

The New Science

Giambattista Vico

One of the first to conceive of history as a progress through successive stages, the Italian lawyer and professor of Greek and Latin Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) published his monumental Principles of a New Science Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations in 1725. This selection is from the introduction to the book, which Vico titled "Idea of the Work."

This New Science studies the common nature of nations in the light of divine providence, discovers the origins of institutions, religious and secular, among the gentile nations, and thereby establishes a system of the natural law of the gentes, which proceeds with the greatest equality and constancy through the three ages which the Egyptians handed down to us as the three periods through which the world had passed up to their time. These are: (1) The age of gods, in which the gentiles believed they lived under divine governments and everything was commanded them by auspices and oracles, which are the oldest institutions in profane history. (2) The age of heroes, in which they reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs. (3) The age of men, in which all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies, both of which are forms of human government.

In harmony with these three kinds of nature and government, three kinds of language were spoken which compose the vocabulary of this Science: (1) That of the time of the families, when gentile men were newly received into humanity. This was a mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express. (2) That spoken by means of heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions, which make up the great body of the heroic language which was spoken at the time the heroes reigned. (3) Human language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and which is proper to the popular commonwealths and monarchical states; a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound. Hence, among all nations, once the laws had been put into the vulgar tongue, the science of laws passed from the control of the nobles. Hitherto, among all nations, the nobles, being also priests, had kept the laws in a secret language as a sacred thing. That is the natural reason for the secrecy of the laws among the Roman patricians until popular liberty arose.

Now these are the same three languages that the Egyptians claimed had been spoken before in their world, corresponding exactly both in number and in sequence to the three ages that had run their course before them. (1) The hieroglyphic or sacred or secret language, by means of mute acts. This is suited to the uses of religion, for which observance is more important than discussion. (2) The symbolic, by means of similitudes, such as we have just seen the heroic language to have been. (3) The epistolary or vulgar, which served the common uses of life. These three types of language are found among the Chaldeans, Scythians, Egyptians, Germans, and all the other ancient gentile nations; although hieroglyphic writing survived longest among the Egyptians, because for a longer time than the others they were closed to all foreign nations (as for the same reason it still survives among the Chinese), and hence we have a proof of the vanity of their imagined remote antiquity.

We here bring to light the beginnings not only of languages but also of letters, which philology has hitherto despaired of finding.... Philologists have believed that among the nations languages first came into being and then letters; whereas (to give here a brief indication of what will be fully proved in this volume) letters and languages were born twins and proceeded apace through all their three stages. Their beginnings are precisely exhibited in the causes of the Latin language.... By the reasoning out of these causes many discoveries have been made in ancient Roman history, government, and law, as you will observe a thousand times, O reader, in this volume. From this example, scholars of oriental languages, of Greek, and, among the modern languages, particularly of German, which is a mother language, will be enabled to make discoveries of antiquities far beyond their expectations and ours.

We find that the principle of these origins both of languages and of letters lies in the fact that the early gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. This discovery, which is the master key of this Science, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life, because with our civilized natures we [moderns] cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of these first men. The [poetic] characters of which we speak were certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animated substances, of gods or heroes, formed by their imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus; exactly as the fables of human times, such as those of late comedy, are intelligible genera reasoned out by moral philosophy, from which the comic poets form imaginative genera (for the best ideas of the various human types are nothing but that) which are the persons of the comedies. These divine or heroic characters were true fables or myths, and their allegories are found to meanings not analogical but univocal, not philosophical but historical, of the peoples of Greece of those times.

Since these genera (for that is what the fables in essence are) were formed by most vigorous imaginations, as in men of the feeblest reasoning powers, we discover in them true poetic sentences, which must be sentiments clothed in the

greatest passions and therefore full of sublimity and arousing wonder. Now the sources of all poetic locution are two: poverty of language and need to explain and be understood. From these comes the expressiveness of the heroic speech which followed immediately after the mute language of acts and objects that had natural relations to the ideas they were meant to signify, which was used in the divine times. Lastly, in the necessary natural course of human institutions, language among the Assyrians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Latins began with heroic verses, passed thence to iambics, and finally settled into prose. This gives certainty to the history of the ancient poets and explains why in the German language, particularly in Silesia, a province of peasants, there are many natural versifiers, and in the Spanish, French, and Italian languages the first authors wrote in verse.

From these three languages is formed the mental dictionary by which to interpret properly all the various articulated languages, and we make use of it here wherever it is needed.... Such a lexicon is necessary for learning the language spoken by the ideal eternal history traversed in time by the histories of all nations, and for scientifically adducing authorities to confirm what is treated of in the natural law of the gentes and hence in every particular jurisprudence.

Along with these three languages—proper to the three ages in which three forms of government prevailed, conforming to three types of civil natures, which succeed one another as the nations run their course—we find there went also in the same order a jurisprudence suited to each in its time.

Of these [three types of jurisprudence] the first was a mystic theology, which prevailed in the period when the gentiles were commanded by the gods. Its wise men were the theological poets (who are said to have founded gentile humanity), who interpreted the mysteries of the oracles, which among all nations gave their responses in verse. Thus we find that the mysteries of this vulgar wisdom were hidden in the fables. In this connection we enquire into the reasons why the philosophers later had such a desire to recover the wisdom of the ancients, as well as into the occasions the fables provided them for bestirring themselves to meditate lofty things in philosophy, and into the opportunities they had for reading their own hidden wisdom into the fables.

The second was the heroic jurisprudence, all verbal scrupulosity (in which Ulysses was manifestly expert). This jurisprudence looked to what the Roman jurisconsults called civil equity and we call reason of state. With their limited ideas, the heroes thought they had a natural right to precisely what, how much, and of what sort had been set forth in words; as even now we may observe in peasants and other crude men, who in conflicts between words and meanings obstinately say that their right stands for them in the words. And this by counsel of divine providence to the end that the gentiles, not yet being capable of universals, which good laws must be, might be led by this very particularity of their words to observe the laws universally. And if, as a consequence of this [civil] equity, the laws turned out in a given case to be not only harsh but actually cruel, they naturally bore it because they thought their law was naturally such.

Furthermore, they were led to observe their laws by a sovereign private interest, which the heroes identified with that of their fatherlands, of which they were the sole citizens. Hence they did not hesitate, for the safety of their various fatherlands, to consecrate themselves and their families to the will of the laws, which by maintaining the common security of the fatherland kept secure for each of them a certain private monarchical reign over his family. Moreover, it was this great private interest, in conjunction with the supreme arrogance characteristic of barbarous times, which formed their heroic nature, whence came so many heroic actions in defense of their fatherlands. To these heroic deeds we must add the intolerable pride, profound avarice, and pitiless cruelty with which the ancient Roman patricians treated the unhappy plebeians, as is clearly seen in Roman history precisely during that period which Livy himself describes as having been the age of Roman virtue and of the most flourishing popular liberty yet dreamed of in Rome. It will then be evident that this public virtue was nothing but a good use which providence made of such grievous, ugly, and cruel private vices, in order that the cities might be preserved during a period when the minds of men, intent on particulars, could not naturally understand a common good. Thence are derived new principles by which to demonstrate the argument of St. Augustine's discussion of the virtue of the Romans; and the opinion hitherto held by the learned concerning the heroism of primitive peoples is put to rout. Civil equity of this sort we find naturally observed by the heroic nations in peace as well as in war (shining examples are adduced from the history of the first barbarian times as well as from that of the last); and it was practiced privately by the Romans as long as theirs was an aristocratic commonwealth, that is to say down to the times of the Publilian and Petelian laws, until which time everything was based on the Law of the Twelve Tables.

The last type of jurisprudence was that of natural equity, which reigns naturally in the free commonwealths, in which the people, each for his own particular good (without understanding that it is the same for all), are led to command universal laws. They naturally desire these laws to bend benignly to the least details of matters calling for equal utility. This is the *aequum bonum*, subject of the latest Roman jurisprudence, which from the times of Cicero had begun to be transformed by the edict of the Roman praetor. This type is also and perhaps even more connatural with the monarchies, in which the monarchs have accustomed their subjects to attend to their own private interests, while they themselves have taken charge of all public affairs and desire all nations subject to them to be made equal by the laws, in order that all may be equally interested in the state. Wherefore the emperor Hadrian reformed the entire heroic natural law of Rome with the aid of the human natural law of the provinces, and commanded that jurisprudence should be based on the Perpetual Edict which Salvius Julianus composed almost entirely from the provincial edicts.