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity
> as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world will be to "draw the circles

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[53] Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Books VI-X*, trans. H. D. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 65.

[54] A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 481.

somehow toward the center," making all human beings more like our

fellow city dwellers, and so forth. [55]

As Nussbaum observes, stoic thinking significantly allows for the possibility of thinking

of a global community, unconstrained by the geographical limits and idiosyncratic laws

of individual city-states or even Empire. She also effectively identifies the fact that, in

spite of its universal reach, stoic cosmopolitanism is still political. In emphasizing the

metaphor of citizenship, however, Nussbaum obscures the fact that what makes stoic

cosmopolitanism important as a step away from Aristotle and toward what would become

our modern conception of society is not the application of an effectively legal metaphor

to a newly conceived form of community, but rather its *continuity with* Aristotle.

For Aristotle, *koinōnia politikē* refers to a uniquely human form of relationship

between free men engaged in the exchange of rational speech about the good. The *polis*,

on the other hand, refers to a set of organizational structures with respect to which

koinōnia politikē might be best achieved and sustained. For Aristotle, a well-ordered

polis, and its opposition to an equally well-managed *oikos,* is a necessary condition for

the achievement of a political community, and so also a necessary condition of human

flourishing. A significant feature of a well-ordered *polis* for Aristotle is group size, for "a

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[55] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Kant and Stoic Cosmopolitanism," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 5, no. 1 (1997): 9.

city could not be formed from ten people, but it would be a city no longer if it had a hundred thousand."[56]

> A state, then, only begins to exist when it has attained a population sufficient for a good life in the political community: it may indeed, if it somewhat exceeds this number, be a greater state. But, as I was saying, there must be a limit. What the limit should be will be easily ascertained by experience. For both governors and governed have duties to perform; the special functions of a governor are to command and to judge. But if the citizens of a state are to judge and to distribute offices according to merit, then they must know each other's characters; where they do not posses this knowledge, both the election to offices an the decision of lawsuits will go wrong. When the population is very large they are manifestly settled at haphazard, which clearly ought not to be. Besides, in an over-populous state foreigners and resident aliens will readily acquire the rights of citizens, for who will find them out? Clearly then the best limit of the population is the largest number which suffices for the purposes of life, and can be taken in at a single view.[57]

Here, Aristotle again reiterates the fact that the good life can only be achieved within the context of a political community, which Aristotle identifies with the *polis* itself. A major

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[56] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 151.

[57] "Politics," 2105.

reason why the *polis* and the political community must be identical for Aristotle is a function of group size. Once the population of a *polis* reaches a certain limit, the level of social integration decreases to the point that it becomes impossible to for all members to be friends in a way that would mutually contribute to the achievement of the good life. Friendship, for Aristotle, is a necessary condition of, if not also identical with, community.[58] And an essential condition of friendship is living together (*to suzên*).[59] The idea of a political community that is global in scale is, for Aristotle, like trying to be in love with many people at once.[60] The level of intimacy required for friendships that contribute positively to the political community is such that it cannot be extended beyond a certain limit. An increase in population size beyond a certain limit 'ascertained by experience' also presents challenges to governance, insofar as it becomes difficult to select good leaders, and also renders it difficult to enforce the law. The stranger has no place in a political community

The most crucial contribution of the stoics to the gradual emergence of the modern concept of society is not the invention of a global citizen. To suggest that this is the case is to confuse *koinōnia politikē* (a form of community) with the *polis* (a form of government) and to argue that the stoics conceived of a kind of universal *polis*. If we assume that, like Aristotle, the stoics viewed *koinōnia politikē* and the *polis* as identical,

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[58] "For in every community there is thought to be some form of justice, and friendship too." Ibid., 1833.

[59] Ibid., 1829.

[60] Ibid., 1830.

then this would not be an issue. But the stoics did not see the two as identical, and it is here that we see the real stoic innovation: with the stoics, and against Aristotle, it becomes possible to think *koinōnia politikē* without the *polis*, political community in the absence of government.

For Aristotle, the *polis* is both natural and artificial. On the one hand, it is artificial because it is the product of human *technē*: the acting upon natural materials in order to bring about a state of affairs that could most certainly be otherwise. On the other hand, it is natural, in so far as it is a necessary condition of human flourishing. For Aristotle, a life in accord with human nature means the creation of a (good) government and submission to its laws. For the stoics, on the other hand, a universal *koinōnia politikē* becomes possible on account of a belief that it is, for man, possible to live life strictly in accord with the law of right reason, which is to say natural law. That this is the case is perhaps nowhere clearer than in the founder of the stoic school, Zeno of Citium, whose *Republic* is purported to have aimed at making one main point: "that our household arrangements should not be based on cities or parishes, each one marked out by its own legal system, but we should regard all men as our fellow-citizens and local residents, and there should be one way of life and order, like that of a herd grazing together and nurtured by a common law."[61] This is not to call for the dissolution of local governments, but rather to say that local governments are only needed where the knowledge of natural law and the discipline to live in accord with it are lacking. It is also

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[61] Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1, 429.

not a call for the *creation* of a global *polis*, but rather an assertion about the ready

existence of a global community into which every human belongs as a consequence of

birth. From the stoic perspective, the city is simply a group of people living in the same

place and administered by law[62] for the preservation of private property.[63] In other

words, if we adopt Aristotle's definition of the political as free and rational discourse,

then there is actually nothing political about the stoic *polis*.

Despite their disagreement with Aristotle on the necessity of the *polis,* the

cosmopolitan vision is still one of political community, characterized by many of the key

features of Aristotle's *koinōnia politikē*. As with the members of the Aristotelian *polis*,

stoic cosmopolitans are "members of a community because of their participation in

reason, which is natural law."[64] Characterized by life in accord with nature, which is life

in accord with reason, cosmopolitans are unencumbered by the needs of bare life. The

stoic account of what it means to be unencumbered, however, differs radically from

Aristotle's. For Aristotle, participation in a political community is only possible for men

who are free to commit themselves entirely to a life of reason, and the only way for men

to commit themselves entirely to a life of reason is to offload nutritive functions and

demands into the domain of the home. From the stoic perspective, however, being

unencumbered by the needs of bare life is not achieved as a result of the mere ongoing

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[62] Dio Chrysostom 36.20. In ibid.

[63] Cicero, *Republic* I.34. In ibid., 433.

[64] Eusebius, *Evangelical preparation* 15.15.3-5. In ibid., 431.

satisfaction of lower desires, but rather from overcoming those desires in the first place.

For Aristotle, membership in the political community as *polis* is made possible only to

the extent that there are populations that are both excluded from it and make it possible.

Stoic cosmopolitanism, however, is able to arrive at a universalistic and inclusive form of

koinōnia politikē because, in addition to making the *polis* unnecessary to political

community, it also eliminates the need for its opposite. Instead of insisting upon the

institution of the *oikos,* which Aristotle viewed as essential and opposed to the *polis*, the

stoics found freedom in the activity of the will, or rather an overcoming of the passions.

Stoic virtue is a life in accord with reason, made possible through an overcoming of

desire. Freedom cannot come from the satisfaction of desire, as is the case in Aristotle's

account, since satisfaction involves dependency. Instead, freedom involves will, taking

personal responsibility for one's passions in order to overcome them. Since the will is

both personal and universal, membership in the cosmopolitan community is open to all.

In the words of Seneca, "Virtue is open to everyone, admits everyone, invites everyone –

freeborn, freedman and slave, king and exile. It does not have to choose the great house

or the great fortune; it is content with the naked man."[65]

The stoic view of cosmopolitanism was certainly not without its critics. On the

one hand, Cicero agrees with the stoic concentric view of human association when he

states in *De Officiis* that

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[65] Lucius Annaeus Seneca, "On Favours," in *Moral and Political Essays*, ed. John
M. Cooper and J. F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 256.

There are indeed several degrees of fellowship among men. To move

from the one that is unlimited, next there is a closer one of the same race,

tribe and tongue, through which men are bound strongly to one another.

More intimate still is that of the same city, as citizens have many things

that are shared with one another: the forum, temples, porticoes and roads,

laws and legal rights, law-courts and political elections; and besides these

acquaintances and companionship, and those business and commercial

transactions that many of them make with many others. A tie narrower

still is that of the fellowship between relations: moving from the vast

fellowship of the human race we end up with the confined and limited

one.[66]

On the other hand, Cicero is highly suspicious of the stoic view that would see it possible

to separate the *polis* from the political. In his *Republic*, Cicero demonstrates in Laelius's

criticism of Scipio that a strictly contemplative life dedicated to reason, the kind of life

promoted by the stoics as truly cosmopolitan, serves in actual fact to undermine the

material and political conditions necessary to the pursuit of that life in the first place. As

Pangle explains, "as Scipio's and Cicero's whole lives so vividly indicate, the life of

thinking is for humans a life that includes sharing or generosity, and above all the

generosity of awakening the gifted young, and securing the leisured and virtuous or

decent social conditions most conducive to their awakening. The theoretical life cannot

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[66] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On Duties*, trans. E. M. Atkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 22-23.

then be divorced from the life of civic action."[67] With the stoics, Cicero importantly

distances the *polis* from the political, thinking of a universal *polis* made possible as a

result of a universally shared capacity for reason and a life of contemplation. Unlike the

stoics, however, and with Aristotle, Cicero observes the foolishness of thinking that a life

of contemplation might be pursued without any consideration to material conditions.

Even more than the stoics, Cicero prepares the way for the eventual emergence of the

modern conception of society by not only considering all of humanity as a single object,

but also transforming the public sphere into one whose concern is primarily economic. In

Cicero's view, it is not only the family, but also the tribe and the city that are responsible

for ensuring that material needs are met. Just as, for Aristotle, the *oikos* exists for the

sake of the *polis*, so is it the case for Cicero that the *polis* exists for the sake of the

universal fellowship of rational men.

Medieval Religious Thinking

A second historical moment that prepares the way for the split between society

and the state is the Augustinian doctrine of the two *civitates*. The stoics made it possible

to think of political community separately from the polis, but they did so in a way that

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[67] Thomas L. Pangle, "Socratic Cosmopolitanism: Cicero's Critique and Transformation of the Stoic Ideal," *Canadian Journal of Polictical Science / Revue canadienne de science politique* 31, no. 2 (1998): 246.

nevertheless maintained an inextricable relationship between the two. Conceiving of community types as a series of concentric circles, as spheres of intimacy with other human beings that become progressively weaker as they radiate outward,[68] the stoics also viewed natural law as a universal force that found its source in the most extended circle of intimacy, and so applied to everyone and everything, and functioned as the standard against which good and bad communities might be judged. In other words, even though the *polis* needn't be political for the stoics, it nonetheless should be on account of its being contained by, and participating in, the cosmopolis. As Cicero explains, "There will not be a different law at Rome and at Athens, or a different law now and in the future, but one law, everlasting and immutable, will hold good for all peoples and at all times. And there will be one master and ruler for us all in common, god who is the founder of this law, its promulgator and its judge. Whoever does not obey it is fleeing from himself and treating his human nature with contempt."[69] In other words, for the stoics it's political all the way down.

Where Augustine differs from the stoics by whom he was otherwise quite influenced, is in that he abandons the concentric circle model and, instead, considers the City of God and the City of Earth separately. As Sayer and Frisby remark, "with the development of Christianity, Aristotle's unity of the community of society of citizens and

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[68] Cf Hierocles (Stobaeus 4.671, 7-673, 11) in Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1, 349-350. Cf also Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (London: Heinmann, William, 1938), 57.

[69] Cicero, *Republic.* In Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1, 433.

culture was broken. The *polis* or *civitas* and the church or *ecclesia* were strictly separated."[70] It is certainly the case that the separation of *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* in Augustine, and the later distinction between *communitas civilis* and the *communitas divina* in Aquinas are made possible only as a consequence of the stoic move to embrace all human beings equally, as members of a single and universal *societas humana*. Indeed, on the surface at least, the similarity between stoic cosmopolitanism and this medieval tradition is, at times, so great that one might be inclined to say that the two are in actual fact so structurally similar that medieval thought in this regard would be better considered an elaboration of stoicism rather than any kind of epochal shift in its own right. When Cicero explains the idea of a single, universal law, for example, his words bear could very well have come out of the medieval Christian tradition: "And there will be one master and ruler for us all in common, god who is the founder of this law, its promulgator and its judge. Whoever does not obey it is fleeing from himself and treating his human nature with contempt; by this very fact he will pay the heaviest penalties, even if he escapes all conventional punishments."[71]

With Augustine's *City of God*, however, an epochal shift does indeed occur. On the one hand, in contrast to the stoic concentric view of human community, the *civitas Dei* neither contains nor is contained by the *civitas terrena,* but is rather wholly separate. A major consequence of this is that the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* lose something

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[70] Frisby and Sayer, *Society*, 16.

[71] Cicero, *Republic* 3.33. In Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1, 67.

of their universalistic quality. Although both cities retain open membership policies, the two are also mutually exclusive: citizenship in the city of God is limited to those who love God, and citizenship in the city of earth belongs to those who love themselves

On the other hand, the *civitas Dei* is also not political; it is not a collection of free individuals engaged in rational free speech. With the rise of the Roman empire, and the alienation of the individual from direct participation in the political life of the *polis*, the stoics separated the *polis* and the political in a way that allowed for universal participation in the life of reason in a way that was not conditioned upon the particular conditions of ones life. In Augustine, however, the Aristotelian conception of the political is eliminated entirely, as both the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* come to be ruled by law rather than by reason. The *civitas Dei* "knows only one God as the object of worship and decrees, with faithful devotion, that he only is to be served."[72] Purified by faith, reason and understanding in the *civitas Dei* take the form of obedience to eternal law,[73] and it is through such conformity that eternal peace is accomplished. The *civitas terrena*, on the other hand, finds peace in custom, laws, and institutions.[74] In both of these cities, the primary concern is for the achievement of peace, and in both of these cities, peace is achieved through conformity. In place of a conception of freedom as the

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[72] Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 2003), 878.

[73] Ibid., 430.

[74] Ibid., 878.

unconstrained rational speech applied in the context of public deliberation about the good life, for Augustine freedom is found in freedom from sin.[75]

In contrast to the Aristotelian account of the *polis* as an extension of ethics, and as necessary to the achievement of the good life for man, Augustine divorces government from the Good entirely. Like Aristotle, Augustine views government as natural, in so far as it is a necessary consequence of human nature. Augustine's view of human nature, however, differs radically from Aristotle's. For Aristotle, it is in human nature to pursue the good, which is a perfection of that activity of the soul that accords with reason. In contrast, Augustine's view of human nature is as fundamentally driven by selfish desire. The Aristotelian *polis* is a community of philosophical friends. The function of laws and institutions in Augustine's view is merely to mitigate conflict that would otherwise arise when mutually exclusive human desires come into contact.

With Augustine, the Aristotelian idea of the political, still preserved in the stoic cosmopolis, is replaced with the civil. Active citizens are transformed into passive subjects. Participation is replaced with obedience. Here, the move from the Greek *koinōnia politikē* to the Latin *societas civile* is one of transformation rather than of mere translation. The distinction between the city of God and the city of earth produces a separation between community concerned with the Good and community concerned with stability and peace. In spite of their different roles, however, both forms of community nonetheless share what is essentially a non-political attribute, for in neither community is

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[75] Ibid., 875.

participation conceived as particularly active. For Augustine, the city of God is the community in which human goods come to be fully realized, but in a way that is wholly separate from both earthly experience and human activity. Activity of the soul in accord with reason in Aristotle becomes salvation by grace in Augustine. With respect to both the city of God and the city of Earth, then, peace is bought at the price of submission. Active citizens are made into passive subjects, whose freedom is not a freedom to critically deliberate, but rather a freedom from conflict through submission to God and to the law. With Augustine's *city of God*, then, we see the emergence of several key attributes of the modern idea of society: like Augustine's city of God, the modern conception of society is as a community that transcends the state, and that, despite being made up of individuals, nonetheless confronts those individuals as an entity unto its own, something with its own history and trajectory, and which demands submission, without reason, but on the basis of its own authority alone.

<div align="center">The Emergence of Society</div>

The third and final epoch involved in the emergence of the modern concept of society out of its origins in the Aristotelian *Koinōnia politikē* was the development of the natural law theory of the state. On the one hand, as Baker observes, the natural law tradition was itself a product of a particular set of historical conditions, the most important of which was the rise of Pyrrhonian skepticism in philosophy, and that of Augustinianism in religion. On the other hand, it is also the case that the natural law tradition opened up new possibilities, and it is out of this tradition that we see the most

profound shift in our thinking about the relationship between peoples and states, and the fullest emergence of a conception of society that functioned amidst a constellation of other related conceptions that made it possible to think the future in a radically different way. "Unhistorical in the foundations on which it was built, it was also directed, in its efforts and its results, not to the purpose of scientific explanation of the past, but to that of the exposition and justification of a new future which was to be called into existence."[76]

Concerned with mitigating the foreseen pernicious impact of skepticism, political thinkers sought stability in a largely neglected area of Roman law. In the second century, the Roman jurist Ulpian first proposed the division of law into three classes: *ius civilis*, which covered laws pertaining to the lives of citizens; *ius gentium*, which included generally accepted principles that could guide successful exchange relationships between states; and *ius naturalis*, or that set of laws that governed all mankind by virtue of a shared biological condition. Following its codification by Justinian in his sixth century digest, the division was almost universally accepted until the middle of the seventeenth century.

So much emphasis was placed on civil law that, by 1650, the majority of jurists had abandoned Uplian's model in favor of the *ius publicum*, whose content could be drawn from either the *ius naturalis* or the *ius positum*. When retained, the Roman

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[76] Otto Friedrich Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society, 1500 to 1800*, trans. Ernest Barker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934), 36.

conception of the *ius gentium* usually lost its sense of unique identity, and instead was thought as merely a special case of natural law, as it applied to international relations.

As Baker observes, natural law takes on a new and particularly important role in the seventeenth century, as a way of trying to mitigate risks associated with skepticism. A major point of interest for natural law theorists was the locus of political power and how it came to be conferred on a ruler. Contrary to DeWeil,[77] it is not the case that the concept of society emerged with the emergence of the concept of "a people" as having characteristics and properties distinct from its members. In fact, as Gierke notes, the idea of 'a people' in this sense, as an entity with a unified personality and as an originary bearer of political power was universally held until the seventeenth century. Rather, what marks the emergence of the modern conception of society is the possibility of this personality persisting even after conferring political power to the state. Until the seventeenth century, political power was thought to have been transferred from the personality of the people to that of the state, and with that power, personality itself. Personality was thought to be coextensive with political power, such that giving up the latter meant also giving up the former. With theories of natural law, however, come for the first time the possibility of dual personality, of the simultaneity of both people and state. In order to achieve this, what was lost was a sense of a people as a unified and organic whole. In contrast to thinking of a people as a *universitas*, natural law theories of

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[77] DeWeil, "A Conceptual History of Civil Society: From Greek Beginnings to the End of Marx."

state thought of it as a *societas*. In *Natural Law and the Theory of Society*,[78] Gierke observes a fundamental distinction in Roman law, between *societas* and *universitas*. In Gierke's account, *societas*, as we have already noted, refers to an aggregate of distinct individuals formed by partnership in the pursuit of a common (and mutually beneficial) end. A *universitas*, on the other hand, while consisting of individuals, nonetheless endows its members with its corporate identity.

The modern natural law tradition was inaugurated by Hugo Grotius, whose theory served to replace scholastic views while at the same time addressing skeptical concerns raised by authors in the Renaissance. What motivated Grotius's masterwork, *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* (*On the Law of War and Peace*), was the need to establish universal principles of justice on a foundation other than belief in a Christian God. Grotius's project was not an atheistic one, but rather one of identifying those necessary conditions, without which human society would be inconceivable, and so establish universal principles of justice that could be accepted by Christians and skeptics alike.[79] "What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness: that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to him."[80] Like Descartes, who's *cogito* was meant to

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[78] Gierke, *Natural Law and the Theory of Society, 1500 to 1800*.

[79] Richard Tuck, "Grotius, Carneades and Hobbes," *Grotiana* 4 (1983): 53-55.

[80] Hugo Grotius, *Hugo Grotius on the Law of War and Peace*, trans. Stephen C. Neff, Student ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 4.

combat skepticism and to assuage fears that morality would cease if God were absent,[81] so too did Grotius seek to construct a post-skeptical morality that would bind human beings without resorting to theology. And like Descartes, whose inquiry led him to locate his first principle in the self, so too did Grotius's inquiry lead him to the principle of self-interest.

It is in *De Iure Praedae* that Grotius first systematically described his theory of natural law, which *De Jure Belli ac Pacis* would follow almost exactly.[82] Here, Grotius explains that, from the principle of self-interest, it was possible to derive two principles:

(1) "It shall be permissible to defend one's own life and to shun that which threatens to prove injurious;" and

(2) "It shall be permissible to acquire for oneself, and to retain, those things which are useful for life"[83]

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[81] "For although it suffices for us believers to believe by faith that the human soul does not die with the body, and that God exists, certainly no unbelievers seem capable of being persuaded of any religion or even of almost any moral virtue, until these two are first proven to them by natural reason." (René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 1.)

[82] Richard Tuck, "Grotius and Selden," in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*, ed. J. H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 516.

[83] Qtd. in ibid., 506.

In addition to self-interest, Grotius asserts that humans are also naturally moved by a common sense of kinship toward one another, which results in two additional laws of nature:

(3) "Let no one inflict injury upon his fellow;" and

(4) "Let no one seize possession of that which has been taken into the possession of another"[84]

As Tuck is careful to explain, the social sensibility that Grotius claimed humans have toward one another does not entail any obligation for humans to assist each other. It is not a principle that binds humans together. Instead, it amounts entirely to the understanding that all are similarly motivated by self-interest, and that the unrestrained pursuit of personal utility would produce conflict that would jeopardize one's life more than preserve it. "The natural society of men is one in which individuals pursue their own interests up to the point at which such a pursuit actually deprives another of something which they possess; it is not one of benevolence as we would customarily understand the term, and it is very far removed from the Aristotelian picture of the *zoon politikon*."[85]

Grotius marks a radical departure from Aristotle, in that he envisions a form of society that is neither political nor a *polis*. The principle of self-interest, for Grotius,

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[84] Qtd. in ibid.

[85] Ibid., 507.

replaces the kind of philosophical friendship that Aristotle insisted was both natural and necessary to the fulfillment of humanity's purpose. For Aristotle and the cosmopolitan tradition, the end of man was to achieve a life of pure contemplation and (except for the stoics) a well-ordered *polis* was necessary to achieve that end. For medieval thinkers, the end of man continued to be the contemplation of something outside of himself, and it was this activity of contemplating a shared external object that made community possible. Grotius's reconceptualization of human nature involved the elimination of an external object of contemplation and in so doing conceived of society in a way that was a-political. He also eliminated the need for a local community. Grotius was a kind of cosmopolitan in that he thought of society as a fundamentally global phenomenon. All are equally bound by natural law, and so equally members of society, regardless of their levels of interaction.

> [Relatively small] social units began to gather individuals together into one locality, not with the intention of abolishing the society which links all men as a whole, but rather in order to fortify that universal society by a more dependable means of protection, and at the same time, with the purpose of bringing together under a more convenient arrangement the numerous different products of many persons' labour which are required for the uses of human life.[86]

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[86] Qtd. in ibid., 508.

Society for Grotius is a jurisprudential concept. As in the case of the classical concept of *societas*, society is a partnership formed through sharing (of natural law) for the sake of achieving a common and mutually beneficial end (self-preservation). Any local civil societies that may form are subsequent to, and in the service of, the logic of universal society.

John Selden was Grotius's first important follower. Like Grotius, Selden set out to combat the skeptical claim, most famously expressed by Carneades,[87] that proof for the absence of a universal law of nature could be found in the fact that there was such widespread disagreement between nations. In contrast to Grotius, who thought it necessary to bracket the existence of God in order to demonstrate the operation of universal laws of nature, Selden held steadfastly to the idea that morality could only be secured in the presence of a superior who imposed a sense of moral obligation. In *De Iure Naturali et Gentium juxta Disciplinam Ebraeorum*, Selden agrees with Grotius that man's primordial state is one that is characterized by complete moral freedom, but that the will to self-preservation causes man to limit the expression of that freedom. For Grotius, the principle of self-preservation is sufficient in and of itself to justify a set of natural laws governing human relationship. Here, however, Selden disagrees with Grotius. In contrast with Grotius, who aims at an entirely non-theological justification of universal law, Selden insists that the universality of natural law is strictly a function of the fact that God spoke universal laws into existence.

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[87] K. E. Wilkerson, "Carneades at Rome: A Problem of Sceptical Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 21, no. 2 (1988).

I cannot fancy to myself what the Law of Nature means, but the Law of

God. How should I know I ought not to steal, I ought not to commit

Adultery, unless some body had told me so? Surely 'tis because I have

been told so? 'Tis not because I think I ought not to do them, nor because

you think I ought not; if so, our minds might change, whence comes the

restraint? From a higher power, nothing else can bind.[88]

For Grotius, the principle of self-interest necessarily implies a set of basic universal laws.

For Selden, the principle of self-interest merely motivates man's submission to God's

authority, which takes the form of abiding by laws revealed by God in history and as a

function of direct revelation through the active intellect.

For Selden, as with Grotius, society is a universal phenomenon. For Grotius, this

universality is the consequence of a common human nature, defined by self-interest and a

capacity to reason. For Selden, universal society is likewise a consequence of self-

interest and reason, but in a way that becomes manifest in a common submission to

divine law. A further significant difference between Selden and Grotius may be found in

the way that they each conceive of civil society. As we have seen, Grotius viewed the

formation of civil societies as a way of supporting and fortifying universal society, since

local societies make it possible to more efficiently produce and share those things that

human beings find useful. According to Selden, however, the emergence of civil

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[88] John Selden, *Table Talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden*, Third ed.
(London: J. M. Dent & Co., 1906), 73.

societies and the imposition of positive law is rather a symptom that universal society under the natural law established by God had broken down.[89]

As with Grotius and Selden, Pufendorf's conception of society emerges as a consequence of a particular relation to theology. For Grotius, it is important to demonstrate that it is possible to arrive at the essence of natural law and to make a strong case for civil society without having to assume the existence of a Christian God. For Selden, the thought of society in the absence of Divine authority is ludicrous. Pufendorf meets these two views in the middle, in a way, by adopting a kind of deist perspective that would see God as the creator of human beings entirely responsible for their own moral realities. On the one hand, argues Pufendorf, God "would not that Men should pass their Life like Beasts, without Culture and without Rule."[90] On the other hand, Pufendorf rejected any notion of an essential human nature, save for a strong social disposition:

> Man is an Animal extremely desirous of his own Preservation, of himself
> expos'd to many Wants, unable to secure his own Safety and Maintenance
> without the Assistance of his Fellows, and capable of returning the
> Kindness by the furtherance of mutual Good: But then he is often

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[89] Richard Tuck, ""The Ancient Law of Freedom": John Selden and the Civil War," in *Reactions to the English Civil War, 1642-1649*, ed. John Morrill (London: MacMillan, 1982), 149.

[90] Samuel von Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, trans. Basil Kennett, Fourth ed. (London: Printed for J. Walthor, R. Wilkin and J. Bonwicke, S. Birt, T. Ward, and T. Osborne, 1729), 3.

malicious, insolent, and easily provoked, and as powerful in effecting

Mischief, as he is ready in designing it. Now that such a Creature may be

preserv'd and supported, and may enjoy the good Things attending his

Condition of Life, it is necessary that he be *social*, that is, that he unite

himself to those of his own Species, and in such a Manner regulate his

Behaviour towards him, as that they may have no fair Reason to do him

Harm, but rather incline to promote his Interests, and to secure his Rights

and Concerns. This then will appear a fundamental Law of Nature, *Every*

Man ought, as far as in him lies, to promote and preserve a peaceful

Sociableness with others, agreeable to the main End and Disposition of

human Race in general.[91]

In *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, Pufendorf reaffirms the

fundamental importance of human sociability by stating that "all that necessarily and

normally makes for sociability is understood to be prescribed by natural law [and] all that

disturbs or violates sociability is understood as forbidden."[92] As Pufendorf unequivocally

asserts, all other precepts are finally reducible to the natural law of human sociability.[93]

And yet, it is also clearly the case from Pufendorf's arguments that human sociability is

not, itself, primordial, but is rather the consequence of a more fundamental drive toward

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[91] Ibid., 136-137.

[92] *On the Duty of Man and Citizen According to Natural Law*, trans. Michael Silverhorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 36.

[93] Ibid.

self-preservation. As Pufendorf explains, man's nature "is so constituted that the human race cannot be secure without social life," and "God wills that a man should use for the preservation of his nature the powers within him in which he is conscious of surpassing the beasts."[94] If both man and God desire that man's life be preserved, and that human sociability is a consequence of the exercise of man's reason in order to best achieve that end, then it is not the case that sociability is an essential human attribute, let alone *the* essential human attribute. Instead, sociability is natural and necessary only as a consequence of the convergence of man's reason and the urge to secure his life.

It is generally agreed that the modern conception of society as an object separate from the state and that exists in a way that warrants, not just study, but the development of a separate discipline, finally comes into full bloom with Montesquieu. As early as the *Persian Letters*, we see in Montesquieu a total dismissal of the natural law conception of society as no more than a collection of individuals bound together by contract:

> I have never heard any discussion of international law that did not begin
> with a careful examination of the question of the origin of societies—
> which seems ridiculous to me. If people did not come together in groups,
> if they avoided and fled each other, we would need to ask why they
> separated themselves. But instead they are born tied to each other: a son is

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[94] Ibid.

born to a father, and stays close to him: and that is society, and the cause

of society.[95]

In Montesquieu's view, human beings are naturally born into society, and bound together by a general spirit whose character is a function of climate, religion, law, the precepts of government, traditions, customs, and manners. Although DeWeil criticizes Montesquieu for his still-too-heavy influence by French Rationalism,[96] what we see here for the first time is an idea of a people defined by culture, and in such a way as to both effect it subjectively and be effected by it objectively. Born into society and bound by a general spirit, human beings nevertheless are prone to forget the fact. It is the task of the state, therefore, to implement laws that would effectively function to maintain order as surrogates for humans' natural but forgotten social instincts.[97]

With Montesquieu's conception of society, we see two features that are essential to the development of sociology in the eighteenth century. On the one hand, we see the ontologization of society as something that is separate from both the state against which it

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[95] Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *Persian Letters with Related Texts*, trans. Raymond N. MacKenzie (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2014), 138.

[96] DeWeil locates the origin of the concept of society with Herder, and closely associates it with the concept of culture. DeWeil, "A Conceptual History of Civil Society: From Greek Beginnings to the End of Marx."

[97] "Such a being could at any moment forget himself; philosophers have reminded him of himself by the laws of morality. Made for living in society, he could forget his fellows; legislators have returned him to his duties, by political and civil laws" Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Anne M. Cohler, Basia C. Miller, and Harold S. Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 5.

is opposed, and the individuals that make it up. Ironically, Montequieu's *société* is not a *societas*, but rather something more akin to a *universitas*, a functional unity that wields power as a collective rather than as a coordinated collection of contractual relations. From this perspective, then, Montesquieu can be seen as inventing modern society by fundamentally altering its referent, confusing it, in a way, with that against which it was previously opposed. As Dumont laments,

> The word by which the old scholastics designated society, or corporation
> in general, *universitas*, 'whole,' would much better fit the alternative view
> [to methodological individualism], which is our own, that society with its
> institutions, values, concepts, language, is sociologically prior to its
> particular members, the latter becoming human beings only through
> education into and modeling by a given society. It is unfortunate that,
> instead of *universitas*, we have to use *societas* or 'society' to designate the
> social whole; but the fact shows the legacy of Natural Law and its
> progeny.[98]

Montesquieu may be said to have invented society by merely placing *universitas* in the place of a *societas* that had already been set in opposition to the state. More than simply confusing *universitas* and *societas*, Montesquieu also innovated by setting society against, not just the state, as indeed Koselleck, Arendt, Runciman, and others identify as

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[98] Louis Dumont, "The Modern Conception of the Individual. Notes on Its Genesis and That of Concomitant Institutions," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 6 (1965): 30-31.

its defining feature, but also against the individual. In Gauchet's view, it is only with the emergence of an individual disengaged from traditional forms of community and religious expressions of place that something like society could appear as an objective, secular domain that impinges upon the wills of individuals.[99] In the face of alienating effects of industrialization on the one hand, and the anomic effects of skepticism on the other, the concept of society provided "an autonomous ground of human existence, a domain whose stability did not require the imposition of order from above, and whose free action did not necessarily denigrate into anarchy and disorder below."[100] Freitag argues that the Enlightenment concept of society as *universitas*, as a transcendent and ontologized whole, originally took its shape as a kind of god in the absence of God, a guarantee of peace and stability even in the face of utmost skepticism.[101] Such a conception of society, however important it may have been to the emergence of the science of sociology, was and still continues to be an artifact of its theological roots. Citing Habermas's discussion of the 'reserves of tradition,' Freitag claims that, while it is fair to talk about external systems of norms and values, and even the social as having a transcendental constitution, it is clearly a mistake to reify society as an object, as if the meaningful activity of individual human beings is in no way constitutive of it.

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[99] Marcel Gauchet, "De L'avènement De L'individu À La Découverte De La Société," *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 34, no. 3 (1979): 460.

[100] Baker, "Enlightenment and the Institution of Society: Notes for a Conceptual History," 119.

[101] Freitag, "The Dissolution of Society within the `Social'," 177.

What is involved is a question of ontology bearing on the irreducibly

normative 'mode of being' of human (read: contingent) reality, and the

fragility inherent in the 'mode of being' of value. Note that it is not the

mode of being (our mode of being as social beings) that has changed, but

only our manner of representing it. Until now all societies have given

themselves, through the 'debt of meaning', an indirect view of their

transcendental constitution and, in consequence, their ontological

actuality. By projecting outwards their inner consciousness of themselves

(at first in a concrete, and then an abstract manner), they were not –

whatever might have been said – deluding themselves as regards their

nature. On the contrary they were duly recognizing, in an entirely realist

manner, the ontologically transcendental character of their existence. In a

sense, they were only looking at themselves in a mirror. True, the mirrors

were broken; but being just mirrors, what they reflected did not, thereby,

fall to pieces. And what were these mirrors? At bottom no more than the

reflection's 'reification'. And the reflection is still with us: it is immanent

to our capacity to see and think, and is fundamental to our liberty.[102]

The Enlightenment conception of society, then, represents, not an end, but an

evolutionary stage in the development of the concept of the social. The fact that

sociology first arose in order to understand this newly discovered thing called 'society,' a

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[102] Ibid., 191.

thing whose ontological status is now held in suspicion in ways not dissimilar from those suspicions of religion in the eighteenth century, it is a serious question whether the discipline of sociology has, or will continue to have, value, or whether it is not itself merely an artifact of the eighteenth century, a function of the 'reserves of tradition' that is bound to disappear with the dissolution of society into the social.

The Concept of Society in Early Vico

Very little attention has been paid to the Vico's conception of society as it appears in his early works. There are several possible reasons for this neglect in the literature despite Vico's otherwise proto-sociological fame. In the first place, none of Vico's early orations, including *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, are ostensibly about the concept of society. The intention of these orations is not to develop sociological themes. Rather, taken together, the *Inaugural Orations* are meant to function holistically as a kind of 'perfect speech' in defense of the importance of humanistic education.

Taken both individually and as a collection, Vico's orations are an exercise in the art of rhetoric in exactly the way he describes in the orations themselves. As Vico explains,

> in the art of oratory the relationship between speaker and listeners is of the essence. It is in tune with the opinions of the audience that we have to arrange our speech. It often happens that people unmoved by forceful and compelling reasons can be jolted from their apathy, and made to change their minds by means of some trifling line of argument. Consequently, in order to be sure of having touched all the soul-strings of his listeners, the orator, then, should run through the complete set of *loci* which schematize the evidence. (SM 15)

The function of Vico's orations is to address students in terms of the various opinions and positions they might currently hold, as well as in terms of those that they might also come

to hold in the future. Whether primarily motivated by an interest in self-knowledge (*Oration I*), the cultivation of personal virtue (*Oration II*), the good of the community (*Oration IV*), political power (*Oration V*), or the advancement of knowledge (*On the Study Methods of our Time*),[103] the members of Vico's audience were meant to be convinced of the relevance and value of humanist training to their domains of primary interest. That we are meant to interpret Vico's inaugural orations holistically is evident from the manuscript tradition, according to which Vico continually revised his orations for future publication (although this never took place, most likely on account of a lack of patronage).[104] Vico's inaugurations were carefully crafted to convince the students at the University of Naples of the importance of humanistic education, and of the value of humanism in general, even as their values might change with their entry into civil service. Moreover, taken as a whole, the *Inaugural Orations* are meant as a general appeal on behalf of humanistic education to an audience that extended beyond the walls of the university, and into every corner of civil society.

A second reason for the neglect of the concept of society as it appears in Vico's early work may also have to do with what we know about Vico's own intellectual development. It was not until he was commissioned in 1713 to write what would become

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[103] Oration III functions as a way of effectively making the transition form the self in the first two orations to the community in oration IV, just as Oration VI serves to transition for primarily civic concerns to the more global interest in human progress.

[104] Salvatore Monti, *Sulla tradizione e sul testo delle orazioni inaugural di Vico* (Naples: Guida, 1977) and the introduction by Gian Galeazzo Visconti to Giambattista Vico, *Le orazioni inaugural, I-VI,* ed. Gian Galeazzo Visconti (Bologna: Il Milino,1982).

De rebus gestis Antonii Caraphaei (published in March 1716) that Vico first encountered

Hugo Grotius (A 154), and in a way that would initiate his serious interest in the tradition

of natural law, an interest that would consume him and culminate in the composition of

his master work, the *New Science*. Why should anyone be interested in Vico's

conception of society in works that appear to precede his interest in the topic? Why

should one expect to find anything in his use of the term *societas* other than what would

either have been commonplace or else the kind of standard definition one would find in

the Roman legal tradition?

A final possible explanation for a neglect of the concept of society as it appears in

Vico's early work is one that is particular to scholars reading Vico in English: poor

translation quality. In English, the only translation of Vico's *Inaugural Orations* is that

of Pinton and Shippee. Assessed only in terms of the ways with which they chose to

translate the Latin *societas,* and in terms of the contexts in which they choose to apply the

term 'society,' what we find is a striking degree of inconsistency, and a significant

muddying the hermeneutic waters. From the Pinton and Shippee translation, the reader

might easily get the impression that Vico thinks of society in the same loose and ill-

defined way that most contemporary English-speakers use the term. In actual fact, a

close reading of Vico's Latin finds, not only a striking amount of consistency in Vico's

use of the term '*societas*,' but also some key features that strongly anticipate a conception

of society that we don't otherwise see fully fleshed out until the *Universal Law*. In this, I

am in agreement with Flint who views Vico's thought as a continuous process of

enlargement and enrichment rather than as subject to the kind of discrete periodization

common among Italian interpreters.[105]

Vico's conceptions of philosophy and of education are intimately connected. As

with most philosophers of the Italian renaissance, [106] Vico was driven by pedagogical

concerns throughout his entire career. We can see this clearly in his oration on the

"Heroic Mind," delivered to the Academy of Naples in 1732, where he strongly asserts

the crucial connection between education and the good of human society as a whole (HM

230). Moreover, it is clear that Vico viewed the *New Science* itself as serving a

pedagogical function, as a practice meant to prepare the youth for virtuous participation

in civic life (NS 430, §1411). As Flint observes, Vico's pedagogical theorizing was

foundational to his intellectual development, and always central to the system of thought

that he developed over the course of his lifetime.[107] To the extent that Vico's earliest

orations were also interested in fostering a kind of self-knowledge within, and for the

sake of, community, it is clear that an interest in the nature of society and in the

conditions under which it becomes possible, was also important even at this early stage.

In spite of the various reasons that might lead to its neglect, then, it is nevertheless

remarkable that more attention has not been paid to the role of the concept of society in

Vico's early inaugural orations. Only very recently has Barbara Naddeo made an effort

[105] Robert Flint, *Vico* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co, 1884), 50.

[106] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979).

[107] Flint, *Vico*, 63.

to trace the origins of Vico's social theory back to his early pedagogical and rhetorical work. Naddeo's *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory* is an important work, one that goes a long way toward historically justifying Vico's importance and novelty as a modern social thinker. It is also important, in that it presents a compelling argument in defense of Vico as thinker whose interest in the social and in social theory did not emerge *ex nihlo* with the *First New Science*, but rather whose interest in the social is clearly evident as a guiding concern throughout his entire body of work, before the *New Science* and even before Vico's discovery of Grotius, whom Vico praised for embracing "in a system of universal law the whole of philosophy and philology, including both parts of the latter, the history on the one hand of facts and events, both fabulous and real, an on the other of the three languages Hebrew, Greek and Latin" (A 155). While I agree with Naddeo that an interest in the concept of society is evident in Vico's early orations, she doesn't pay enough attention to the term '*societas*' itself, but rather invests her interpretive energy in defending what she claims to be a very strong cosmopolitan commitment. Although Naddeo's argument that Vico self-consciously imposes a concentric view of stoic cosmopolitanism onto the structure of his orations is clean and elegant, a close reading of Vico's actual use of the term '*societas*' reveals a social theory of far more sophistication than Naddeo realizes, and which goes a long way in anticipating the social science that Vico would only explicitly elaborate some thirty years later.

What follows in the rest of this chapter is an investigation into the ways in which Vico uses '*societas*' and similar related terms throughout his early inaugural orations. Particularly close attention to the word 'society' as it occurs in Vico's orations (and in

Vico's *ouvre* as a whole) is a necessary consequence of fact that the present work is concerned with Vico's conception of society, and not with Vico's social theory. A problem with looking for social theory in Vico is that one is bound to find it. As a term, 'social theory' functions as a rather vague umbrella under which a wide variety of interpretive efforts might be collected, and which must assume a particular conception of the social before ever even getting off the ground. The scholar interested in understanding Vico's social theory inevitably begins with some conception of what social theory is before they can begin to look for it. In assuming a definition of social theory, the scholar must also necessarily assume a certain conception of the social (even if, as is most frequently the case, that conception is more latent and vague than fully expressed). In other words, to think of Vico as doing social theory is already to commit the conceit of scholars (NS 61, §127), which is to assume that one's own particular notions are shared by thinkers in the past. In an effort to avoid this kind of interpretive error, we must begin with the word, and to tease out its meaning in relation to its textual context (i.e. relative to the claims Vico explicitly makes about the term). Only once we have an understanding of Vico's own conception of the social can we then elaborate upon whatever theory he may have constructed from it.

Oration I: On Self Knowledge

In their translation of Vico's *Inaugural Orations*, Pinton and Shippee make the unfortunate decision to translate both *societas* and *civitas* as 'society.' Consequently, an important difference in Vico's use of the two terms is obscured. When Vico uses the

term *civitas* in the first of his inaugural orations, he means to refer to a particular

community, one that has a particular history and that is bound together by a set of shared

traditions and customs.

> Certainly "many traditions have been wisely discovered and instituted by
>
> our ancestors" for the moral well-being and the happiness of the **society**
>
> [*civitas*] founded upon them. (OI 35)

As a particular community, a *civitas* is one that sees human social capacities actualized in

a particular time and place. Along with its particular customs and traditions comes also a

set of habits and dispositions. In the context of his *Inaugural Orations*, Vico expresses

delight at the fact that the Naples of the early eighteenth-century is marked by curiosity,

with the implication that at other times and in other places, communities might be formed

that are not likewise motivated.

> So it is that the fruits we enjoy in our peaceful **society** [*civitatis*] are for
>
> the most part based on the cultivation of these studies, which, like trees in
>
> their seed, are all contained, I dare say, in this most advantageous
>
> tradition. Moreover, the most happy natural disposition of this age, and
>
> especially in this **society** [*civitate*], is such, by good fortune, that from
>
> earliest youth men are seized with a certain marvelous an incredible desire
>
> for learning. (OI 35-36)

A *civitas* is also hierarchically ordered. Vico argues that the students at the University of

Naples are, by virtue of both temperament and education, being prepared to participate in

the city as members of an elite group. As 'men of culture,' this group will receive the

greatest rewards the city has to offer, but in return they are given the responsibility

govern, as custodians of culture, in such a way as to both maintain tradition and to

continue the cultivation of virtuous dispositions.

> All of our **society** [*ordines*], which bestows the best positions and
>
> responsibility on men of culture, and the entire **commonwealth** [*civitas*]
>
> wish that you become the most erudite, for they treat such men with honor
>
> and praise. (OI 52)

Again, the implication here is that, although the *civitas* is by definition hierarchically

ordered, the aristocratic nature of Naples is neither universal nor necessary. It is in the

nature of a *civitas* to be hierarchically ordered, but rather than being governed by the

best, there is nothing to say that it might not otherwise be governed by the powerful. The

educated students to whom Vico addresses his speech, then, are charged to grow in

erudition that they might both enter into the positions that require it, but also in order to

conserve the traditions of the city and prevent it from becoming ordered otherwise.

In contrast to *civitas*, which is local, actual, and hierarchically ordered, *societas*,

for Vico takes on a distinctly cosmopolitan character.

> Demosthenes called the laws a gift of the gods, because by them the life of
>
> **society** [*societas*] is preserved. (OI 47)

> To be brief, all of the gods, for whatever benefit they have conferred on
>
> **human society** [*hominum societatem*], which antiquity has thus depicted
>
> as being in the heavens, are in truth you. (OI 48)

In contrast to the *civitas*, which, for Vico, is a function of tradition and hence whose characteristics are a function of both time and place, *societas* is universal. In the context of Vico's first inaugural oration, human society is made possible by virtue of a set of essentially human capacities (OI 48). The exercise of these capacities produces things of such grandeur that they transcend what is possible by tradition alone, and so, argues Vico, their products (which include law, medicine, eloquence, and music) have been famously attributed to the gods. Such products have a transcendent quality. They transcend time and space and affect human existence universally, as if they have their source, not in the life of the city, but in some external constellation of divinities. It is indeed true, says Vico, that there is a divine source for such wondrous innovations as law and medicine, but rather than locating such divinity externally, Vico finds it in the divine mind:

> For each one of you, O listeners, the mind is to you your own god. Divine
>
> is the faculty that sees; divine is that which hears; divine is that which
>
> conceives ideas; divine is that which perceives; divine that which judges;
>
> divine that which reasons; divine that which remembers. To see, to hear,
>
> to discover, to compare, to infer, to recollect are divine. Sagacity,
>
> keenness, cleverness, capability, ingenuity, and swiftness are marvelous
>
> great, and divine. (OI 48)

Human society refers to a community of divine minds that share a common capacity for creativity. But such a capacity can only be realized in space and in time, through the concrete exercise of creative capacities to make laws, and medical treatments, and speeches, and music. The life of universal *societas* is only realized in the concrete

activities and artifacts of the *civitas*, and stability within the *civitas* is made possible as a result of tradition. The role of education, then, is to mediate the conflicting forces of the *civitas* (whose conservative drive is toward peace and happiness, but which by itself risks falling into stagnation and legalism) and *societas* (whose drive is toward innovation, but which must be tempered lest it fall into chaos). To 'know oneself,' which is the theme of this first oration, means to understand oneself as a simultaneous member of two communities. On the one hand, by virtue of our humanity, we all belong to a common society of creative agents. On the other hand, by virtue of the fact that we must also, not only create, but also live together, we are also responsible for preserving peace within the city through abiding and preserving tradition.

Self-knowledge, for Vico, is essentially social. A lack of self-knowledge, according to Vico, finds itself manifest essentially in laziness, a state that shuns difficult things and pursues easy things (OI 35), and that results in a lack of properly civil participation. With self-knowledge, however, one finds themselves between *societas* and *civitas*, in need of them both, and responsible for the activity that produces and maintains each. To put it differently, although stoic in many ways, Vico's early conception of society is dichotomous from the start. In setting society apart from the state, as early as 1699, Vico is working with a view of society that is strikingly similar to our modern conception. All that is missing is a further distinction of society from the individual, such that society functions as an agent separately from the individual agencies of the people that make it up. It is true that Vico gestures in this direction through his brief comments about the power of tradition, but in this early account, tradition is a function of the state rather than of society. Vico, then, is not yet modern.

Oration II: On Virtue and Wisdom

It is only in the second of his inaugural orations that we see Vico introduce the concept of a universal city. Again, however, it is important to observe that Vico does not use the city as a metaphor for society, but rather observes that there are key characteristics of the *civitas* that may be applied to humanity as a whole. Vico's universalization of the *civitas* is not meant to supplement the concept of a human society, which he introduced in the first oration, but rather to demonstrate that human beings live simultaneously within two distinct forms of community. Vico uses the second oration to demonstrate that we have the same kinds of responsibility with respect to all of humanity as we do more local legislative bodies. In this, Vico highlights the fact that we, as human beings, always carry a dual membership in two fundamentally different yet interdependent kinds of universal community: the *civitas* and the *societas*.

> Certainly, he [the fool] is not punished for the crimes mentioned by the poetic theologians, because we could not commit any crime when we did not exist, but rather for acting against that eternal law upon which Almighty God has founded this orderly community throughout the whole world. If all things wish to preserve themselves and, at the same time, save the commonwealth of the universe, while other created things must follow their nature, man must instead follow wisdom as his guide. (OII 57)

In Vico's view, human beings are unique in that their behavior is governed by choice rather than by nature.

Having been assaulted by such weapons, defeated by so great a force, of

what most beautiful and great city is the fool deprived? Certainly not the

one protected by walls of stone marking boundaries defined by the plow,

but rather of the heavenly city encircled by a wall of blazing fire. He is

deprived not of a city founded on imperial laws, but rather of one ruled by

eternal law. He is deprived not of a city which venerates its patron deity,

but rather of one where the heavens which are the celestial temple of

Almighty God opens up. As its theater, the world lies open; as its baths,

the seas; as its racecourses the pathways of the sun. Only God and the

wise are its citizens. Man's privilege of citizenship is not by birth, nor by

one's legitimate children, nor is it a reward earned in the fields of battle or

at sea, but only by the possession of wisdom. (OII 66)

In his second oration, Vico expands his notion of the *civitas,* suggesting that there is a

way in which it, like *societas*, may be extended universally. Yet, the way in which a

civitas may be universal and the way in which a *societas* may be universal are

fundamentally different. As can be seen in Vico's first oration, membership in the human

societas is the *de facto* consequence of certain shared characteristics that are constitutive

of human nature itself. Citizenship in the universal *civitas*, on the other hand, is a

privilege, a function not of the human potential for wisdom, but rather of wisdom's

actualization. For Vico, the universal *civitas* and the human *societas* are not the same, but

they are nonetheless related as two sides of the same coin. We are essentially all in the

same community, but only a few have had the occasion to fully contract their essence

and, through wisdom, come to participate in the universal *civitas*, which is society's

fullest realization.

Oration III: On True Learning

It is really only with Vico's third oration that we see an explicit account of society

begin to emerge. Again, however, the Pinton and Shippee translation must be carefully

compared against Vico's original Latin in order to sift out the sediment that otherwise

muddies the water around Vico's conception of society. For example, Pinton and

Shippee translate Vico as stating that literary studies are intended "To bring about a peace

to spirit and to instruct in the most worthwhile manners of society" (OIII 75). The

implication here is that society somehow involves behavior and certain standards of

appropriateness. But in Vico's own words, there is nothing to say that manner and

society have anything to do with each other. It is indeed the case that Vico claims that

literary study establishes order in the soul and is instructive of excellent manners, but in

no way does Vico find that either of these consequences are connected to the concept of

societas.

In his third oration, Vico begins to use the term *societas* to describe community,

not in the universal sense, but rather in terms of more local and particular forms of non-

civic association. Delivered only a month following the failed conspiracy of the Prince of

Macchia, this oration differs importantly from Vico's first two, as it breaks from the

laudatory tone of the first two orations and laments the fact that it is not reason alone that

distinguishes humans from animals, but also their capacity to exercise freedom of will.

With a gesture to Pico Della Mirandola's *On the Dignity of Man*, Vico notes that "Man

alone is whatever he chooses to be. He becomes whatever he desires to become. He

does whatever pleases him" (OIII 74).[108] With Pico, Vico indeed agrees that it is

freedom of will that gives humans their greatest dignity, allowing them to sit at what Pico

calls the 'midpoint of the world.'[109] Unlike Pico, however, and in a way that sees the

start of a move away from a strictly stoic or Ciceronian view of human nature and toward

one that is more informed by the Christian theological tradition,[110] Vico now also sees

free will as the source of humanity's greatest ignominy. Unlike animals, humans are not

limited by instincts, and so are able to exercise a kind of lordship over the rest of nature

(OIII 74). But with this power of human nature to shape and forge itself, also comes the

power of self-destruction:

> Indeed, the freedom of choice of the human spirit is the reason for all evil.
>
> All misfortunes, all ruin, all plagues of mankind are derived from it. Man,
>
> by the abuse of his freedom of choice, has made harmful all things that
>
> were previously inoffensive to his nature. He has built above him a great
>
> wall of stone, but it will crush him. He has dared to entrust himself to the

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[108] Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. Charles Glenn Wallis, Paul J. W. Miller, and Douglas Carmichael (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1965), 4.

[109] Ibid.

[110] Barbara Ann Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 68.

sea, but it will shipwreck him. He has sharpened the iron, but it will inflict wounds on him. (OIII 74-75).

Just as in the first two orations, Vico continues to maintain that there is indeed a powerful and inherent human drive to enter into relationship with others, "a great and powerful force inherent in the soul of man which leads him to associate and join together with others" (OIII 76). But he now also acknowledges an opposing drive that would value the immediate selfish interest over actual utility, the pleasures of the palate over the needs of the body (OIII 75).

With an acknowledgement of the selfish nature of the human will, Vico now asserts that, in addition to the innate and God-given drive to enter into community, humans enter into various forms of association in order to share and mutually benefit from otherwise individually held goods and talents (OIII 76). "As reason unites men, language nations, government citizens, name families, blood kin, and commodities merchants, it is necessary both that scholarship should bring together professors of liberal arts and that the inquiry into the nature of all things unite philosophers" (OIII 77). Every form of human association, then, involves the exchange of some kind of shared material, which functions as the medium for sociability.

Although Vico does not here make use of the Malebranchean distinction between cause and occasion (as he would do later, beginning with *Universal Law*), it is clear that he is thinking along these lines even at this early stage in his intellectual development. While the cause of human association is Divine, since it is God who created humans in such a way as to desire it, the occasion for entering into society is exchange. For Vico,

there is nothing motivating human association, as if human beings need some prior

motivation before entering into relationship. Human beings rather enter into relationship

as an essential property of their nature. But relationship cannot take place in a vacuum.

Humans can only realize their nature as fundamentally social beings through some

medium of exchange. In other words, although not motivated by anything to enter into

relationship, human beings are nevertheless in need of an occasion to do so.

Even in this very early work, we see Vico working to establish sociability as a

first principle. If human beings are social rather than solitary in nature (as we see as a

basic premise in the natural law tradition), and enter into relationships for the sake of

fulfilling this fundamental drive (which is to say, for their own sake), then the ethical

principle of good faith naturally follows. If we understand ourselves as essentially social,

then it is always in our best interest to share, in order that the associations we enter into

might be preserved. This is a radical departure from the implications of assuming self-

interest as a first principle, as indeed we see in Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf. Vico

shifts the nexus of *conatus* away from the preservation of the individual (which quite

evidently has very negative social repercussions), and toward the preservation of the

community.

Not only does good faith serve to preserve society, but it also serves to bring

about the ends implied by every medium of social activity:

The nature of **society** [*societatis*] is, indeed, founded on mutual good faith.

Thus the ancients in matters regarding society have put forth in writing

that rule of law: "Among the good behave well." The strength and the

authority of this is such that as a duty it acquires the force of law. O

Eternal God! If in **societies** [*societate*] that are based on profit making the

members act equitably and fairly with one another, will the members in

the scholarly societies act unfairly with each other? (OIII 79)

In government, 'behaving well,' which is to say behaving honestly and acting in a way

that is consistent with the good of the whole, results in peace. In economics, good faith

yields profit. In the literary arts, good faith yields truth through an openness to criticism,

the absence of deception, and a spirit of sharing and mutual gratitude.

Good faith does not tolerate […] mockery and detests […] backbiting.

When you are conscious that an author has written well and has discussed

true things, take heed that you do not deceive yourselves into withholding

the credit due him. When you are conscious that in some way he has been

deceived or has erred or has strayed, do not allow him to persist in his

error, but with words well chosen as much as possible, advise him of his

faults. The citizens of Athens would vilify with public curses one who

gave misleading directions to another who had lost his way, and they

would charge him with acting against the nature of **human society**

[*humanam societatem*]" (OIII 82)

Is truth, then, the cause for entering into literary society? To the contrary, Vico is very

clear that in literary society, as in all forms of society, exchange activity is for the sake of

that society and not the other way around: "We must learn, O youth of great hope in

order to know how best to be able to relate humanely to others" (OIII 82). The primary

motivation for intellectual activity, and the fundamental reason for a commitment to good

faith is not the truth (although this may be a happy consequence). The primary reason to

pursue intellectual activity is to better relate to others in our mutual and genuine

humanity.

> In the **society** [*societatem*] of men of letters the most abundant fruit that
>
> we shall reap is modesty of spirit by which no one would presume to know
>
> beyond his measure. And thus, with all deceit overcome, such a one may
>
> live his life honestly and sincerely. (OIII 90)

Oration IV: On Education for the Common Good

Vico opens his fourth oration by briefly articulating a shift in his epistemological

orientation, from a rationalist view informed in large part by his reading of Descartes, and

toward a more Platonic Christian view. In contrast to Descartes, according to whom first

truth may be arrived at through the application of human reason alone, Vico now insists

that reason is an obstacle that must be overcome. In order to arrive at first truth, which is

beyond demonstration, Vico asserts that one must overcome sense, imagination, and

reason. By virtue of this fact, children must be reached before these capabilities are more

fully developed, and persuaded to assume their civic duties by "exhortation, admonition,

and entreaty."

> And so, all of what I have spoken must be accomplished by adolescence at
>
> an age when the vigor of the senses is the greatest, phantasy is the most
>
> powerful, the mind is in its most limited state because only now for the

first time has it become liberated from the chains of matter, and reason is

inquisitive to the point of insolence because it dwells in the total ignorance

of things. (OIV 93)

With this change in perspective, Vico now also shifts his interest away from specific

societies to the state. In Vico's view, the state binds people together in two ways. First,

the state binds citizens to itself out of duty. Government commits itself to its citizens so

that its citizens will, in turn, commit themselves to its service. The logic applies to

citizens universally, but especially to Vico's audience, which consists of students being

educated at public expense for the explicit purpose of entering civil service. "Can it be

otherwise than that you are now of special interest to the state so that later you yourselves

will wisely show the same concern in the administration of it along with the prince

himself? Therefore, if the greatest instigation to the pursuit of civil employment is to be

able to enter the service of the state, what should we say when the government itself of its

own accord has already committed itself to you?" (OIV 94). In essence, the state

functions for Vico as a nurturing parent that gives of itself for the sake of our

preservation. In return, it becomes the citizen's duty to serve the state according to the

nature of their individuals gifts and the extent that they have benefitted from the state's

investment.

The state binds people through duty and obligation, but this is not itself a social

bond, for it does not bind citizens to each other directly, but only indirectly as they share

a common relationship as an aggregate of debtors in relationship to a single lender. In

other words, citizens are bound together as sons (and daughters) sharing a common

relationship to a parent, and not because of any direct relationship to each other. They

are sons and daughters, not brothers and sisters. And yet, a consequence of this parental-type bond between state and citizens is a second and social relation that sees citizens bound together in fraternal love. State bonds are essentially relations of debt between unequals, but they nonetheless create an occasion for the formation of social bonds between equals.

Of fraternal bonds, Vico identifies several factors that are important to maintaining a social sense with one's fellow citizens. The first is group size: the greater the number of citizens, the less intense the feelings of affection between them (OIV 95). Second, the social bond requires a shared space, or a shared commitment to the geographical boundaries that a state provides. The source of kinship among citizens is the motherland. But the motherland does not only consist in boundaries. It has other qualities that significantly impact the feelings that people have toward it (OIV 96-97). The land is itself a determining characteristic of the virtue and happiness of its inhabitants. Fertile soil and benevolent sky lend themselves to just laws, lasting virtue, and unending happiness. Here again Vico lists the affordances of the motherland as producing a debt that must be paid by its inhabitants. In contrast to the debt owed the state, however, which can only be paid through service, debt to the motherland can be paid only through the fulfillment of human potential. Where the state demands usefulness, the motherland demands honor.

Human beings are marked by two kinds of debt, in accord with two kinds of relation. On the one hand, citizens are indebted to the state, which preserves them and, in exchange, demands that citizens make themselves useful through civil service. On the other hand, humans are indebted to nature, which demands that they maximize the

fulfillment of their potential. Just as "there can be none that is honorable from which the useful could be separated or distinguished" (OIV 100), so too is there not a state in the absence of society. To be honorable is to live in accord with the virtues that nature has endowed, and to cultivate one's capacity for service through training in the liberal arts (OIV 101-102). The desire to be honorable leads to the desire to serve, just as the desire to serve leads to the cultivation of virtue.

The state demands service. The motherland demands honor. In light of the convertibility of use and honor, it may be said that both the state and nature demand the same thing. This is not, however, to say that the state and the motherland are one in the same. They each demand the payment of a debt, and they both demand payment in the same currency; yet, the motherland comes first (OIV 97). Place takes priority over government, as indeed a condition of its possibility. The state establishes a relation between citizens and itself, and service to the state is always service *to the state*. One's debt to the motherland, on the other hand, is paid through the conditioned realization of one's human virtue, which culminates in service *to others* motivated by fraternal affection. In other words, the social bond comes first, as an immediate consequence of a life in accord with nature. The state bond comes later, as a consequence of the subsequent formalization of law and the establishment of government.

Vico emphasizes the importance of service to other citizens as if they were, in fact, kin. "Therefore, you should learn from other reasons the importance of freely serving the demands and needs of your fellow citizens. In fact, I believe that you can easily understand that the source of this kinship is our homeland. It is the need, affection, and solicitude that we have for our motherland that encompasses the needs, affections

and 'solicitides for others'" (OIV 96). As, indeed, we observe in Vico's third oration,

society is in need of a shared occasion in order to be expressed. For Vico, the city, while

not itself society, is nevertheless an important occasion for society's actualization, as it

provides a local space, a common set of commitments, and shared media of exchange

(the most important of which is a shared language). Whatever differences there may be

between the members of Vico's audience, they nevertheless share a common love and

commitment to city, which itself is a synecdoche for a tradition that came before, for "our

forbearers who founded our city and established our nation, and grateful memory for our

ancestors who have enlarged it and made it illustrious" (OIV 96).

As we might expect, Pinton and Shippee confuse Vico's account by incorrectly

translating *civitatem* as 'society,' as in "They [the founders] have established a society

[*civitatem*] with such just laws and under such favorable auspices that it increasingly

profits by lasting virtue and unending happiness" (OIV 97). A *societas*, for Vico, is not

established or founded, and is not governed by law. A *societas* may be actualized in

response to the founding of a city by law, but cannot itself be founded, since it both pre-

exists the city as a potential inherent in human nature itself and becomes actualized

within it through exchange.

There are only two places in which Vico mentions *societas* in this fourth oration,

and in both cases Vico is clearly interested, not in particular societies, but rather in

human society as a universal.

> I share here the inheritance of Socrates and the complaints which he made
>
> against those men who were first to draw the most dangerous distinction

within **human society** [*humanae societati*] between the two terms "the

useful" and "the honorable." That which nature has joined to be one and

the same they have pulled apart by their false opinions. (OIV 99)

In truth, O Listeners, this is the most close-linked chain of events—from

the conviction of desiring to help **human society** [*humanae societatis*] is

born duty, from repeated duty is created the reputation of virtue, from that

reputation of virtue the praise of good fellows, from the praise of the good

men by necessity the poser of leadership emerges, then honors, riches, and

followers. (OIV 102)

The order of priority that Vico lays out here is very important. What comes first, in

Vico's account, is not self-interest, as if self-interest is what brings society about.

Instead, what comes first is an interest in actualizing and maintaining society itself. Vico

here inverts the assumptions of the natural law tradition by seeing more selfish ambitions,

not as primary, but as a consequence of the more primordial desire to help and preserve

human society.

Oration V: On The Liberal Arts and Political Power

In the fifth oration, Vico extends his discussion of the honorable and the useful,

and in particular his defense of the value of the literary arts, beyond the realm of the civil

affairs of the state, and into that of international politics. Against the argument that

political power is won solely through courage and military fortitude, Vico sets out to

defend the claim that "nations have been most celebrated in glory for battles and have

obtained the greatest political power when they have excelled in letters" (OV 110). Vico

anticipates and upsets his audience's expectation that he would argue in defense of the

compatibility of wisdom and military strength. An obvious kind of argument that could

be made in defense of humane education would be to say that it produces a more prudent

and effective practitioner in the arts of war. But Vico admits from the start that "the

study of letters wears away strength" (OV 111). Instead of making the obvious

argument, which would be to say that the study of letters produces the best soldier, Vico

challenges the assumption that military force is what is first and foremost responsible for

producing, preserving, and expanding the state. As we have seen, Vico considers society

and state separately, and insists that the former take priority over the latter. Military

investment in the absence of literary investment is akin to supporting an effect at the

expense of its cause. It is a strong social sphere that is ultimately responsible for assuring

the stability of the state, and the social sphere is maintained by wisdom. The exercise of

military strength brings about instability. Even its victories are short-lived without a

peaceful society to support it:

> How can it be, someone would ask, that the great glory of war and the
>
> most high praise of wisdom in one and the same commonwealth not only
>
> accept one another but accompany and help each other when the military
>
> art strengthens the vigor of the body while the discipline of the literary arts
>
> weakens it; war arouses, but wisdom tames the spirits; soldiers delight in
>
> scuffles, while philosophers love tranquility; those who are adept at war
>
> are wasteful of their souls, while those devoted to wisdom lament the
>
> shortness of life because of the plentiful abundance of things to be known;

and finally, the arms of warfare prepare the demise of humankind while

the arts of wisdom preserve **human society** [*humana societas*]? (OV 111)

Vico flips the expected argument on its head. Instead of demonstrating the value of

humane education to military service, Vico makes a case for submitting the military to

philosophers. Instead of using the military as a blunt instrument for the enforcement of

positive law, which inevitably brings nations into conflict, Vico insists upon service to

natural law, which is shared by all and oriented toward universal harmony:

> Wherever the Hun brings war, horror overtakes, destruction accompanies,
>
> desolation follows; the philosopher, while he is resisted, urges, perseveres;
>
> when victory is won, kindness, forgiveness, compassion prevail. Wars of
>
> the former kind, in which the greedy fight for blood and gold only to
>
> obliterate, exterminate, and plunder, bring ruin to mankind; the latter,
>
> instead in which one confronts the other to set conditions right, is
>
> necessary for mankind. (OV 113)

In this fifth oration, Vico supports his argument with explicit reference to

Seneca's cosmopolitanism. Following Seneca, Vico argues that man has a dual

citizenship, one given by nature and the other by birth.

> Let us take hold of the fact that there are two communities – the one,
>
> which is great and truly common, embracing gods and men, in which we
>
> are neither to this corner nor to that, but measure the boundaries of our

state by the sun; the other, the one to which we have been assigned by the accident of our birth. [111]

The latter is defined by geographic boundaries and governed according to locally established laws enforces by state institutions. The former has no geographic boundaries -- "the limits […] are the heavens" (OV 117) -- and is based on the divine right of nations. The way that Vico distinguishes man's two citizenships departs significantly from Seneca's account, however. For Seneca, man's dual citizenship takes individual men as its basic unit and explores two forms of relationship: (1) the relationship to the state under positive law, and (2) man's relationship to man under natural law. For Vico, in contrast, the basic unit of interest changes between the two forms of citizenship. On the one hand, like Seneca, Vico identifies man's citizenship to the state through positive law. On the other hand, he looks to the relationship between states under natural law. There is a strong parallelism between the two forms of relationship, the state-mediated relationship between men, and the natural-law mediated relationship between states. In both cases, relationship is produced and assured through contracts: "Each of them is based on its own laws, the first by the divine right of nations, and other by the proclamation of the people, the senate, or the sovereign" (OV 117). The primary end of civil law is the enforcement of contracts between private citizens. Similarly, the proper end of military activity is the enforcement of contracts between states.

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[111] Seneca, *On Leisure* 4.1. In Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 1, 431.

> If private parties bind themselves by contract or have violated the law, our
> rights with them can be protected by specific legal procedures. However,
> if a people has violated the divine right of nations or has broken a treaty of
> alliance, then what sort of remedy will shine forth to preserve the law of
> human society? War and the implements of war. (OV 117).

Just as in the state, in which peace is preserved through the exercise of wisdom in the creation of just laws, and the application of force solely in the service of those laws, so too is peace between nations best preserved by wise treaties and alliances, with military force applied only under the direction of wise counsel and for the sake of guaranteeing agreements.

> And should it not also be our right that soldiers bearing arms uphold and
> defend the divine law of nations and the supreme rule of the inherent
> rights of peoples, which is the conserving of **human society** [*humanae*
> *societatis*] that the philosophers want to be the standard of all our duties?
> (OV 113).

With this, Vico circles back. The study of literary arts and the cultivation of humane virtues do not make a good soldier, but they do make a good commander, whose duty it is to know when military strength is warranted by natural law and, when it is, to mobilize troops in the most efficient and effective manner. Guided by wisdom, counseled by prudence, and in the service of natural law, the military arts may rightly be viewed as arts of peace, rather than as arts of war.

Oration VI: On The Proper Order of Studies

In Vico's sixth oration, he treats the practice of education itself, providing an account of the order of studies that is best suited to human nature. In Vico's view, human nature consists essentially of these parts: mind, spirit, and language. Each of these essentially human qualities has been corrupted, says Vico, by the body, which man shares with animals and is the source of the will. Through the will, the body separates human beings from one another by rendering language inadequate, the mind confused by opinion, and the spirit distracted from virtue. In other words, the body is anti-social, for because of it, communication is incomplete, arguments erupt, and we are driven by self-interest as the expense of others (OVI 127).

> Because basic human nature has been changed by original sin, assemblies
> of men may appear to be societies, but the truth is that isolation of spirits
> of greatest where many bodies come together. Even more is it like the
> crowded inmates of a prison where the spirits that I have mentioned above
> endure punishments, each in a cell to which it is assigned. (OVI 129)

The goal of education, then, is to counter-act the anti-social tendencies of the body, and to cultivate man's humanity through eloquence, knowledge, and virtue: "These three are like the three points around which all the orb of the arts and sciences encircles. All wisdom is contained in these three most excellent things—to know with certainty, to act rightly, and to speak with dignity" (OVI 129). In his first oration, Vico argues that "knowledge of oneself is for everyone the greatest incentive to acquire the universe of learning in the shortest possible time" (OI 33-38). Here, in his sixth oration, Vico tells us

what exactly it is in which this self-knowledge consists: eloquence, knowledge, and virtue. Each of these aspects of human nature is crucial for man to enter into true society.

As far as the proper order of studies is concerned, Vico insists that they should begin with languages, for society is only possible to the extent that languages are polished, unambiguous, and shared (OVI 135). Language is the first thing that children acquire, and serves as the scaffold upon which all other knowledge is built, and so it is incumbent upon educators to ensure that it is acquired rightly. This is particularly the case, says Vico, since it is in childhood that human memory is the strongest, and reasoning capacity poorest. Attempting to cultivate analytical skill during this time, then, is counter to human nature in two respects: it is difficult to accomplish and, to the extent that is accomplished, distracts from the more social aim of language acquisition. Eloquence joins; analysis divides. The mind's capacity for reason, argues Vico, should only be developed in adolescence, and then should follow beginning with mathematics, which is aided by youthful imagination, through physics, and culminating in training in the most abstract form of human reason, which is metaphysics. With studies ordered in this way, a student's natural ability to reason will not only follow their natural cognitive development, but also lead them progressively to that knowledge of God and understanding of Christian religion which is so crucial to the spirit's ability to make wise judgments about human affairs. All of this culminates with a return to language, through the study of eloquence, for it is one thing to be wise, and another to give wise counsel:

> Finally, you have been instructed in these studies of wisdom so that each
> of you may earn merit far and wide from human society and be of help,

not only to yourselves or to a few, but to as many as possible, and to this

end you should join with these studies those of eloquence. (OVI 138)

As the proper order of studies demonstrates, the aim of education is to prepare humans to

serve, not the state, but rather human society as a whole. While it is certainly true that

humane education benefits the state, in both civil and international affairs, it does so only

by putting human nature, and consequently human society, first. In this, Vico's first six

inaugural orations may be read together as an exercise in stoic virtue. Just as in the case

of Zeno's archer, who hit his mark only by losing sight of his target and focusing,

instead, on developing his excellence as an archer, Vico's student serves the state and

will receive all of the resulting accolades, but only in a meaningful and enduring way to

the extent that civil virtue is forgotten. True civil virtue is only possible through the

pursuit of social virtue first, and it is this social virtue that true education exists to

cultivate (OVI 140).[112]

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[112] Discussion of Vico's seventh oration, published separately as *On the Study Methods of our Time*, is not included here for reason of the fact that it largely reiterates sentiments expressed in the sixth oration, but with an even more exclusive pedagogical emphasis. As far as Vico's conception of society is concerned, the term *societas* is mentioned only twice (SM 9, 77-78). In each case, the term is used to refer to all of humanity, but in a way that contributes nothing to the conception of society developed in the first six of Vico's inaugural orations.

Vico's Metaphysics: Society as First Principle

On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians

Just as in the case of Vico's *Inaugural Orations*, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* would seem to have very little to do with the concept of society. The stated aim of the work is to derive a metaphysics on the basis of Latin etymologies. The work was to be the first and foundational volume in a series that would also include (uncompleted) volumes on physics and ethics. Although the three-volume project was ultimately abandoned, *Ancient Wisdom* nevertheless functions as a foundational text for the theories that Vico would later explicate beginning with *Universal Law*, and ultimately in the *New Science*.

The word *societas* does not appear a single time in the entirety of Vico's metaphysical work. Yet, *Ancient Wisdom* is nevertheless essential to establishing the foundation upon which Vico's mature conception of society is laid. In particular, *Ancient Wisdom* accomplishes two vital tasks. First, Vico is concerned with establishing the limits and conditions of human knowledge. Ironically, in this metaphysical work, what we see is ultimately a criticism of metaphysics itself. In explicating what human knowledge is, and the conditions under which it is possible, Vico presents a criticism of metaphysical speculation in general. Second, in taking up Descartes' *cogito*, Vico provides a damning argument against self-knowledge as first principle. On the one hand, Vico's criticism of metaphysics is necessary to establishing a legitimate space for philology as a primary method of achieving human understanding. On the other hand,

Vico's criticism of the *cogito* is necessary to undermining the assumption of the solitary self as the foundation, not just for metaphysical speculation, but for politico-historical knowledge as well. By clearing away the self as a first principle, Vico makes room for what he will later put in its place: society.

Critique of Metaphysics

Vico opens *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* with the most important paragraph of the entire work. In the etymologies of three related terms—*intelligere*, *cogitare*, and *ratio*—are contained the essence of, and foundation for, the work as a whole.

> For the Latins, *verum* (the true) and *factum* (the made) are interchangeable or, as is commonly said in the Schools, they are convertible; and for them, *intelligere* (to understand) is the same as *perfecte legere* (to gather fully) and *aperte cognoscere* (to know plainly). Also, where they said *cogitare* (to think), we, in the vernacular, say *pensare* (to think) and *andare reccogliendo* (to go along gathering together). Also, *ratio* (reason) for them referred both to the sum of elements gathered together in arithmetic and to the endowment proper to man, by which he differs from and is superior to brute animals. (AW 17)

The vast majority of commentators are wont to view the convertibility of the *verum* and the *factum* as foundational to Vico's thought, both in *Ancient Wisdom* and in subsequent works as well. In actual fact, however, the convertibility of the true and the made is

premised on a far more basic set of distinctions which is made on the basis of the metaphor of 'gathering.'

Thought, for Vico, is a gathering process. In agreement with Aristotle, Vico concurs that man is a rational animal, an animal distinguished by his capacity for reason. In contrast to Aristotle, however, and by appealing to the ancient Italians rather than to the Greek language, Vico argues that to be a rational animal does not mean having a capacity for speech. Instead, human rationality merely refers to the extent to which humans are capable of understanding. *Ratio* refers at once to a being's potential for gathering, and the limits beyond which a being is incapable of gathering. To extend the gathering metaphor, human *ratio* for Vico is akin to the basket that we bring into the world by virtue of our humanity. Our *ratio* basket is the condition of possibility of our gathering, of our ability to think (*cogitare*), but its finitude also restricts our ability to understand (*intelligere*), which is to say 'gather fully.' In Vico's view, *ratio* is an attribute that only fully belongs to the divine mind. Human beings are distinguished from animals by virtue of their ability to 'participate in reason' (AW 17), which is to say by an imagination that represents experience, and a memory that records those represented experiences. *Ratio,* for Vico, has nothing to do with an ability to synthesize information and to deduce its consequences, but rather to a being's ability to think reality into being for itself.

Our 'basket' contains, not the things themselves, but rather only our perceptions of those things. In this, Vico is deeply phenomenological in his understanding of understanding. To think (*cogitare*) is to go along gathering together (*andar raccogliendo*), but our gathering is limited only to the externals of things. In other words,

we gather only our experiences of things as we represent them to ourselves. For this reason, argues Vico, the Latin *legere* means both to gather and to read, because in reading we gather together representations of things in words; in reading we gather words, not things. What distinguishes Divine understanding from human thinking is that in God are gathered things in their entirety, and without the need for representation:

> The true is itself made; and consequently, first truth is in God because God is the first maker; it is infinite because he is the maker of all things; it is most complete because He represents to Himself both the external and internal elements of things, for he contains them. Moreover, science involves composing the elements of things, both external and internal, because He contains and disposes them, but the human mind, because it is bounded and outside everything else which is not itself, goes along gathering up only the extremities of things, but never gathers everything together. (AW 17)

The mind contains only what it makes. Since God is the maker of all, all is contained in His divine mind. Humans, however, only make representations based on their experience of the externals of things, and so are necessarily capable of only finite and incomplete knowledge. Human *ratio* is limited by absolute constraints introduced as a result of the nature of human being, as created creator.

It is on the basis of the epistemological limits that Vico argues are the logical consequence of the nature of human being that that Vico launches his criticism of metaphysics. Having demonstrated that complete truth is in God and God alone, Vico

asserts that we have no other rational choice than to accept the truth of revelation without also inquiring into its cause, motivation, or reason. Since the genus and mode of revealed truths are beyond our ability to comprehend them, to presume to know them is not only futile, but also vain and impious. What, then, is the nature of human science, if human knowledge consists wholly and entirely in representations of experience? In Vico's view, science is an 'anatomy of the works of nature' (AW 17). Like the anatomist, the scientist cannot do their work without also cutting and killing their object of study:

> But the same thing comes to pass in this anatomy of things as does in the ordinary anatomy of the human body: in the latter, even the more keen-sighted physicists wonder about the condition, structure and function of the parts of the body, wonder whether because of death (with the bodily fluids thickening and motion ceasing, and even with the very dissection itself) both the condition and structure of the living body have perished so that it is impossible to determine what the function of these parts is. (AW 21)

In rummaging around the externals of things, cutting up nature in order to understand it, we merely increase our experience of externals without actually coming into contact with the internals of things (their genus and their mode) as they are. For Vico, abstraction is the process of cutting our experience of things, which is otherwise primordial, in an attempt to come into contact with what is beyond our grasp. We readily identify the composite nature of the things we experience, and so we strive to cut our experience in order to come into contact with its more simple parts. But these parts are absolutely hidden from our view. Out of either ignorance or pride, however, we ignore our

epistemological limits and proceed via abstraction to cut and divide our experience. For Vico, the Latin language is here revealing as well, as the same word, *minuere*, means both to divide and to diminish, "as if to say that things we divide are no longer composed, but diminished, changed, corrupted" (AW 23),

In Vico's view, abstraction is the result of a natural vice of the human mind. It is a vice because it is impious. It is impious, because in presuming to extend beyond our epistemological limits, we claim an ability to know the truth of things. Since truth and making are convertible, to claim the ability to know the truth is also a claim to have made the world we discover. But this is a function that is accorded to God and to God alone.

A happy consequence of this impiety is that, through its exercise, humans do actually become creators:

> Subsequently, man turns this vice of his mind to good use and by abstraction, as they say, feigns for himself two things, a point which can be designated and a point which can be multiplied. […] Over and beyond this, man assumes for himself the right to advance from these fictions all the way to the infinite such that he may draw lines and multiple innumerable times. So, on this basis, he found within himself a sort of world of forms and numbers, a universe circumscribed by himself, and by extending or cutting or composing lines, by adding, subtracting or computing numbers, he effects infinite works because he know within himself infinite truths. (AW 25)

The function of abstraction is not actually to serve as a vehicle for arriving at simple, clear, and distinct truths (as Descartes would have it), but rather to create fictions that have the appearance of truth. Relative to the world of things that God has created, such fictions are exactly that: fictions. As fictions, these foundational principles of geometry are also fully made by man, fully contained by man, and so also fully certain. The mistake that man makes, therefore, is not of claiming to have arrived at truth, but to apply these truths outside of their proper domain, which is human consciousness. In all this, what is clear is that the task of metaphysics, according to Vico, is not a speculative one, but rather one of identifying the nature and limits of man relative to God, and to identify the epistemological limits of man, beyond which it is both futile and impious to proceed.

Critique of the Self as First Principle

Vico opens his critique of Descartes by focusing on his unoriginality. That Vico emphasizes this point so strongly is an indicator that, if Vico read Descartes at all, his acquaintance with the *cogito* was exclusively as a consequence of having read the *Discourse on Method*. If Vico had read the *Meditations*, he would have seen from the start that Descartes did not, in fact, make any claim to originality in the articulation of any of the particular arguments that he employed. Instead, Descartes merely claimed to have collected together the best arguments of his time:

> I am convinced that hardly any arguments can be given that have not
>
> already been discovered by others. Nevertheless, I judge that there is no
>
> greater task to perform in philosophy than assiduously to seek out, once

and for all, the best of all arguments and to lay them out so precisely and plainly that henceforth all will take them to be true demonstrations.[113]

On the one hand, Vico's discussion of Descartes' originality seems out of place, especially in light of Vico's own insistence in the *Inaugural Orations*, upon a spirit of charity within the society of letters. In fact, Vico goes so far as to patronize Descartes by referring to him variously as 'the great meditator' and 'the great philosopher '(AW 31). More than seemingly inconsistent with the virtues befitting a member of the society of letters, Vico's interest in Descartes' originality also seems to be irrelevant to what is a larger critique of the *cogito*. The question of Descartes' originality is, at first glance, irrelevant to an evaluation of the validity of his claims. Regardless of Vico's own originality in identifying similarities between the modern Descartes and obscure and ancient sources, it is difficult to see how Vico's comments here might contribute positively to his larger argument. Rather, Vico's patronizing interest in Descartes' originality appears to function at this point only to discredit the source of ideas that had, by that time, overcome the city of Naples (A 128ff), and that even Vico himself praised as little as ten years earlier as a "philosopher like no other" (OIII 81).

According to Vico, the difference between the dogmatist and the skeptic is not that either denies the certainty of their own thinking. Both the dogmatist (Descartes) and the skeptic (Vico) alike agree that one's own thinking is an event that would be silly to doubt:

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[113] Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 2.

But no skeptic doubts his own thinking: indeed, he professes that what he seems to see is so certain, and professes it with such steadfastness, that he defends it even in the face of ridicule and calumny. Nor does the skeptic doubt his own being: indeed, it is precisely this well-being that concerns him when he withholds his assent, lest he add opinions to the troubles the things themselves already have in store for him. (AW 33)

The difference between the dogmatist and the skeptic rather lies in the epistemological status that they grant their certainty, and so to the extent to which their knowledge may function as a first principle on the basis of which one might secure the truth of the world of knowledge that is built upon it.

A key distinction, for Vico, is the difference between science (*scientia*) and consciousness (*conscientia*). "For science involves possessing the genus or form by which something comes to be, while consciousness belongs to those things whose genus or form we cannot demonstrate" (AW 33). Returning to Vico's *verum-factum* principle, except for cases in which we are, ourselves, responsible for the conditions of a thing's creation (and so are capable of fully demonstrating its form, by perfectly gathering together its elements), we are limited to the externals of things. Since all human beings have equal access to the externals of things, no particular erudition or esoteric knowledge is necessary in order to arrive at valid conclusions in this domain. This insight makes sense of both Vico's interest in the character of Sosia and also in the patronizing way in which he refers to Descartes. The nature of consciousness is such that it involves knowledge that is commonplace and available to even the most humble, as indeed it is available to an uneducated slave like Sosia.

Descartes' mistake, then, is a failure to recognize that self-certainty is in no way different from certainty attained by consciousness of any other phenomenon. To bring his point home, Descartes implicates an 'evil genius' to function as a *deus ex machina*, as if the introduction of such a possibility serves to actually distinguish self-knowledge from the kind of consciousness that one might have about any other object. Yet, the introduction of such a 'character' functions only to obscure the fact that, regardless of its object, consciousness is always subject to the same limits. Whether a stone or one's own self, consciousness always encounters its objects as external to itself. On the model of the divine mind, science is only possible in cases where the human mind can perfectly gather together all the elements of a thing, and in such a way that those elements may be contained within itself. In an odd sense, the self, according to Vico, doesn't have or contain even itself. Rather, the self and the stone, as equally created by God, co-exist as external to consciousness and, as such, are equally intractable. As created beings in a world of created beings, we are all like Sosia. On the basis of his distinction between science and consciousness, Vico further distinguishes between two kinds of truth. In contrast to divine truth, which is both perfect and infinite, human truths

> are those whose elements we feign for ourselves, contain within ourselves,
> extend into the infinite through postulates, and when we compose those
> elements, we make the truths which we know in the composing, and on
> account of all this, we possess the genus, or form, by which we make
> them. (AW 39)

In other words, human truths, unlike divine truths, consist in fictions. Just as in mathematics "man turns this vice of his mind to good use and by abstraction, as they say,

feigns for himself two things, a point which can be designated and a unit which can be multiplied," and "assumes for himself the right to advance from these fictions all the way to the infinite" (AW 25), so too does the *cogito* represent a fiction on the basis of which a system of knowledge may be derived, to be sure, but a system marked by human truth, fictitious truth, nonetheless.

Universal Law

Vico's *Universal Law* is a work of metaphysics that builds upon the work begun in *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* in order to address a fatal flaw that Vico identifies in the natural law tradition, and particularly in the work of Hugo Grotius.

> On the other side there is Hugo Grotius, a weighty philosopher and most
> eminent philologist. […] But when his principles are submitted to critical
> examination, they are found to be more probable and verisimilar than
> necessary and irrefutable. (UL 48)

In sharp contrast to his position in *Ancient Wisdom*, Vico's view in *Universal Law* is that civil and moral principles must be built upon a firm metaphysical foundation. Metaphysics must come first, because our ability to prescribe, or even to adequately understand the meaning of, activity in the realm of human affairs, requires a complete understanding of what a human is, (1) in itself, (2) in relation to others, and (3) in relation to God (UL 42). The practical consequence of deriving principles of natural law from sources other than metaphysics is that legal conclusions come into conflict. The fundamental reason for differences of opinion in the legal tradition, argues Vico, is the

fact that the field of jurisprudence was not built upon a single first principle, but rather on two: reason and authority.   On the one hand, there are those 'philosophers' who, like the ancient Greeks, subject the law to metaphysical arguments, but neglect a consideration of the role of history, precedent, and authority to the art of applying law to facts. On the other hand, the philological approach takes history, precedent, and authority very seriously, but lacks the commitment to reason that would mitigate interpretive differences. According to Vico, the age-old conflict between the philosophical and philological perspectives is not a necessary one, but is rather a consequence of a failure to recognize that the two are actually integrated by a single, more foundational principle. In other words, Vico criticizes these conflicting perspectives for thinking of reason and authority as first principles, when metaphysical reflection reveals the fact that they are in fact both derivative, made possible by a principle that is truly original. What conflict emerges in the field of jurisprudence is as a consequence of an unclear understanding of what reason and authority are in the first place. For Vico, the task of synthesizing reason and authority in a single universal first principle can only be accomplished by metaphysics:

> Therefore we must begin by establishing that there is a law, true and
> eternal, and that this law obtains everywhere, among all people, and at all
> times. Metaphysics explicates the eternal knowledge of true things, and
> metaphysics defines this explication as "criticism of the true." Only
> metaphysics can demonstrate that such a law exists and remove the
> wretched doubt that justice does not exist. Thus, we must derive from that

philosophy the principles of that law to which everyone agrees amicably

and constantly. (UL 49)

It is curious that Vico apparently abandons the critique of metaphysics that he advances

in *Ancient Wisdom*, in order to engage in a project that is not only metaphysical in a very

traditional sense, richly informed by scholasticism, but also Cartesian since he draws

heavily form Malebranche for many of his basic assumptions.

Vico and Malebranche

That Vico was influenced by Malebranche, as a direct consequence of the

Neapolitan Cartesianism of his day, has been observed by Del Noce,[114] Agrimi,[115]

Botturi,[116] and Fabiani.[117] Botturi, in particular, has shown the influence of Malebranche

on Vico's conception of society:

The metaphysical character of Vico's philosophy of law manifests

conceptualizations that manifest the power of the Malebranchean

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[114] Augusto Del Noce, *Riforma Cattolica e Filosofia Moderna*, vol. 1 (Bologna: Società editrice Il Mulino, 1965), 694.

[115] Mario Agrimi, *Vico e Malebranche* (Naples: Cuen, 1999), 10.

[116] Francesco Botturi, *La Sapienza della Storia* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1991), 241.

[117] Paolo Fabiani, *The Philosophy of the Imagination in Vico and Malebranche*, trans. Giorgio A. Pinton (Florence: Firenze University Press, 2009), 26-27.

influence. We may say that at this phase of the Vichian thought, Vico

found in the Cartesianism of Malebranche the most suitable formulas for

deducing the strict connection between philosophy and law, and in this

connection the implication of an absolute in the regulation of social

rapports. The defense of the natural law against the skeptic doubt exalts in

Vico the search for the ultimate condition of the possibility of law itself,

possibility that is identified in the transcendental relationship of the human

mind with God. Law in the eyes of Vico becomes practiced metaphysics,

expression of the nature of the human mind. The metaphysical structure of

law is analyzed by Vico with a terminology and some references that echo

in profundity the Malebranchean meditations. This is verifiable at the

analytical or systematic level and indeed we may say that Malebranche

represents the magnetic orientation of Vico's thought.[118]

For whatever criticisms there may be of Vico's connection to, and influence by,

Malebranche (Fabiani lists three possible criticisms, but fails to provide any examples of

these criticisms ever having been launched), it is surprising that more work hasn't been

done on Malebranchean intertext in the *Universal Law*. Indeed, each of the five

metaphysical assumptions that Vico uses as the foundation of his work are taken almost

word-for-word from Malebranche's *Search of Truth*. First, Vico fully accepts

Malebranche's dualism, arguing in total agreement with him that there are only two kinds

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[118] Botturi, *La Sapienza della Storia*, 241. Fabiani, *The Philosophy of the Imagination in Vico and Malebranche*, 26-27.

of substance, intelligible and corporeal, and that in man do the two coalesce (UL 52). The two thinkers differ slightly in so far as Vico is inclined to make the stronger claim that there are only two substances that exist, while Malebranche is open to the possibility of the existence of other substances that are beyond the grasp of human cognition.[119] In practice, though, the two thinkers are in fundamental agreement that there are two substances – intelligible and extended – that coincide with the only two, and mutually exclusive, modes of human knowledge.

Second, Vico insists that the mind, which is the intelligible part, judges truth according to the clarity of ideas, and that sensation, while confused, nonetheless functions to experience pleasure and pain as heuristics on the basis of which human beings act for the sake of self-preservation (UL 52-53). Where the mind is concerned with truth, sensation is concerned with use. This dualistic view, and in particular the latter claim that sense is for the sake of self-preservation, obviously has its origin in Descartes' Sixth Mediation, but we also see it strongly rearticulated in the first book of Malebranche's *Search for Truth*: "We must follow this rule exactly. *Never judge by means of the senses as to what things are in themselves, but only as to the relation they have to the body* because, in fact, the senses were given to us, not to know the truth of things in themselves, but only for the preservation of our body."[120] On the operation of the mind, it is striking that Vico borrows some of the language that he introduced in

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[119] Nicolas Malebranche, *The Search after Truth*, trans. Thomas M. Lennon and Paul J. Olscamp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 249-50.

[120] Ibid., 24.

Ancient Wisdom, specifically the distinction between the true and the certain. In stark contrast to the distinction as he presents in in *Ancient Wisdom*, however, Vico here abandons his previous insistence upon the identity of the true and the made, and instead defines the true as that state of the mind when it is in conformity with the order of things (UL 52). This too is in line with Malebranche who, like Descartes, insisted on the importance of clear and distinct ideas as foundational to arriving at certainty about more complex truths.[121]

Third, Vico accepts from Malebranche what is, perhaps, his hallmark: the distinction between causes and occasions:

> The occasions of things are not the causes of things. Bodies and whatever
> is corporeal, such as the senses, are occasions through which eternal ideas
> of things are produced in the mind. But transitory things like the body, or
> corporeal things, or the senses, are not able to give rise to what is eternal
> and beyond the body. Ignorance of this truth causes men to be ungrateful
> to God. (UL 53)

A distinction that becomes incredibly important to Vico's conception of providence, and to his conception of society in particular, it is again striking that, in spite of the severity of Vico's criticism of Descartes in *Ancient Wisdom*, he would here prove to put so much stock in accepting the occasionalism of Malebranche, who writes:

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[121] Ibid., 453.

A true cause as I understand it is one such that the mind perceives a necessary connection between it and its effect. Now the mind perceives a necessary connection between the will of an infinite being and its effect. Therefore, it is only God who is the true cause and who truly has the power to move bodies.[122]

Fourth, when Vico claims that there is only one kind of assent, we see the identical claim made in Malebranche's discussion of the relationship of sensation and the will:

> I reply that in Adam's case his sensations preceded his reason. […] But I deny that they preceded his will or that they excited any rebellious impulses in it. For Adam willed to be warned by these sensations of what he was to do for the preservation of his life. But he never willed to be moved despite himself, for that is a contradiction. Furthermore, when he wanted to concentrate on contemplating truth without the least mental distraction, his passions and senses were in a state of perfect tranquility. Order would have it so, and it is a necessary consequence of the absolute power he had over his body.[123]

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[122] Ibid., 450.

[123] Ibid., 593.

With Malebranche, Vico affirms a conviction that, regardless of whether one's activity is of the mind or of the body, that activity is caused neither by reason nor by sense, but is rather a function of the will.

Vico's final metaphysical assumption in his *Universal Law* is that it is "necessary that the idea of the object presented to the mind us adequate to the object itself" (UL 54). Vico's insistence on adequation between object and idea is motivated by a desire to introduce, advance, and conclude "a discipline truly ample, truly universal, truly without weakness" (UL 54). Vico's task in his *Universal Law* is to identify a truly universal and foundational principle that would integrate philosophy and philology and, in so doing, eliminate cause for conflict between the two approaches. The only way to do this is to identify some principle that is undisputable by virtue of the fact that it coincides exactly and demonstrably with a true state of affairs. As we have seen in Vico's previous four metaphysical assumptions, this too can be found in Malebranche. For Malebranche, universal truth was a necessary consequence of a veracious God. Consequently, disagreement between people about matters of fact had to be the consequence of human error. Since assent is the function of the will, the cause of error in Malebranche's view, is the corruption of the will as a consequence of original sin. The search for truth, then, is the effort to adequate object and idea through rules meant to mitigate error introduced by the fallen will.

Eternal Ideas and the Possibility of Community

If considered solely as bodies, human beings are absolutely and inescapably alone. In Vico's claim that "because the body and what is of the body like sensation, is finite, each human being is divided from all other humans" (UL 55), the reader is reminded of Aristotle's famously paradoxical observation in *De Anima* that it the act of touching never reaches its object.[124] That community is possible at all is a direct consequence of the fact that humans are not merely corporeal, but intelligible as well. Unlike the corporeal part of humans, which is finite, the intelligible part of humans is infinite on account of the fact that it participates in eternal truth. Where bodies are many and separate, truth is one, which means that the intelligible part of human beings not only allows humans to discern the order of things through piety, but also makes communication possible, since ideas are all drawn from a common well. At the same time as human nature divides, therefore, it also unites (UL 55).

The idea of hierarchy plays a fundamental role in the ability of humans to communicate. Communication relies on agreement about differences between things, but also degrees of goodness (UL 55). In establishing his claim to the importance of hierarchy, not only as necessary for communication, but also as an eternal truth, Vico identifies three truths that are common among all peoples: (1) "there are no beings without attributes," (2) "the whole is greater than the part," and (3) "everyone desires to

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[124] Aristotle, "On the Soul," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 673.

be happy" (UL 55). In these three examples, Vico not only illustrates his claim that there are certain universal truths, but also defines three basic forms of hierarchical relation, drawn from the basic topical distinctions that appear in Peter of Spain's *tractatis*: (1) Intrinsic Topics, (2) Extrinsic Topics, and (3) Mediate Topics.

> [A topic] is intrinsic when an argument is taken from what are substantive
> of a thing, as from a definition. It is extrinsic when the argument derives
> from things completely separate from a thing's substance, as from
> opposites […]. A Topic is Middle when an argument is taken from things
> partly agreeing in terms posited in the question and partly differing.[125]

The idea of eternal order, for Vico, simultaneously demonstrates three truths: (1) there is a God, (2) He is one infinite mind, and (3) He is the author of the eternal truths in us:

> This idea of an eternal order is not physical, therefore this idea is mental.
> It is not an idea of a finite mind because it unites all peoples and minds.
> Therefore, this idea of an eternal order is the idea of an infinite mind,
> Infinite mind is God. Therefore the idea of eternal order demonstrates
> these truths simultaneously: there is a God, He is one infinite mind, He is
> the author of the eternal truths in us. (UL 55-56)

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[125] Peter of Spain, *Language in Dispute: An English Translation of Peter of Spain's Tractatus Called Afterwards Summulae Logicales*, trans. Francis P. Dinneen (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990), 52.

Each of these truths implies the others, but individually functions to delineate a separate domain of knowledge. From the idea that there is a God derives the field of metaphysics, which concerns itself with intrinsic topics. From the idea that God is one infinite mind, we derive the principles of mathematics, which concerns itself with extrinsic topics. From the idea that God is the author of eternal truths in us, we derive the principles of ethics, which concerns itself with mediate topics.

God's Goodness and the Preservation of the Whole

The nature of God's creation is such that it is structured to preserve, not individual bodies – which are of corporeal substance, and so finite – but rather the order of things – which is intelligible, and so infinite. As far as the individual human being is preserved, they are preserved by virtue of, and to the extent that, their ideas conform to the truth, which is the eternal order of things. As far as corporeal bodies are concerned, however, God has established the world with a view to self-preservation. From the eternal perspective, what is truly important is not the conservation of individual bodies, but of the order in which they participate.

> Goodness is shown in the way that every created thing has within itself an
> impulse to cooperate for self-preservation. And when something begins to
> decay because of weakness of its physical nature, even though the
> individual may not be preserved, divine goodness has arranges that
> through that very weakness the genus itself will be preserved. (UL 57)

Vico's view is in stark contrast to the view of self-preservation that is taken up by Grotius, Pufendorf, Selden, Hobbes, and Spinoza, which is concerned with the preservation of individual bodies. Without starting with metaphysics, and in the absence of a conception of human nature as it relates to the idea of eternal order, Vico would argue that what these thinkers arrive at are doctrines of authority, according to which humans are essentially solitary and at the mercy of the more powerful. A strictly corporeal conception of self-preservation leads these thinkers to conceive society as the effect of a primordial will to persist as body, as a way of increasing one's power to persist in the face of which they would otherwise likely perish. By starting from metaphysics, and from the one principle of jurisprudence which is that the principles of all the sciences are from God (UL 56), Vico arrives at a quite different conception of self-preservation. For Vico, society is not the effect of a more primordial interest in self-preservation as securing the body from harm. Instead, society is there from the beginning, as an essential part of the eternal order of things. Made possible by the fact that human beings participate in the eternal order of things through their intellectual substance, humans are born into a genus, a whole that is greater than its parts. That genus, the genus of humanity, exists both before and after the bodies that make it up, and is preserved by those bodies through an innate impulse to cooperate. In other words, for Vico, humans do not create or enter into society in order to preserve their bodies. Instead, they are always already born into society, are innately cooperative, and are moved to preserve themselves in order to preserve the larger whole. In Grotius, Pufendorf, Selden, Hobbes, and Spinoza, self-preservation is the cause and society is the effect. In Vico, the reverse is the case.

Human Nature and the Life of Contemplation

Vico defines a human beings as a "finite knowing, willing, and acting being who tends toward the infinite" (UL 58). This is in contrast to God, Whom Vico (following Augustine) describes as "infinite Power, Knowledge, and Will" (UL 56). Humans are of a mixed substance, limited by virtue of their corporeality, but pre-eminent relative to the rest of nature by virtue of their reason (UL 59), which is the capacity to conform one's mind to the order of things (UL 53). The defining characteristic of a human being, then, is reason, which is at once both a capacity and a drive. The end of the human being, then, is to fully realize that proper characteristic of themselves, which is their reason: "Thus, the complete and integral human is one who completely realizes this full human nature by contemplating eternal truth, God Himself, with a pure mind, by willing eternal good with a pure soul, and by loving the whole human race on account of that eternal good, God Himself" (UL 60).

On the one hand, Vico would seem to deviate very little from Aristotle, according to whom the end of man is activity of the soul in accord with reason,[126] and in whose view a life of contemplation is man's highest achievement. On the other hand, however, we see in Vico a far greater interest in the role of community. To be sure, in Aristotle, philosophical friendships are crucially important and necessary to man's achievement of the contemplative life. But in Aristotle, philosophical friendships function as a kind of ladder that can and should be kicked away once the contemplative life has been

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[126] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 9.

achieved.[127]   The life of a wise man, of a man whose life is entirely oriented toward

study, is self-sufficient for Aristotle. The reason for this is that the kind of accord that is

sought between the mind and the truth is, for Aristotle, unmixed with the nutritive and

perceptive parts of the soul (which humans share with other forms of life). Recall that

Aristotle defines wisdom (*sophia*) as understanding (*nous*) plus scientific knowledge

(*episteme*).[128] Defined in this way, wisdom involves true knowledge about first

principles and the ability to deduce a coherent system of truths on the basis of those

principles. Wisdom *does not* involve contingent activities. It does not involve either

making (*technē*) or moral action (*phronesis*). Instead, wisdom in its purest form is the

activity of reflecting the true, necessary, and eternal order of things. Like Aristotle, Vico

insists that the highest achievement of man is the contemplation and reflection of the

eternal order of things. Unlike Aristotle, however, for whom this contemplation results in

god-like self-sufficiency and so independence from others in society ("Anyone who

either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore

does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god"[129]), Vico argues that the

consequence of a life of contemplation is cosmopolitanism. The reason for this is that the

eternal order of things is, for Vico, an eternal order of *things*. It is not merely something

that exists in the divine mind, but is rather actualized in the world. In spite of the fact

that the world is characterized by contingency, it is also ordered in such a way that while

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[127] Ibid., 164.

[128] Ibid., 91.

[129] "Politics," 1988.

particulars both come into and go out of being, the genus of those particulars, and the

relationship between genii, nevertheless remain. The life of contemplation, for Vico,

culminates in an understanding of this fact and so results in a perfect form of sociability.

Life in accord with reason, which is to say in accord with the eternal order of

things is, for Vico, necessarily social. Life dominated by corporeal desire is solitary.

The most basic error, and the font of all human misery (UL 62) is to view self-love as a

first principle:

> God gave humans sense that they might preserve their lives, but people
>
> make senses judges and arbiters to discern and decide the truth of things.
>
> But the senses are notoriously unreliable; thus reason, when it follows the
>
> judgment of the sense ignores the truth of things. (UL 61)

It is folly to view self-love as a first principle for establishing principles of moral action.

If we begin, instead, with the principle that God is the author of the eternal truths in us,

then we are forced to acknowledge that life in accord with God's eternal order does not

justify selfishness, but rather a commitment to the life of society as a whole. Cupidity

results in a distorted view of the world, and it is this distorted view that led to the

misguided and anti-social theories of natural law of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Selden.

Fortunately, the nature of Divine providence is such that man's view of the eternal order

of things is never completely obscured:

> But man is not able to lose all vision of God because everything is from
>
> God and everything not from God is nothing. For it is given to each one
>
> to perceive the light of God in all things, if not by reflection then at least

by the refraction of its rays. Thus, man cannot be deceived except by
some image of the truth or able to sin except through some appearance of
the good. (UL 63)

The Occasional Nature of Human Society

We see that human beings are able to communicate with each other
because they share a common notion of eternal truth and are endowed by
God with the power of expressing themselves through speech. Though
people are divided by having finite bodies, yet speech occurs in the finite
body, and so speech enables people to communicate truth and reason to
others. Therefore, man is made by nature to cultivate the society of truth
and reason. (UL 67-68)

According to Vico, the fact that human beings are able to communicate despite the fact
that their corporeal natures should otherwise preclude it is evidence that humans share a
common capacity for reason, which is the ability to accord the mind with the eternal
order of things. On the basis of this fact, Vico concludes that the end of human beings is
to cultivate society, which is only possible to the extent to which the members of that
society are actualizing their capacity for reason. Again in contrast with Aristotle, for
whom political society strictly involves discourse about truth, Vico finds in the capacity
for communication another distinctly human quality: the communication of emotional
states. That humans are uniquely endowed with the capacity to communicate means that

they are able to communicate, not just shared ideas via speech, but also needs and desires through facial expressions, for the sake of providing mutual aid:

> [h]umans render assistance to each other. So it is not only reason and speech that distinguish the human from the beastial but also the countenance, for beasts have faces but not countenances. Man is this not created merely for himself alone as the beasts are, but to communicate his needs and desires to other humans. He is born to cultivate the society of truth and reason, and he is made to communicate his own needs and utilities by means of truth and reason. (UL 68)

This is where Malebranche's occasionalism comes in. For Vico, man does not create or enter into society in order to ensure their self-preservation. Yes, Vico explicitly defines society as a 'community of utility' (UL 68). Vico does not deny that human beings enter into community for the sake of mutual aid. What he does deny, however, is that utility is the cause of society. Human beings are naturally and primordially social, according to Vico, on account of the fact that they are created by God and in such a way as to make society not only possible through the uniquely human capacity for communication, but also necessary to the fulfillment of their capacity of reason. In other words, the cause of society is not the human drive for self-preservation, but rather God, Himself. Although not the cause of society, however, utility is nevertheless an occasion for it. For Vico, occasions are a mode of Divine Providence, events or things that are not hoped for by human beings, but that nevertheless function as a vehicle through which God produces things at their proper time (UL 58). It is here that Vico finds his deepest criticism of the natural law tradition:

An occasion is not a cause, a key point that Hugo Grotius did not see in

this matter. Utility is not the mother of law and human society, nor is

necessity, not fear, nor want, as Epicurus, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza,

and Bayle affirm. Utility was only the occasion by which human beings,

naturally social but internally divided by original son, weak and needy,

were drawn to cultivate society and affirm their natural sociability. (UL

69)

An Anatomy of Natural Society

The cause of society is, for Vico, the same as the one principle of jurisprudence:

God. The occasion of society is utility. From the causal and occasional aspects of

society, Vico argues that there are two parts of natural society: the first (from cause) is

oriented toward truth; the second (from occasion) is oriented toward equity:

We have seen that human beings are made to communicate truthfully and

rationally with each other about needs and utilities in conformity with

equity, or rather with truth itself. Thus, the nature of human sociability

itself brings about human society with a two-fold reality: one of truth, the

other of equity. (UL 72)

Equity, for Vico, involves the distribution of goods in accord with truth, which is to say

in accord with the eternal order of things. In a way, truth and equity may be considered

separately, as they pertain to the two different substances that make up the human being:

intelligible and corporeal. Yet, in another way, and as Vico implies above, the two are in

fact the same, since the end of corporeal existence is to accord with the eternal order of things, which is the truth.

Nevertheless, Vico considers society as if it were two: one corporeal, occasional and contingent, and the other intelligible, causal, and eternal. Of the society of truth, Vico insists that its fundamental law is to "act in good faith" (UL 72). To act in good faith is to act in accord with natural law, which dictates that we (1) speak truthfully about current states of affairs (which Vico calls rectitude), and (2) behave in fidelity to our promises. The former concerns speech about activity. The latter concerns activity about speech, and is implied in the former, since the truth or falsity of a claim in the present is determined by an act of the will to be performed in the future. Of the society of equity, Vico also offers two laws. First, members are to refrain from injury, which Vico observes originally meant to "seize by force." The implication of this is that we are neither to take the goods belonging to others, nor to take advantage of others through physical violence or deceit. In contrast to the first law, which is negative, the second law is positive. Not only are we to refrain from injury, but we are also to be benevolent toward others. Implied in this second law, says Vico, is a law of extreme necessity whereby one is permitted to take from another for the sake of sustaining one's own life, on the condition that there are no other alternatives (UL 73). Also implied is the principle of harmless utility, which grants one the ability to take from another on the condition that what is taken is of utility to oneself and that the act is also harmless to the one from whom goods are taken (UL 73 - 74)

Vico's New Science of Society

Barbara Naddeo concludes her book, *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory* just before where many Vico scholars pick up: the *New Science*. Her reason for ending her account of Vico's social theory with the *Universal Law* is that "as a project the *Scienza nuova* was so very different from the earlier texts that Vico had written."[130] According to Naddeo, the *New Science* marks a shift in Vico's thought, away from social theory *per se*, and instead toward an "investigation of historical phenomena with presumes bearing on the present of Vico's own world" and in a way that "delved ever more deeply into a series of recondite debates surrounding chronology and evidence of history as well as the nature and signs of language."[131] Naddeo's comments here are oddly dismissive, especially considering the rigor with which she approaches Vico's earlier work. They are also grossly mistaken. What we see in the development of Vico's thought is a constant and consistent effort to understand the nature of, and relationship between, Divine providence and human society. It is true that we see a significant shift take place between *Universal Law* and the *New Science*, but this shift does not represent a change in the scope of Vico's interest. Instead, it marks a methodological shift (not unlike the shift between the *Inaugural Orations* and *Ancient Wisdom*) in response to a realization that the metaphysical approach that he took in *Universal Law* actually fell into

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[130] Naddeo, *Vico and Naples: The Urban Origins of Modern Social Theory*, 186.

[131] Ibid., 187.

the same traps as the natural law tradition that he set out to criticize. As Pompa observes

in his introduction to his translation of the *First New Science*,

> Vico does not, however, provide this metaphysics of human nature with
> any further support by deriving it, as in *Universal Right*, by deduction
> from some *a priori* primary truths. Instead he sees it as the
> universalization of a developing series of human capacities, i.e. both ideas
> and volitions, which can be proven to be true of ourselves by relating
> them, in some way or other, to what we know is fundamental to the
> existence and continuation of our shared human experience.[132]

As Pompa rightly observes, the *New Science* is still a metaphysical project. In contrast to

Universal Law, however, which strangely forgets the stunning critique of abstraction and

of metaphysical speculation that Vico launched in *Ancient Wisdom* a mere ten years prior,

the *New Science* takes *Ancient Wisdom* seriously, and looks to history as a metaphysical

practice that is proper to human beings. In contrast to modern metaphysics, which

contemplates the self in order to understand absolute reality, Vico now argues that

knowledge of both the self and of God can only be accomplished through contemplation

of the history of human intellectual and social development:

> Hence metaphysics, which has hitherto contemplated the mind of
> individual man in order to lead the mind to God as eternal truth, which is

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[132] Leon Pompa, "Introduction," in *The First New Science*, ed. Leon Pompa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), xxvi.

the most universal theory in divine philosophy, must now be raised to

contemplate the common sense of mankind as a certain human mind of the

nations, in order to lead the mind to God as eternal Providence, which

would be the most universal practice in divine philosophy. (FNS 30-31,

§40; cf also NS §331, §347)

Vico is forced to reject traditional metaphysics for two reasons. First, as Vico famously

argues in *Ancient Wisdom*, the self cannot know itself with the kind of veracity necessary

to function as a first principle upon which to build a true metaphysical system. Having

neither knowledge of its cause, nor of the nature of its activity (since the mind does not

create itself), the self doesn't know itself, but is rather merely conscious of itself. There

is no doubt that the self senses itself thinking, and that this sensation serves as an

indication of itself, but certainty about indications is not the same as certainty about

causes (AW 35). In other words, one may be aware of their own thinking, but this

awareness is not knowledge, since at the moment that the self becomes conscious if its

own thought, it does not also understand what thought is, nor what it means to be. Of

thought and being, consciousness cannot elucidate material, formal, efficient, or final

causes. Indication merely indicates.

On the one hand, then, as a first principle the *cogito* functions in the same way as

the geometral point, as a convenient fiction achieved by the attempt to extend human

powers of abstraction beyond the limits of its own capacity to know. On the other hand,

Vico's criticism of the *cogito* also serves to identify, not a flaw in Descartes' method, but

rather a serious problem with its execution. The first rule of Descartes' method is never to accept anything as true unless it is beyond our ability to doubt it.[133] Beyond the fact that the opposite of doubt is not truth, but rather certainty (UL 51), Vico further observes that the cogito is based on a tautology. Descartes begins his inquiry into metaphysical foundations with a solitary thinking thing – Descartes himself – and with the assumption that thinking consists in the ability to proceed analytically to clear and distinct ideas, and synthetically via deductive principles (i.e. the law of non-contradiction, and the law of the excluded middle) to construct a logically consistent system. Descartes is "like a man who walks alone in the dark,"[134] who proceeds via circumspection only to find that he is a man who walks alone in the dark who proceeds via circumspection. For Descartes, the 'thinking thing' is *homo logicus*. This assumption is where Descartes' mediations begin and, lo and behold, this is where they end.

The inclination to universalize rationality is one that haunts the entire tradition of metaphysics, and it is here that Vico finds a second major reason that metaphysics needs to be, not abandoned, but rather rethought. Although neither Grotius, Pufendorf, nor Selden are ostensibly engaged in metaphysics, a significant consequence of the metaphysical tradition, and one that was most forcefully and clearly explicated by Descartes, is that human beings are fundamentally 'thinking things,' which is to say that they both may and do indeed exist with the capacity to reason, and in a way the precedes

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[133] René Descartes, "Discourse on Method," in *Selected Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29.

[134] Ibid., 28.

their entry into human society. With nothing but their reason, only reason can be the cause of humans coming together to form society.

According to Vico, Grotius, Pufendorf, and Hobbes all make the same Epicurean mistake in their accounts of human societal origins. Whether fundamentally good, as in Grotius, or fundamentally wicked, as in Pufendorf and Hobbes, all three thinkers agree that otherwise solitary human beings first formed communities from a recognition of their own relative weakness, and in order to increase their chances of survival. The guiding principle in each of these accounts is that human beings are naturally motivated by an interest in maximizing their own utility (FNS 14, §15). The kind of utilitarian reasoning that these thinkers assign to primitive peoples, however, is an example of the 'conceit of scholars,' or the inclination to assume that "what they know is as old as the world" (NS 61, §127). Utilitarian thinking, and the principles of natural equity that Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf each claim to result, demand a fully developed kind of human reason that could not have been expected of primitive peoples. Instead, argues Vico, "men first did things through a certain human sense, without attending to them, and then, much later, they applied reflection to them and, by reasoning about their effects, contemplated their causes" (FNS 21-22, §26; cf also NS §§326-329). It is as if, Vico adds, these natural law theorists would have us believe that the first peoples were not vicious simpletons at all, but rather philosophers capable of a kind of abstract reason that could only have developed over a very long time (FNS 23, §28).

As we have seen, this error, of attributing utilitarian reasoning to primitive peoples is one that Vico, himself, committed in *Universal Law*. Unlike other natural law theorists, Vico was careful to avoid conceiving utility as a cause, preferring instead to see

it as an occasion through which the work of Divine providence maintained the eternal order of things. And yet, it is interesting to note that the traditional mode of metaphysical discourse that Vico adopts in that work resulted in a largely conventional view of the origin of human society. Vico retains the distinction between cause and occasion in the *New Science*, but with a novel approach to metaphysical thinking comes the necessity of also rethinking the ways in which Divine providence is at work to preserve order and stability.

A New Metaphysics, A New Method

In spite of the great body of literature that frames Vico as anti-Cartesian, the method that Vico introduces in the *First New Science* and perfects in the *Second New Science*, is indeed Cartesian, albeit in the same way that he may also be conceived as a Baconian. In *The Art of MEMORIA: Vico, Bacon, and the Frontispiece to the New Science*,[135] I argued that, in certain significant respects, several of Vico's major works may be read as correctives to Baconian works, marked by the very charitable spirit that Vico recommends in his third inaugural oration. Likewise, in the *New Science*, Vico may be viewed as applying Descartes' geometric method, albeit in a way that also rejects the *cogito*, which rests on the error of mistaking the true and the certain. Put differently, the *New Science* may be considered a kind of 'middle term,' between the anti-cartesianism of

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[135] Timothy D. Harfield, "The Art of MEMORIA: Vico, Bacon, and the Frontispiece to the New Science" (University of Alberta, 2006).

Ancient Wisdom and the very favorable adoption of the Cartesian tradition in *Universal Law*.

The Cartesian method famously consists in "beginning with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend little by little, step by step, to knowledge of the most complex."[136] In spite of Vico's outright dismissal of Descartes in *Ancient Wisdom*, we nevertheless see an explicit attempt to put this method to use in the *Universal Law*. In the *Universal Law*, Vico agrees with Descartes that truth is judged my means of clear ideas (UL 53). Rather than beginning with the *cogito*, which Vico dismissed in *Ancient Wisdom*, Vico begins with the shared idea of hierarchy and, on that basis, proceeds "in a rigorous, rational sequence, each [principle] following from the other" (UL 56). Vico abandons this analytical approach in the *New Science*, for the reasons mentioned above, but he nevertheless retains the spirit of Descartes' approach. In fact, Vico even goes so far as to repeatedly refer to the first edition of the *New Science* as a 'meditation' although in subsequent editions he reserves the term for more traditional approaches to moral and metaphysical philosophy. Like Descartes, Vico sets out to begin with the simplest and most easily known objects in order to ascend step by step to knowledge of the most complex. In the *New Science*, however, he does so with keen attention paid to the limits of human knowledge, and in a way that is careful to avoid the conceited tendency to mistake deductive reason with thought in general.

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[136] Descartes, "Discourse on Method," 29.

First, like Descartes, Vico's *New Science* is committed to overcoming intellectual prejudices.

> Hence, in meditating upon the principles of this Science it is necessary,
> not without the most violent of efforts, to clothe ourselves to some degree
> in such a nature and, therefore, to reduce ourselves to a state of the most
> extreme ignorance of all erudition, human and divine, as if there had never
> been either philosophers or philologists to help in this research. (FNS §40)

In the second edition of the *New Science* Vico reiterates this point, affirming that his method requires us to avoid the two conceits (of nations, which is the inclination of historians; and of scholars, which is the temptation of philosophers), and that to do so we must "reckon as if there were no books in the world" (NS 96, §330). In this, Vico does not differ from Descartes at all. In echoing Descartes, Vico affirms his commitment to avoid prejudice in the service or arriving at a knowledge of the truth. At the same time, however, Vico implies that Descartes had not, himself, sufficiently girded himself against his own philosophical biases. With this affirmation, Vico embarks on the Cartesian project, but in a way that is more true to its originary spirit.

Second, with Descartes, Vico's method is geometric. Implied in the first edition of the *New Science* (FNS 33, §42) this fact is made explicit in subsequent editions:

> Now, as geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its
> elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does
> our Science [create for itself the world of nations], but with a reality
> greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs

are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures are. And this very

fact is an argument, O reader, that these proofs are of a kind divine and

should give thee a divine pleasure, since in God knowledge and creation

are one and the same thing. (NS 104-105, §349)

Vico's commitment to the geometric method is made even more salient in the structure of

the second edition of the *New Science*, which is organized through the use of geometric

nomenclature: axioms and corollaries. Of the frontispiece to the work, Vico explains that

"the ray with which divine providence lights up the breast of metaphysic represents the

Axioms, Definitions, and Postulates that this Science takes as Elements from which to

deduce the Principles on which it is based and the Method by which it proceeds" (NS 26,

§41). Vico here clearly implies his intention to construct the *New Science* according to

the geometric method first elaborated by Euclid, and which was favored so highly by

Descartes. In spit of his stated intention, however, and the quite explicit use of geometric

terminology in book I, what follows is hardly what one would expect from a deductive

argument, and certainly has none of the structured argumentative flavor even of the

Universal Law. In Goetsch's view, Vico's geometric language is meant to function

ironically, upsetting reader expectation in a rhetorical act meant to serve as the starting

point for considering the nature of science anew: [137] "when Vico speaks of axioms,

corollaries, and the geometric method, he is not intending his (insightful) readers to

expect a deductive system. The philosophy of the maker's imagination has far more to

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[137] James Robert Goetsch Jr., *Vico's Axiioms: The Geometry of the Human World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 107.

offer us than this, if we are prepared to unthink the obvious."[138] A master of irony in the Socratic tradition, Vico is most certainly keen on upsetting the expectations of his readers. What Goetsch misses, however, is that Vico is not simply interested in provoking an unthinking of scientific knowledge by undermining the utility of the geometric method (and to implying its abandonment, at least where human affairs are concerned), but rather promoting an alternative view of science on the basis of a richer view of geometry. In this, again, Vico is not critical of the use of the geometric method *per se*. In fact, by actively employing the geometric method, Vico rather condones it. The problem, for Vico, is that the geometric method is widely misunderstood, and so often wrongly applied.

Geometry is something that interests Vico as early as his third inaugural oration, in which he praises Descartes for applying the geometric method to the field of physics. For this, and on account of the brilliance of his meditations on first philosophy, Vico praises Descartes as a "philosopher like no other" (OIII 81). By *Study Methods*, however, Vico demonstrates far more skepticism with respect to the application of that method beyond its proper and original field of application: points, lines, and shapes. Here, four years prior to the publication of *Ancient Wisdom*, we see in Vico an awareness of the abstract quality of geometry and the risks inherent in applying its methods to the world of nature. In Euclidean geometry proper, one begins by positing axioms and then proceeds by way of deduction in order to arrive at a proof for some proposition. Axioms,

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[138] Ibid., 47.

in this case, are simple propositions analytically derived from an existing body of coherent propositions, and which can then be used, by a process of deduction, to arrive at additional previously unknown propositions. Put differently, an axiom is a first principle: it is used as a building block for constructing proofs, but it cannot itself be proven. Geometers, then, are not interested in making claims about true states of affairs, but rather only about the logical consistency of abstract systems. In the hands of the physicist, however, the risk of using the geometric method lies in the temptation to confuse axioms (which are arbitrary) with true states of affairs.

> [i]n the opinion of our scientists, that they teach, based on the geometric
> method, is, as it were, the authentic voice of Nature […]. But if Nature is
> organized differently—if a single one of the laws of motion established by
> out modern physicists is false (not to mention that already more than one
> has been proved false), let our enthusiasts pause and repeatedly ponder
> whether they are not carelessly following an unsafe path, leading away
> from the goal of the solution of the problems of nature. (SM 21-22)

Geometers are constrained by their axioms, because they know that even a slight alteration to a single one of them can have radical consequences for the system as a whole. But they are also not constrained, since their axioms do not also make any claim to truth. The geometric physicist, however, constrains themselves more than even the geometer, since they claim to represent reality. More than this, the conclusions derived by physicists are far more consequential, since they are also put to use to solve real-world problems. The danger in applying the geometric method to physical reality, then, is that it promotes ontological commitments to unprovable truths, on the basis of which decisions

are made that, if wrong, can have dire consequences. This latter position is, of course, most famously restated in *Ancient Wisdom*.

In the *Universal Law*, Vico makes an important distinction between the arithmetic and the geometric.

The common measure of corporeal things is what is vulgarly called "proportion," which, for the purposes of our argument, takes two forms in mathematics: arithmetic or simple proportion and geometric or comparative proportion. An example of an arithmetic proportion would be "ten is to six as six is to two"; An example of a geometric proportion would be "one is to three as four is to twelve." In this case each lesser number of one-third of the greater. What is equal when measured is just when freely chosen, for there is only one kind of assent in cognition and choice, provided each is demonstrated according to its own nature. Thus, just as equality results when the correct mathematical operations are carried out, so a just action will clearly result as long as the soul is not distressed or corrupted (UL 67)

Writing on the nature of equity, Vico argues that in a given society, a just distribution of goods among equals (i.e. brothers, relatives, friends, citizens, guests, and strangers) follows an arithmetic principle, whereas among unequals (parents and children, civil authority and subordinates, God and man), equity follows a geometric principle (UL 78-79). For the sake of our present discussion, however, what is important is simply that arithmetic relations are static and absolute. In contrast, geometric relations are dynamic

and conditional. Ironically, the application of the geometric method to the field of geometry is arithmetic. Since axioms do not change, and since they are arbitrary constructs of the human mind, all humans enter as equals relative to the truth of geometric systems. Here, the geometric method is applied arithmetically. The nature of the geometric method does not change from one set of axioms to another, but rather may be applied absolutely and universally. As we move from mathematical axioms to axioms pertaining to the world of nature, however, and further to the world of human affairs, the application of the geometric method must become progressively more geometric. In physics and the natural sciences more generally, the geometric method must be adapted to take on a more dynamic form. From strict abstraction and deduction, the natural world demands a more experimental approach which is dynamic, responsive to changing conditions. On the one hand, the experimental method of Bacon and Bayle doesn't look like the geometric method at all. On the other hand, if we conceive 'geometric' in the way that Vico describes above, then it is indeed geometric, not only because it is adapted specifically to a dynamic state of affairs, but also because we, as humans, share unequally in truths about nature relative to God. Lastly, when viewed relative to the world of human affairs, our method becomes geometric in the fullest sense of the term, since the reality that we seek to understand is dynamic, not merely on account of our own imperfect access to truth, but because it is, itself, subject to constant change. The problem with analysis is that it assumes that the axioms at which it finally arrives are static and eternal. In geometry, this is in fact the case, since in the end all axioms are simply 'made-up.' In the natural sciences, experimentation, too, makes the assumption that its basic principles are not subject to change, as evidenced by Bacon's

recommendation that the scientific method proceed through the composition of a register of basic facts. If scientific facts were subject to change, then 'progress' in natural science would be impossible. In geometry, we are committed to the stability of our axioms, even though we create them. In natural science, we affirm the stability of facts, even if we did not create them. In the world of human affairs, however, facts are both created by us *and* dynamic. The ways in which facts change, however, is fortunately not random, but rather developmental and in accord, so Vico argues, with a necessary and universal pattern.

As Vico argues in *Ancient Wisdom*, human beings are limited to the externals of things, and their knowledge of externals is limited to the extent that they are creators. The most basic problem with analysis when applied to metaphysics is that, in its quest for simplicity, it attempts to abstract in a way that is actually beyond human capability. To the extent that analysis is 'successful' in arriving as basic metaphysical principles (which are axioms that claim to be identical with the truth of things), it fabricates rather than discovers, because it presupposes a human ability to grasp hidden reality in a way that they do not. Combining metaphysics with analysis, then, is a mis-match of method to object, which ultimately leads to self-deception. If metaphysics is possible at all, then it must rather be done using a method that properly understands the nature and limits of the human capacity to know. Like Descartes, Vico is interested in the structure of the human mind, and finds in the human mind the basic principles upon which his new science is built. Rather than positing the mind as a 'thinking thing,' however, which is a claim that presumes to know something about the nature of both being and of thought, Vico looks to the mind's effects in human history, which is man's creation:

Hence, in this vast ocean of doubt, there appears this one isle upon which we may stand firm: that the principles of this world must be discovered within the nature of our human mind and through the force of our understanding, by means of a metaphysics of the human mind. Hence metaphysics, which has hitherto contemplated the mind of individual man in order to lead the mind to God as eternal truth, which is the most universal theory in divine philosophy, must now be raised to contemplate the common sense of mankind as a certain human mind of the nations, in order to lead the mind to God as eternal Providence, which would be the most universal practice in divine philosophy. Thus, without a single hypothesis, for metaphysics disowns hypotheses, we must search for this metaphysics in fact, among the modifications of our human mind in the descendants of Cain before the Flood, and in those of Ham and Japhet after it. (FNS 30-31, §40)

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. (NS 96, §331)

Like Descartes, Vico proceeds "in accordance with [the method of] division, from cognition of the parts, thence of their composition, to cognition of the whole that is in question" (FNS 31, §41). But the method of division that Vico employs is philological, for philology "observes that of which human choice is the author." In proceeding

philologically, argues Vico, we can come to an understanding of the certain (i.e. that

which is beyond doubt, but is nonetheless incomplete, limited to externals, and so not

true). Metaphysics is only possible through the combining of philology and philosophy,

history and reason (NS 6, §7). For Vico, however, the aim of metaphysics, is not to grasp

the true nature of hidden reality (which, again, is beyond our reach, not mater what

methodological tricks we employ), but rather to arrive at a certain understanding of the

eternal work of Providence in human history, and a justification for piety:

> To sum up, from all that we have set forth in this work, it is to be finally
>
> concluded that this Science carries inseparably with it the study of piety,
>
> and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise. (NS 426, §1112)

The aim of metaphysics, for Vico, is not cold and dry, like the corpses that result from

analysis. It is not abstraction for the sake of idle system-building. Rather, it is both about

and for the sake of moral action.

The Occasions of Human Society

The conception of society that Vico puts forth in the *New Science* bares several

structural similarities to the view he maintained in *Universal Law*, but is also marked by

significant differences.

First, in the *Universal Law*, Vico argues that human communication, and so

human society, is made possible only as a consequence of a shared participation in the

eternal order of things, as evidenced by a common conception of hierarchy. In the *New*

Science, however, Vico replaces what is essentially a neo-platonic notion of participation in the divine mind, with the idea of an 'ideal eternal history.' Introduced in the first edition of the *New Science*, and then more clearly elaborated in subsequent editions, the idea of an ideal eternal history seeks to account for a common structure observable in the historical development of all nations. More than this, however, it functions as a dynamic and more metaphysically consistent account of the conditions under which society is possible. Instead of a common and universal access to a transcendent and eternal set of ideas, the concept of an ideal eternal history introduces the notion of *sensus communis*, or common sense. According to Schaeffer, Vico's concept of *sensus communis* is "grounded in the language, literature, and institutions of a community and relate to the community's political and social world, a relation that is consensual and concrete. *Sensus communis* provides a historical continuity within which the community can interpret its own policies and make its own decisions."[139] Rather than static, absolute, and eternal, *sensus communis* is dynamic, developmental, and contingent upon time and place. It is the consequence of collective sense-making in response to providential occasions. It is a phenomenon that functions as a common ground of truth, both within and between nations (NS 63, §144), and that also precedes the later development of rational judgment (NS 63, §142; NS 91, §311).

Second, as in *Universal Law*, Vico distinguishes the cause and the occasion for the formation of human society. As we have seen, however, Vico's view of the

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[139] John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 150.

occasional nature of human society is radically altered in the *New Science*, in response to

his own criticisms of Grotius, Selden, and Pufendorf for universalizing a mode of

rationality that would lend itself to the conscious application of a utilitarian calculus. As

in *Universal Law*, Vico continues to insist that the cause of society is God, through

whose providence occasions are produced in the face of which humans create society for

themselves. For Vico, man's essential nature is as a being whose principle property is

that of being social (NS 4, §2; NS 62, §135), but whose descent into bestial solitude

comes as a consequence of self-love (NS 101, §341) and a renunciation of religion (NS

113, §369).

In contrast to the *Universal* Law, in which Vico argues that utility is the sole

occasion through which providence is exercised to form and sustain human society, in the

New Science, Vico argues that there are two occasions of society, necessity and utility

(NS 78, §241). In both the first and the second *New Science*, necessity and utility

respectively mark the first two ages through which all of humanity must have progressed:

the age of gods, and the age of heroes.

The Age of Gods, the Age of Necessity

After the universal flood, and brought on by a rejection of religion as a

consequence of self-love, human beings entered a beastial state out of which they are, by

themselves, helpless to escape. In spite of man's inability to escape the barbarism that he

brought upon himself, he nevertheless desires something greater than himself that would

save him.[140] This desire, a trace memory of the safety of society that was lost to the

darkness of time, nevertheless seems to function, in Vico, as an openness to the work of

providence, even if this desire is not alone sufficient to spark a return to piety. It is only

with a great universal event, the first experience of thunder after the flood, that primitive

humanity first begins its 'bestial education' (NS 72, §195). That first thunderous blast

from the heavens was heard first by the most robust of the human race of giants (grown

to excessive size as a result of wallowing in their own filth and the intense exertions

necessary to penetrate the dense forests they occupied (NS 113, §369)) fearfully shouted

the first word: 'Jove' (NS 7-8, §9; NS 125, §397; FNS 73, §104). This onomatopoetic

utterance, shared by the most exceptional of *giganti*, inaugurates a shared human

language (NS 150, §447), thereby making communication and society among humans

possible once again. In the absence of reason, the seeds of language and natural curiosity

(NS 117-118, §377) are not enough to reignite the social nature of man. Rather, the

occasion for both the origins of language and the formation of community is fear itself:

> For where there is neither rule of law nor force of arms, and men are
>
> accordingly in a state of complete freedom, they can neither enter nor
>
> remain in society with others except through fear of a force superior to

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[140] "We must start from some notion of God such as even the most savage, wild, and monstrous men do not lack. That notion we show to be this: that man, fallen into despair of all succors of nature, desires something superior to save him." (NS 100-101, §339)

them all, and therefore, through fear of a divinity common to all. This fear

of divinity is called 'religion.' (FNS 36, §57)

Here, Vico find himself very much in line with Cicero and Vives, both of whom viewed

society as a function of necessity and *ingenium*, or the ability to meaningfully solve

immanent problems.[141]

It is beyond the reach of human knowledge to know the structure of the human

mind, as it is impossible for one to say in truth or with certainty that there is a common

idea of hierarchy, or of God, that makes it possible to communicate or to innately know

of God's existence. Vico cannot justify the kind of claim, made by others, that

knowledge of God is divinely implanted. What he *can* say is that promise-keeping is an

essential requirement of human society, and that *some* idea of divinity is necessary in

order for that to take place.

For men cannot unite in a human society unless they share a human sense

that there is a divinity who sees into the depths of their hearts, since a

society of men can neither begin nor remain stable without a means

whereby some rely upon the promises of other and are satisfied by their

assertions in secret matters. (FNS 38, §45)

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[141] Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition*, trans. John Michael Krois and Azizeh Azodi (Carbondate, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 8-14.

Religion is the first of three institutions necessary to human society. With thunder comes

fear, and with fear, the experience of urgent necessity in a way that is felt, not thought.

With mortal terror comes a sense of moral necessity: shame.

> Hence the first human society brought together through religion was that
>
> of marriage, into which certain men must have entered when their fear of
>
> god causes them to withdraw from their ferine wandering. In the grottoes
>
> in which each had hidden, they must have kept the women they had
>
> dragged in by force, so that they could mate with them free from the fear
>
> aroused by the appearance of the sky. (FNS 46, §58; cf also NS §504)

In Vico's view, the first society results, not simply as a consequence of a shared fear in

the face of divinity, but also through the advent of shame, which Vico asserts is now

universally experienced by people participating in the act of mating (FNS 45-46, §58).

Prior to the experience of shame, humans roamed like beasts, mating promiscuously

among even their kin (NS 11-12, §17). With mortal, and moral, terror in the face of a

thunderous divinity, Vico argues, the *giganti* felt compelled by necessity to hide the

shame of their procreative activity, and so descended into caves where they kept a single

woman in 'perpetual company and for the duration of their lives' (NS 171, §504). It is

with this that we see a radical departure in Vico's thought from that of Grotius, Selden,

and Pufendorf, who move immediately from a primitive state of nature to a universal

state of reciprocal human relations (NS 93, §318). In Vico's view, not only are marriages

a necessary intermediate step on the way to human society in a more global sense, but

they are also necessary as a basic and persistent bond that, like the social bond created by

religion, must be in place for there to be society at all.

The final institution to develop in the age of gods, and the third bond that is essential to the formation and maintenance of human society, is the burial of the dead (FNS 90, §144; NS 99, §337; NS 184-185, §529). While in a state of feral wandering, says Vico, human bodies were unburied, left to putrefy, to be eaten by wild animals, and to scatter across the surface of the earth. Such a practice was accompanied by fields left uncultivated, and the absence of communal living in cities. The rise of religion through belief in an all-powerful deity, however, gave rise to the belief in the immortality of human souls. The third of three foundational principles of Vico's *New Science*, along with fear of the divine and pious marriage, belief in the dignity of man and the eternity of his soul results in a further belief that Vico says can be universally observed among gentile nations, which is that the spirits of the dead continue to wander on the earth among the mortal. Consequently, the practice of burial originates through a fear of the immortal and a desire to give souls rest.

The burial of the dead, and the marking of the mounds where they lay, had two consequences according to Vico. First, burial markers made it possible, before even the invention of writing, to trace ancestral lineage. And with that newfound genealogical ability, came the first experience of time and of historical consciousness. Second, with the arrangement of buried bodies in a common place according to lineage, families began to delineate settlements in particular locations which, in turn, made it possible to delineate fields for cultivation and to establish land ownership. Only with lands so delineated did it later become possible for the nobles, of the heroic age to found the first cities for, as Vico asserts, "the cities must at first have been made up of nobles alone" (NS 185, §530; cf also NS §597)

The Age of Heroes, The Age of Utility

The age of gods, which originated with the institution of religion, marriage, and burial as a result of felt necessity in the face of mortal terror, culminated in the establishment of the civil arts, which are key markers of nobility, and necessary to the transition from the age of gods to the age of heroes (FNS 81, §123).

> These civil arts are shame of the self, which is the mother of nobility;
> [respect for] the chastity of marriage conjoined with piety towards the
> dead, which are the two perennial springs of the nations; the
> industriousness with which to cultivate the fields, which is the
> inexhaustible mine of the riches of the peoples; the strength with which to
> defend these riches from robbers, which is the impregnable rock of
> empires; and, finally, the generosity and justice with which to receive the
> ignorant and unfortunate, and educate and defend them against oppression,
> which is the solid basis of kingdoms. (FNS 81, §121)

We must remember that the seeds of nobility were not planted throughout bestial humanity, but rather solely in the most brave and robust, those capable of ascending to the heights of mountains from which, exposed to the sky, they encountered providential thunder with sufficient fear to prompt their first shameful descent into caves where they could hide their now-monogamous copulative performances. By the time that the *giganti* fully contracted their humanity, cultivated the land in familial groups, and founded the first cities, the vast majority of humanity, says Vico, still roamed the earth in a feral state.

Only eventually, says Vico, did the *gigantic* come to accept members into their clans that were not related by blood.

In contrast to the *giganti*, who were motivated to form the first society (that of marriage) in response to a moment of desperately felt, but yet unintelligible, moment of need, so, too, were other feral wanderers driven by felt necessity to seek shelter in the cultivated lands of the nobility. The *famuli*, or servants, "consisted in those who, amidst the quarrels of bestial communion, […] took shelter in the lands of the strong to save themselves in their hour of need" (FNS 88, §140). The necessity felt by the *famuli* was of a fundamentally different kind to the necessity from the *giganti*. Although Vico does indeed use the term 'necessity' to refer to the conditions under which both the *giganti* and the *famuli* enter into society, the occasion for entering society for the latter is not properly speaking necessity, but rather utility, since it is not tremulous fear and pious shame that brings about the end to their feral wandering, but the impulse toward self-preservation.

> The second comers came into this second society (which had that name by
> a certain excellence) only for the ultimate necessities of life. And here
> again is a matter worthy of reflection. For the first comers to human
> society were driven thereto by religion and by the natural instinct to
> propagate the human race (the former a pious motive, the latter in the strict
> sense a gentle one), and this gave a beginning to lordly friendship. The
> second comers, since they came out of a necessity of saving their lives,
> gave a beginning to society in the proper sense, with a view principally to
> utility. (NS 196-197, §555)

Vico's comments here are mildly confusing, as he would seem to conflate two groups

that he elsewhere distinguishes: the *famuli* and the *socii*. It is difficult to see how the

famuli could possibly depart their feral wandering on the basis of utility, since Vico

makes such a strong point in arguing that feral humanity lacks the rational capacity to

deliberate on the basis of a utilitarian logic. In the absence of language and the capacity

for abstract thought, the *famuli* were not motivated to enter society in order to maximize

utility. The occasion was for the *famuli* the same as it was for the *giganti*: necessity. In

contrast to the *giganti*, however, who did not also have the opportunity to enter into a

place with pre-existing social institutions, and so had to create them for themselves, the

famuli had the occasion to enter into the safety and protection afforded, not just by

existing cities, but also by the established virtuous temperament of nobility: "when the

weak vagabonds took refuge in the lands of the strong, they were received in accordance

with the just law that, since they had come there to save their lives, they should sustain

themselves by rural works, the art of which the lords would teach them" (FNS 92, §148).

Where the *giganti* were educated by, and attained a piety and virtue in accord with nature

in direct response to the work of God's providence, the *famuli* arrived at the same state,

acquiring language and reason, through education.

Although Vico abandons utility as the occasion upon which the first societies

were formed, his philological perspective nevertheless allows him to retain utility as the

primary occasion for remaining in society in the later stages of human history, after the

capacity for human reason was fully developed:

> In providing for this property [that of being social], God has so ordained
> and disposed human institutions that men, having fallen from complete

justice by original sin, and while intending to do something quite

difference and often quite the contrary—so that for private utility they

would live alone like wild beasts—have been led by this same utility and

along the aforesaid different and contrary paths to live like men in justice

and to keep themselves in society and thus to observe their social nature.

(NS 3-4, §2)

An interest in personal utility outside of the full development of reason results in

selfishness, and the pursuit of immediate desires, in a way that is destructive of society

rather than productive of it (NS 101-102, §341). Once the first society is established

under conditions of necessity, however, and with the development of language and heroic

virtue, utility does indeed become the occasion to re-enter society, as it were.

The *famuli* are not the same as the *socii*, although they are often and easily

conflated. In fact, Vico himself repeatedly appears to conflate the two groups in his

second *New Science* (NS 10-11, §15; NS 47, §91; NS 81, §258-259, NS 136-137, §425;

NS 198-199, §558; NS 209-210, §582; NS 273-274, §721). A fact that Vico largely

neglects in his second *New Science*, is that the first *socii* are those who, having already

been accepted and educated as servants under the protection of the *giganti*, rebelled only

later to be reduced to subjugation (FNS 101-102, §162, NS 104-105, §167). In the

second *New Science*, this is a fact that Vico merely implies as he speculates about the

conquest of some Greek city by the Romans, and asserts that the Romans must have

"received the vanquished inhabitants in the quality of the heroic *socii*" (NS 293, §772).

How, then, do we make sense of this apparent conflation of *famuli* and *socii* in Vico's

New Science, and the apparent contradiction between statements that Vico makes about

the conditions under which the *famuli* enter society and the severely diminished capacity

for reason that surely must have characterized the *famuli* as indeed it did the *giganti*?

In the second *New Science*, *famuli* and *socii* are indeed the same population,

marked by inequality with the nobles, even to the point of giving their lives for the sake

of the nobles in the name of religious sacrifice (FNS §183; NS §722). Yet, just as the

giganti and the nobles are the same population, but at different stages in their

development, so it is with the *famuli* and the *socii*. The *famuli* are those feral wanderers

who, from necessity rather than utility find refuge in the lands of the nobles. It is also the

famuli who, having been educated by the nobles and with the new-found capacity to

reason from utility, actively rebel against the nobles in order to achieve some perceived

advantage. In response to such rebellion, the nobles subject the *famuli* by granting them

certain concessions in the form of civil law (NS 15-16, §25).

In the *Universal Law*, we understand from Vico that pure civil law is a state in

which no one commands except the lords (UL 128), but we also understand that civil

society comes into being only when laws are applied universally. Prior to the rebellion of

the *famuli*, the nobles, still living in the age of gods, had no need or conception of civil

law:

> Since they [those living in pure familial states] are not yet capable of
>
> understanding commonwealth and laws, they are to reverence and fear
>
> their fathers as living images of God, so as to be naturally disposed to
>
> follow the religion of their fathers and to defend their fatherland, which
>
> preserves their families for them, and so to obey the laws ordained for the

> preservation of their religion and fatherland. (For divine providence
> ordained human things with this eternal counsel: that families should first
> be founded by means of religions, and that upon the families
> commonwealths should then arise by means of laws. (NS 10, §14)

In the age of gods, all government is theocratic as the sons of the *giganti* revere their fathers and fatherland in the same way as the original *giganti* revered the sky. Their piety and generosity eventually compelled them to admit the *famuli*, but the *famuli* neither shared the nobles' reverence for the divine, nor their commitment to the fatherland. In the face of inequality, and in the absence of piety, there was nothing to prevent the *famuli* from rebelling as soon as their capacity to reason from utility was sufficiently developed. Civil law originates, then, as a way for the nobles to conserve the essential structure of their relationship with the *famuli* (since the nobles always want to see things remain as they are (NS 225, §609), but on a common foundation, which is utility. In this, civil society is established since the nobles alone retain the right to command through he creation of laws, but also since the civil law is something that constrains the activity of the *famuli* (now the *socii*) and the nobles alike:

> Hence an aristocratic republic, or republic of nobles, can be born only
> through some extreme common necessity that forces the nobles to become
> equal and subject to the laws. Finally, no form of government can either
> rule of endure, if those who lack nobility have no part to play in it, unless
> they enjoy at least security in the natural commodities necessary for the
> maintenance of life. On the basis of these principles it is discovered that

the heroic kingdoms were aristocratic governments, born of the clienteles
through the two oldest agrarian laws. (FNS 87-88, S§139)

The two agrarian laws to which Vico here refers are the law of bonitary ownership (FNS
101, §161) and the law assigning land-rights to the plebs (FNS 103, §164). According to
the former, the plebs (*socii*) were required to make payments to the owners of the land
they were assigned to work. According to the latter, the security of civil law was
extended to the plebs by restricting land-ownership by patricians and offering rights of
ownership to the plebs.

In contrast to the dumb *famuli*, then, who only had necessity to lead them into
society, the rebellious *famuli* are now guided by a sense of their own advantage, and so
re-enter society, but in such a way to transform it. From an awakened ability to weigh
costs and benefits, the *famuli* now decide to re-enter society in its second and proper
form, on the basis of a kind of negotiation, which the nobles enter into as well, since for
them the *famuli* had come to serve a vital function, as agricultural laborers. The *famuli*,
then, become *socii* by entering into society a second time, this time not on the occasion of
necessity, but of utility. Nowhere, perhaps, does Vico make this more clear than when he
states that:

The first *socii*, who are properly companions associated for mutual
advantage, cannot be imagined or understood to have existed in the world
previous to these fugitives who sought to save their lives by taking refuge
with the aforesaid and who, having been received for their lives, were

obliged to sustain them by cultivating the fields of the fathers. (NS 81,

§258)

The Age of Men, the Age of Luxury

In the *New Science*, Vico conceives society in its truest form as a collection of

human beings in an exchange relationship for the purpose of maximizing utility, and

supported by the institutions of religion, marriage, and burial of the dead. Once society is

established, humans enter and remain in society on the occasion of maximizing personal

utility, but this utilitarian logic must be constrained lest it lapse into the very kind of self-

love that precipitated man's original decline into feral wandering.

Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still

later amuse themselves with pleasure, thence grow dissolute in luxury, and

finally go mad and waste their substance. (FNS 82, §124; cf also NS §241)

In all versions of the *New Science*, Vico warns that utility unconstrained by authority

(either religious or civil) inevitably leads to self-love, the dissolution of society, and so

the loss of humanity in general. The sequence of occasions that Vico describes -- from

necessity, to utility, to comfort, and then to luxury – is one that is found in both the first

and second *New Science*. As Pompa rightly observes,[142] between these two works,

however, Vico is found to significantly alter his tone, from optimism to pessimism. Vico

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[142] Pompa, "Introduction," xxxvi.

concludes his first *New Science* with an age of man characterized entirely by the principles of Roman jurisprudence which conform best, in principle and in practice, to the principles of natural law as Vico has described them, and as they conform to Christian philosophy (FNS 269-270, §473). Accordingly, Vico insists that the best form of democratic government is monarchy, since such a state permits both exchange relations between people, while at the same time investing legal authority in an office that would ensure that utilitarian expressions find themselves restrained in equitable exchange rather than allowed to revert to self-love (FNS 270, §473). In the first *New Science*, Vico certainly does not dismiss the possibility of man falling once more into that bestial state he found himself in after the flood, but he also doesn't claim that such a return is inevitable. Rather, granting to humans the power of free will and crediting man's powers of rational deliberation, he exhorts his reader to constantly and earnestly maintain the three institutions upon which civil society was built:

> Hence, the nations guard the following three practices above all others
> with the highest of ceremonies and the most elaborate of solemnities: their
> native religions, marriage within their own people and funerals within
> their own lands. For this is the common sense of the whole of mankind:
> that the nations should stand firm on these three customs above all others
> in order not to fall back into the state of bestial liberty, for all three arose
> from a certain blush of shame, experiences by the living and the dead, in
> the face of the sky. (FNS 229-230, §397)

In contrast to the more optimistic tone of the first *New Science*, the second edition introduces a strongly pessimistic aspect to Vico's theory of ideal eternal history. Instead

of culminating with a form of democracy tempered by Monarchy, Vico now more than

warns of the possibility of decline, but rather actively predicts it: "Our Science therefore

comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the

history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall" (NS 104,

§349).

In contrast to the first *New Science*, the second finds the age of man radically

revised. In the first place, Vico places the Roman jurisprudential tradition in the age of

heroes and defines the age of man, instead, as an age in which humans are guided by the

internalized principles of natural law. In a free commonwealth, a purely democratic state,

people have so internalized the principles of natural equity that they abide by them even

as they pursue their own self-interest. Vico still praises monarchy as the highest form of

government, but in this case the monarch attends only to matters of state and of

international relations. The authoritative function that the monarch would previously

have maintained in the age of heroes gives way to the authority of natural law itself (NS

24, §39). Second, rather than simply citing decline as a possibility to be avoided, Vico

points to the fall of Rome, during which time philosophical skepticism brought about a

condition in which the institutions of religion, marriage, and burial became threatened.

With the freedom that comes with commonwealth, says Vico, comes the development of

eloquence as a vehicle for public reflection upon virtue:

> And from the philosophies providence permitted eloquence to arise and,
>
> from the very form of these popular commonwealths in which good laws
>
> are commanded, to become impassioned for justice, and from these ideas
>
> of virtue to inflame the peoples to command good laws. (NS 422, §1101)

Guided by providence in a democratic commonwealth, eloquence served a conservative

function, actively reminding citizens of the nature of virtue and of its importance to the

preservation of society. With the rise of skepticism, however, came an ability to argue

both sides of a case indifferently, and ability that eroded belief in divinity and made it

possible for citizens to progressively abandon civic virtue in favor of self-interest. In

Rome, says Vico, the result was civil war, 'the perfect tyranny of anarchy or the

unchecked liberty of the free peoples' (NS 423, §1102).

Fortunately, says Vico, Providence works for the good of peoples even as they

begin to fall out of society. In the case of Rome, Providence provided salvation from

within, in the person of Augustus, who "established himself as a monarch and, by force

of arms, [took] in hand all the institutions and all the laws" (NS 423, §1104). It was on

account of the person of Augustus that Rome did not fall further. Vico then speculates

that, were it that Augustus, or someone like him, did not appear, providence may still

have prevented Rome's fall through its enslavement:

> Then, if providence does not find such a remedy within, it seeks it outside.
>
> And since peoples so far corrupted have already become naturally slaves
>
> of their unrestrained passions—of luxury, effeminacy, avarice, envy,
>
> pride, and vanity—and in pursuit of the pleasures of their dessolute life are
>
> falling back into all the vices characteristic of the most abject slaves
>
> (having become liars, tricksters, calumnators, thieves, cowards, and
>
> pretenders), providence decrees that they become slaves by the natural law
>
> of the gentes which springs from this nature of nations, and that they

become subject to better nations, which, having conquered them by arms,

preserve them as subject provinces. (NS 423, §1105)

In this latter case, says Vico, providence may save the fallen nation in much the way as

the fathers provided protection to the *famuli*.

It is only if neither of these conditions are met that the falling nation would find

itself return utterly to that same state as the fallen *giganti*. But this, too, is a work of

providence, for it is only by allowing a humanity overcome by the consequences of its

own unrestrained reason to descend once more to a mute and bestial state that it might

begin again, through the occasion of necessity. So Vico concludes that, not matter what

the state of fallenness a nation might find itself, providence works to "[bring] back

among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundations of justice, as well

as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God" (NS 424, §1106).

Pompa,[143] like others, reads Vico's second *New Science*, as predicting the

inevitable fall of nations, as if the pattern of rise and fall is one that inevitably follows. In

this, Vico is read as breaking from an account that is descriptive and optimistic to one

that is predictive and pessimistic. This common misperception is one that results from a

mis-reading of Vico's doctrine of *corso e ricorso*, as if the *ricorso* is merely a repetition

of the *corso*. The *corso* is the singular and common course that all nations have, and

have to have, taken to ascent from the post-diluvian state of feral wandering, through the

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[143] Ibid.

institutions of religion, marriage, and burial, to the achievement of commonwealth. The

ricorso, on the other hand, refers to the fact that divine providence is always at work.

Alone, human beings are incapable of remaining in society. Naturally social, human

beings are nevertheless profoundly anti-social:

> For, without a provident God, there would have been no states in the
>
> world other than those wandering, bestiality, ugliness, violence, ferocity,
>
> depravity and blood, and probably, or even certainly, throughout the great
>
> forest of the earth, hideous and mute, mankind would not now exist. (FNS
>
> 274, §476)

Despite the fact that human beings are, alone, incapable of remaining in society,

providence is ever at work to occasion the proper expression of their social nature.

The fundamental difference between the first and subsequent editions of the *New

Science*, then, is not that the latter predict a pattern of inevitable decline that is beyond

human control. Rather, Vico's account of the 'barbarism of reason' is specific to the

conditions surrounding the fall of Rome, and is meant only to further illustrate the risk

inherent in forgetting the nature of society, and the steps that must be taken in order to

preserve it. More than this, however, Vico uses Rome as an opportunity to further

illustrate the work of providence in preventing humanity's lapse into feral wandering.

God does not want to see humanity fall, and so exercises his providence either internally

or externally, through a powerful monarch, slavery to a better nation or, in the most

extreme case, by allowing humanity to fall indeed, if only to allow it to begin anew.

Conclusion

When we look back upon the development of Vico's conception of society we

see, not only that society is a constant and central object of reflection throughout his

career, but also that there are three structural features of his conception that remain

constant in spite of apparent differences shaped by the various phases in Vico's

intellectual development.

(1) Human's are essentially social. For Vico, society preexists individuals.

Society is something into which humans are born, and is an essential part of what it

means to be human. Throughout Vico's career, we see an unwavering belief in the

divinity of the human mind which, like its Creator, is capable of seeing, hearing,

discovering, comparing, inferring, and recollecting (OI 48, §12). Like God, human

beings are endowed with the power to create. The ability to exercise this creative

capacity, however, is both contingent upon, and for the sake of, the existence of a

community of creative agents. Vico does not adopt the Aristotelian line here by citing

community as necessary to the fulfillment of individual virtue. Society is not, for Vico,

simply scaffolding necessary to the achievement of self-actualization. Society is not for

the sake of individual human beings. Instead, human beings create and enter into

relationships of exchange in order to preserve society as something that pre-existed them,

into which they were born, and which will continue to persist after their deaths. In his

third oration, Vico clearly articulates his belief that all forms of exchange – political,

economic, and literary – exist for the sake of promoting our ability to relate harmoniously

with one another. In *Universal Law*, Vico argues that God's creation is structured in such

a way as to preserve, not the corporeal bodies of individuals, but rather the eternal order of things. From this perspective, society precedes and supersedes its individual members, and was created by God with a view to its preservation as part of an eternal order. The task of individual human beings in this context is not to preserve themselves, as many in the natural law tradition would have it, but rather to participate in the eternal order of things through the active pursuit of perfect sociability, which is the abrogation of self-interest. In the *New Science*, Vico continues to maintain his position that man's essential nature is as a being whose principle property is that of being social.

(2) Humans do not cause society, they occasion it. Society pre-exists individuals human beings, and human beings exist for the sake of preserving society. What this means is that society is that society is not caused by human beings, as a means to achieve some other end. For Vico, society is not caused by humans for the sake of self-preservation or as a consequence of some utility-maximizing calculus. Rather, society is caused by God and functions as an essential part of his eternal order. If in fact man's essential nature is as a being whose principle property is that of being social, then the only way that man could be the cause of society is if he caused himself. In Vico's view, then, the claim that society is man-made is not one that can be made without also risking the worst kind of impiety.

Humans do not cause society, but their activity does drive its actualization. In his inaugural orations, Vico finds the occasions of society in the life of the *civitas* and the forms of exchange in which it consists. Society precedes the individual and the city, but it is in the relationships of exchange – political, economic, and literary – that we find the actualization of human society in the form of good faith. In *Universal Law*, Vico argues

that human beings are naturally social, but that selfishness brought about by original sin represents a force of disillusion. The selfish will toward self-preservation and the maximization of utility does not cause society, but rather brings humans together and produces occasions for cultivating society where selfishness would otherwise leave to lie dormant. In *Universal Law*, Vico defines occasions as modes of Divine Providence, events or things not hoped for by human beings, but that nevertheless function as vehicles through which God produces things at their proper time (UL 58). In this, the drive to maximize utility is used by God as a way of redeeming human selfishness in order to restore society where original sin would otherwise lead inevitably to its dissolution.

In the *New Science*, Vico maintains his insistence that humans are naturally sociable but intensifies his demonstration of the destructive power of original sin through an historical account of man's post-diluvian lapse into a state of absolute beastial wandering. He also rejects statements made in *Universal Law* to the effect that some innate selfish drive toward utility maximization might ward off the total dissolution of society. The consequence of original sin is that, left to their own devices, human beings are absolutely incapable of preventing their own destruction. It is only as a consequence of God's active intervention in human history, through the phenomenon of thunder, that beastial humanity could emerge from its feral wandering and reestablish the necessary institutions of religion, marriage, and burial.

(3) The task of philosophy is to preserve society. A consistent theme throughout Vico's work – perhaps the most important theme – is the importance of philosophy as a pedagogical endeavor aimed at the preservation of society through the cultivation of piety. In Vico's sixth oration, he describes the task of education as working to counteract

the anti-social tendencies of a human nature changed by original sin, to lead students progressively to knowledge of God, and to cultivate their ability to make prudent decisions in the world of human affairs. In *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Vico criticizes metaphysical abstraction as a futile act of impiety, insists that first principles are to be found in revelation alone, and charges the philosopher to better understand the epistemological limits of their truth claims. In *Universal Law*, Vico views the preservation of society as an exercise of piety. And in the *New Science*, Vico famously concludes his work with the claim that "this Science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise" (NS 426, §1112). Throughout Vico's work, he constructs the philosopher as a moral educator, an agent of Providence whose task it is to foster self-knowledge, which is knowledge of oneself as essentially social, in order to mitigate the effect of those anti-social tendencies brought about by original sin.

In the history of ideas, Giambattista Vico is important because his conception of society, a conception that he generally holds throughout his career, is remarkable in its similarity to the conception held by Montesquieu which many view as making possible the modern discipline of sociology. Vico's conception of society is as an object that is separate both from the state that supports it and the individuals that make it up. In contrast to pre-modern conceptions of society, according to which *societas* consisted merely in aggregates of individuals engaged in relationships of exchange, Vico's view of society is as a transcendent relation that binds together all of humanity, but that is actualized in, and occasioned by, exchange relationships.

In spite of the similarities between Vico's conception of society and the general attributes of society that were necessary to inaugurate the modern sociological tradition, there is one significant difference that finds Vico not-yet-modern. As with modern conceptions of society, Vico's is as a thing separable both from the state and from the individuals that make it up. In contrast, however, Vico does not attribute to society any kind of agency. Society, for Vico, functions as an important structure in the eternal order of things ordained by God, but is sustained through the providential activity of God alone. Like the kind of agency envisioned by the sociologists of the eighteenth century, Providence for Vico has the power to affect the lives of humans without also interfering with their freedom as individual agents. But this power is not in society itself, as it was for either the social physicists or French organicists. Rather, this power for Vico continues to be exercised outside of society, even if for the sake of it.

It is here, in Vico's continued insistence upon God as the sustaining cause of society that Vico falls short of arriving at truly modern conception of society. To the extent that Vico's primary concern in all of his works is to demonstrate Divine Providence in order to promote piety, it is best that we consider his work theologically rather than sociologically. Vico is clearly interested in society, but not as an object for its own sake. The *New Science*, the most sociological of all of Vico's works, is rightly self-described as a "rational civil theology of divine providence" (NS §385). In spite of the formal similarities between Vico's and more modern conceptions of society, the defining characteristic of modern society *par excellence* is a functional one: to mitigate early modern concerns about the possibility of morality and social stability in the face of a God

that had suddenly been called into question. Modern responses to this question, as for example from Descartes, Grotius, and Montesquieu, sought to mitigate anxiety by supplanting God with some object that was better capable of withstanding skeptical interrogation. Other pre-modern responses, like from Selden for example, sought to accomplish the same thing but by reaffirming God's existence and necessity as a moral force. Between pre-modern and modern responses to the rise of Enlightenment skepticism, the moral impetus is the same. Both pre-modern and modern responses were motivated by a strong sense of mission, of having to address moral concerns at the same time as attending to revolutionary social changes brought about as a result of industrialization and political insecurity. Like Montesquieu, Vico insists that human beings are essentially social, and like Montesquieu, Vico believes that human selfishness leads human beings to forget that fact. For both thinkers, the task of the philosopher is to work to remind human beings of a social nature, so easily forgotten, in order to mitigate the pernicious consequences of forgetfulness.

For all the similarity between Vico's conception of society and that of Montesquieu, it is Montesquieu's secularism that ultimately sets his conception of society apart as finally making possible the modern social scientific tradition possible. What marks sociology as a distinctly modern response was its secularism, its earnest desire as a discipline to locate the cause of social phenomena within the logic of society itself, and without the need to resort to theological explanation. For all of his idiosyncrasies, it is for reason of his ardent secularism that August Comte continues to be claimed as the founding father of sociology. And it is for reason of his ardent commitment to theological explanation that Vico is not.

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