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Providence in Ordinary

On Human Language in Giambattista Vico's *The New Science*

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Articolo sottoposto a *double blind peer review*
Ricevuto: 19/06/2020 – Accettato: 23/08/2020 – Pubblicato: 12/2020

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Abstract: Against a presumed antagonism in 18th century philosopher Giambattista Vico between divinity and humanity as the “true” author of history, this article aims to recuperate one aspect of the harmony of human and divine action via what I term the “ordinary providence” of Vico’s *The New Science*. According to Vico’s philosophy of history, the histories of the Gentile and Hebrew races diverge not with respect to whether but how divine providence is variously present to them. The nondescript providential gift of the former, I argue, is realized in and as human language itself. In this unity, the *poiesis* of language is ontologically significant: humans as signifiers both form and are formed by their signs. Ultimately, via exploration of Vico’s “ordinary providence,” I offer that divine providence can be re-imagined not as overwhelming human agency in history (contra the neo-Stoicism and neo-Epicureanism of Vico’s time) nor as interrupting or suspending it (contra claims of occasionalism in Vico), but as fully capacitating it.

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Keywords: Giambattista Vico; philosophy of history; providence; language; *poiesis*

Introduction

If *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* frustrates straightforward interpretation of the relation of divine providence and human agency in history, its aim is at least clear. Vico’s *magnum opus* boldly claims to re-establish the centrality of divine providence to the origin, progress, and end of civil society, and conversely, to rebuke any vision of humanity in history that disregards its divine foundation. Vico images this intellectual *lacuna* in his famous frontispiece as a half-supported globe, writing,

Perciò il globo, o sia il mondo fisico, ovvero natural in una sola parte egli dall’altare vien sostenuto; perché i filosofi infin’ ad ora, avendo contemplato la divina provveden-

za per lo sol'ordine naturale, ne hanno solamente dimostrato una parte [...] ma no 'l contemplarono già per la parte, ch'era più propria degli uomini, la natura de' quali ha questa principale propietà d'essere socievoli¹.

With his visionary socio-historical spirit, Vico thus hopes to restore a firm foundation to what in his eyes has become an enervated epistemology, upon which the “globe” of the natural world precariously verges. His muse is the «metaphysic» of the frontispiece, «the lady with the winged temples» who «contemplates in God the world of human minds [...] in order to show His providence in the world of human spirits, which is the civil world or world of nations»². On the one hand, Vico thus justifies the role of divine providence in history as «a chief business of our Science», and accordingly entitles his radically new science «a rational civil theology of divine providence»³. On the other hand, what is charted throughout is emphatically the course of human history, whose emphasis on the *civil* threatens to far outstrip its theology. Hence the complexity, if not the expected equivocation, of the *New Science*: who is the protagonist of providential history, divine intervention, or human sociality?

This article proposes that the antagonism presumed within Vico's *New Science* between divine providence and human social agency is ultimately a false dialectic. There are indeed multiple ways to confound the relation between human and divine agency, and Vico concerns himself in the text with disabusing various misrepresentations within Stoic and Epicurean cosmologies. Nevertheless, I argue that what might reground a proper reading of the harmony of God's providential action in history and humanity's socio-historical agency is to recuperate the centrality of what I term the “ordinary” providence of Vico's *New Science*.

This grace, which informs the history of the Gentile race in particular, is the capacity for language itself. For Vico, human language, its instantiation in embodied practices of signification and sociality, and ultimately the Gentile race's capacity to author history itself is *also* a manifestation and consequence of divine gift. In this unity, history is God's ordinary providence realized in human

¹ Giambattista Vico, *La Scienza Nuova* (1744), a cura di Paolo Cristofolini e Manuela Sanna, vol. 9, *Opere di Giambattista Vico* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2013), §2. The typographical peculiarities of capitalization and italics in Vico's original 1744 text have here been simplified for the sake of legibility. «The globe, or the physical, natural world, is supported by the altar in one part only, for, until now, the philosophers, contemplating divine providence only through the natural order, have shown only a part of it [...] But the philosophers have not yet contemplated His providence in respect of that part of it which is most proper to men, whose nature has this property: that of being social», Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948), §2.

² Vico, *The New Science*, §2, «La donna con le tempie alate»; «contempla in Dio il mondo delle menti umane [...] per dimostrarne la provvidenza nel mondo degli animi umani, ch'è 'l mondo civile, o sia il mondo delle nazioni [...]», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §1.

³ Vico, *The New Science*, §2, «che principalmente s'occupa questa scienza di ragionare»; «una teologia civile ragionata della provvidenza divina», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §2.

Providence in Ordinary

language. Grace capacitates human speech, and humanity in and through the practice of embodied language, which Vico will define further in his exploration of *piet * and the *senso comune*, propels the course of history.

1. *Part One. Providence or Puppetry?*

For Vico, in order to vindicate the integrity of divine providence in history, one must first disabuse its alluring but mendacious philosophical alternatives. As Joseph Mali notes in *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's New Science*, the natural philosophies of Stoicism and Epicureanism and their intellectual recrudescence in Vico's early 18th century Naples actively rejected notions of the providential in history. Mali writes,

In his own time, [Vico] found the same old polar positions of "fate" and "chance" reaffirmed, respectively, by the modern exponents of "Stoic" determinism and "Epicurean" libertinism: "the latter asserting that human affairs are agitated by a blind concourse of atoms, the former that they are drawn by a deaf chain of cause and effect"⁴.

Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin further isolate Epicureanism as the regnant Neapolitan philosophical heritage which Vico most actively resisted. The «eclectic interests and enthusiasms» of Vico's Napoli for Epicureanism is described as a kind of philosophical patriotism. Naples was

the Italian seat of Epicureanism in Roman times; it was there that Siro and Philodemus taught and Virgil and perhaps Lucretius studied. In the Renaissance, Giovanni Pontano, founder of its Accademia Pontaniana, was the first serious critic of the text of Lucretius. And now in Vico's boyhood a fresh impetus to Epicurean studies had been given by the writing of Pierre Gassendi⁵.

Yet, behind this illustrious past lurks an illusory anthropology. Simply put, for Vico Epicurean cosmology debilitates human volition. The claim, as Mali glosses, that

all beings, including man, were only "bodies in motion", moving at random according to their inner will-power, or natural "endeavor", inflated the efficacy of "free will" beyond meaningful proportions⁶.

⁴ Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's New Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 110–1. Internal Citation from *The New Science*, §342.

⁵ Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin, introduction to Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Max Harold Fisch and Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1944), 31–2.

⁶ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 111.

That is to say, «agitated» by a blind, atomic, and random reality, the Epicurean is not self-determining but rather the ontological prey of a «deaf chain of cause and effect»⁷. Even under the pretense of a free will, human beings are not agents in history, but rather its captives.

Significantly, Vico observes an unexpected *coincidentia oppositorum* with regards to Epicureanism and Stoicism, as philosophical models that variously but equally undermine human agency in history. As Benedetto Croce writes,

la dottrina [stoica] del fato si aggira in un circolo vizioso, perché la serie eterna delle cagioni, con la quale esso tiene cinto e legato al mondo, pende dall'arbitrio di Giove e Giove è insieme soggetto al fato; onde c'è rischio che gli stoici restino avvolti in quella «catena di Giove», con la quale vogliono trascinare le cose umane⁸.

Binding and bound, the cosmological ouroboros of Stoicism envisions reality as a brute concatenation of events willed by “Jupiter,” whose own divine agency is circumscribed within fate. In a contemporary idiom, Vico would likewise criticize Spinoza’s adaptation of Stoic philosophy, especially in its subtle rhetorical substitution of Jupiter with “God.” As Mali writes, «by identifying everything (including God) with Nature, and subjecting all beings to her laws, [Vico] completely undermined the validity of freedom, spontaneity, and hence of free will»⁹.

1.1. *Mind in Vico*

Vico thus discards both Epicureanism and Stoicism as philosophical half-truths. The former is overly capricious, a «deaf chain of cause and effect»; the latter a fatalistic recapitulation of the same. Instead, Vico attempts to vindicate humanity as the author of history in and through a focused study of human society, the knowledge of which, he argues, humanity has privileged access. «One cannot but marvel», he writes,

Lo che a chiunque vi rifletta, dee recar maraviglia; come tutti i filosofi seriamente si studiarono di conseguire la scienza di questo mondo naturale; del quale, perché Iddio egli il fece, esso ne ha la scienza; e traccurarono di meditare su questo mondo delle nazioni, o sia mondo civile; del quale, perché l'avevano fatto gli uomini, ne potevano conseguire la scienza gli uomini [...] ¹⁰.

⁷ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 111. .

⁸ Benedetto Croce, *La Filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, a cura di Felicita Audisio (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1997), 114, «the [Stoic] doctrine of fate moves in a vicious circle, because the eternal series of causes in which it holds the world bound and chained, depends upon the will of Jupiter, and at the same time Jupiter is subject to fate; whence it results that the Stoics are themselves entangled in that ‘chain of Jupiter’ with which they would imprison all things human», Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, trans. R.G. Collingwood (New York: Russell & Russell Inc., 1964), 117.

⁹ Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, 111.

¹⁰ Vico, *The New Science*, §331, «that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men

Providence in Ordinary

Social science, the «study of the world of nations», spans the course of human history from its origins to Vico's own 18th century Italy, all of which is intelligible, he continues, to the «modifications of our own human mind»:

Ma in tal densa notte di tenebre, ond'è coverta la prima da noi lontanissima antichità, apparisce questo lume eterno, che non tramonta, di questa verità, la quale non si può a patto alcuno chiamar'in dubbio; che questo mondo civile egli certamente è stato fatto dagli uomini: onde se ne possono, perché se ne debbono, ritruovare i principj dentro le modificazioni della nostra medesima mente umana¹¹.

Here, “mind” denotes the uniquely *human* genius and genesis of civil history: a history that is eminently knowable by humans because made by humans—an insight originally formulated 30 years prior as the *verum-factum* principle with which he begins his *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia*, i.e. that «[t]he true is precisely what is made» (*verum esse ipsum factum*)¹². Ultimately, neither fate nor chance directs history, but the creative intelligence of the human mind. In the concentric circles of human relations, private and public, human action is sovereign: prospectively inaugurating and refining civil history, and retrospectively studying its development, because eminently knowable in and as modification of mind.

Nevertheless, Vico's denotation of “mind” in the *New Science* as a whole seems ambivalent. While intuitively referring to the human mind in its historical modification and development, “mind” attracts equally divine resonances from the onset of the *New Science*. Charting the serendipitous passage from humanity's vice-ridden prototypical forms of human society to the great virtues of commonwealths, Vico in fact praises a *divine* mind:

come della ferocia, dell'avarizia, dell'ambizione [...] ne fa la milizia, la mercatanzia, e la corte; e sì la fortezza, l'opulenza, e la sapienza delle repubbliche: e di questi tre grandi vizj, i quali certamente distruggerebbero l'umana generazione sopra la

could come to know», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §114.

¹¹ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §113–4, «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 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», Vico, *The New Science*, §331.

¹² Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, trans. L.M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 46. Vico introduces the *verum-factum* principle as follows: «Latinis *verum*, & *factum* reciprocantur, seu [...] convertuntur [...] hominem autem vulgo describebant animantem *rationis participem*, non compotem usquequaque. Altrinsecus uti verba idearum, ita ideae symbola, & notae sunt rerum. Quare quemadmodum legere ejus est, qui colligit elementa scribendi, ex quibus verba componuntur; ita intelligere sit colligere omnia elementa rei, ex quibus perfectissima exprimitur idea. Hinc conjicere datur, antiquos Italiae sapientes in haec de vero placita concessisse: Verum esse ipsum factum; ac proinde in Deo esse primum verum, quia Deus primus Factor; infinitum, quia omnium Factor; exactissimum, quia cum extima, tum intima rerum ei repraesentat elementa, nam continet», Giambattista Vico, *De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia*, a cura di Manuela Sanna (Edizioni di Storia e di Letteratura: Roma, 2005), I, 14.



Thomas K. Graff

terra, ne fa la civile felicità. Questa dignità pruova, esservi provvidenza divina; e che ella sia una divina mente legislatrice; la quale delle passioni degli uomini tutti attenuti alle loro private utilità [...] ne ha fatto gli ordini civili, per gli quali vivono in umana società¹³.

Vico concludes his treatise in similar opacity. He writes,

Perchè pur gli uomini hanno essi fatto questo mondo di nazioni [...] ma egli è questo mondo senza dubbio uscito da una Mente, spesso diversa, ed alle volte tutta contraria, e sempre superiore ad essi fini particolari, ch'essi uomini si avevan proposti [...] ¹⁴.

The passage most illustrative of this mind “often diverse” and “superior” to the ends of men is as follows:

Imperciocchè vogliono gli uomini usar la libidine bestiale, e disperdere i loro parti; e ne fanno la castità de' matrimonj, onde sorgono le famiglie: vogliono i padri esercitare smoderatamente gl'imperj paterni sopra i clienti; onde sorgono le città: vogliono gli ordini regnanti de' nobili abusare la libertà signorile sopra i plebei; e vanno in servitù delle leggi, che fanno la libertà popolare: vogliono i popoli liberi sciogliersi dal freno delle lor leggi; e vanno nella soggezion de' monarchi [...] vogliono le nazioni disperdere sè medesime; e vanno a salvarne gli avanzi dentro le solitudini; donde qual fenice nuovamente risurgano¹⁵.

In response to this passage, Mark Lilla in *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* voices Vico's astonishment at his own discovery: «Must we not, Vico concludes, say that this is a counsel of superhuman wisdom?»¹⁶.

¹³ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §75, «Out of ferocity, avarice, and ambition [...] it creates the military, merchant, and governing classes, and thus the strength, riches, and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness. This axiom proves that there is divine providence and further that it is a divine legislative mind. For out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage [...] it has made the civil institutions by which they may live in human society», Vico, *The New Science*, §132–3.

¹⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, §1108, «[i]t is true that men have themselves made this world of nations [...] but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §523.

¹⁵ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §523–4, «Men mean to gratify their bestial lust and abandon their offspring, and they inaugurate the chastity of marriage from which the families arise. The fathers mean to exercise without constraint their paternal power over their clients, and they subject them to the civil powers from which the cities arise. The reigning orders of nobles mean to abuse their lordly freedom over the plebeians, and they are obliged to submit to the laws which establish popular liberty. The free people mean to shake off the yoke of their laws, and they become subject to monarchs [...] The nations mean to dissolve themselves, and their remnants flee for safety to the wilderness, whence, like the phoenix, they rise again», Vico, *The New Science*, §1108.

¹⁶ Mark Lilla, *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 224.



Providence in Ordinary

Whose mind is Vico here addressing? A human, social mind, or a «divine legislative mind»? If the latter, what use is humanity's intelligence in understanding civil institutions whose modifications derive from an unknowably divine—rather than human—mind? Does not Vico obfuscate his knowable world of nations with a mind transcendent to the modifications of the human mind? And yet, we read immediately following, «[t]hat which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same»¹⁷.

In repudiating both Stoicism and Epicureanism and extolling instead a superhuman wisdom mind directing history, one fears that Vico inadvertently recapitulates the very determinist systems that he seeks to reject. Such a criticism, at least, Croce levies against Vico, as one who co-opts the Christian God as yet another illusive option within a philosophical shell game of human volition:

Fato, Caso, Fortuna, Dio sono spiegazioni che hanno tutte il medesimo difetto, che è di separare l'individuo dal suo prodotto, e, invece di cacciar via, come si argomentano, il capriccio o l'arbitrio individuale dalla storia, inconsapevolmente lo rafforzano o lo moltiplicano. Capriccioso è il cieco Fato, il Caso stravagante, il tirannico Dio; epperò il Fato passa nel Caso e in Dio, il Caso in Fato e Dio, e Dio si converte nell'uno e nell' altro, tutti eguali e tutt'uno¹⁸.

Alternatively, in a more conciliatory vein, Lilla sanitizes Croce's "tyrannical God" as rather an "occasionalist God" at the heart of Vico's philosophy of history. He writes,

from this presupposition that providence strictly guides the history of all mankind Vico draws the obvious inference regarding human freedom: man cannot govern his own history, since every human intention in politics can be, and usually is, exploited by providence for contrary ends [...] Vico now makes providence the "real cause" of historical change, and mankind only the "occasional cause"¹⁹.

This reading of Vico certainly resonates with the occasionalism of the late 17th century French priest and philosopher, Nicholas Malebranche. As John Milbank explains,

¹⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, §1108, «Questo, che fece tutto ciò fu pur mente; perchè 'l fecero gli uomini con intelligenza: non fu fato; perchè 'l fecero con elezione: non caso; perchè con perpetuità, sempre così facendo, escono nelle medesime cose», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §524.

¹⁸ Benedetto Croce, *La Filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, 112, «Fate, Chance, Fortune, God—all these explanations have the same defect: they separate the individual from his product, and instead of eliminating the capricious element, the individual will in history, as they claim to do, they immensely reinforce and increase it. Blind Fate, irresponsible chance, and tyrannical God are all alike capricious: and hence Fate passes into Chance and God, Chance into Fate and God, and God into both the others, all three being equivalent and identical», Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 115.

¹⁹ Lilla, *G.B. Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern*, 223.

[o]ccasionalism in Malebranche means that in each new motion, whether of matter or of the human mind, the full creative impulse of God is present to such a degree that the apparent cause, the prior motion of bodies, or the impulse of our will, is really a mere *occasion* for divine intervention, and no true cause at all²⁰.

The question remains: is Vico's proud human freedom the occasion of divine puppetry, however magnanimous? Accordingly, is Vico's *New Science* merely the literary occasion for disclosing this superhistorical super-imposition?

1.2. *Immanent Providence*

Just as, for Vico, Stoicism and Epicureanism philosophically distort natural theology, an occasionalist reading of history equally misperceives Vico's philosophy of history. One productive if under-considered prospective from which to re-examine Vico's *New Science* in this regard is the principal distinction made therein between the Hebrew and Gentile races. The treatise explicitly distinguishes the supernatural history of the former from the mundane history of the latter. Crucially, as Max Harold Fisch clarifies in the introduction to *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, these two histories diverge not with respect to *whether* but *how* divine providence is variously present to them.

In fact, Vico posits for humanity “*two kinds of providence*” (emphasis added):

(1) the direct and transcendent providence of unique and special acts, which was a privilege of the chosen people, and (2) the immanent providence operating according to uniform laws and using means as natural and easy as human customs themselves, which was all the gentiles had²¹.

Vico locates this distinction internal to providence as along a qualitative gradient of “help” received by God: «For besides the ordinary help from providence which was all that the gentiles had, the Hebrews had extraordinary help from the true God, which was their reason for dividing the whole world of nations into Hebrews and gentiles»²².

In Book I on the “Establishment of Principles” Vico uses similar language, noting that «man has free choice, however weak, to make virtues of his passions», and that this choice is «aided by God, naturally by divine providence and supernaturally by divine grace»²³. God's self-disclosure as a “supernatural help” in Hebrew history is

²⁰ John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico: 1688–1744. Part I: The Early Metaphysics*, vol. 23, *Studies in the History of Philosophy* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 57.

²¹ Bergin and Fisch, introduction to Vico, *The New Science*, xxxii.

²² Vico, *The New Science*, §313, «perchè le Genti n'ebbero i soli ordinarj ajuti dalla provvidenza, gli Ebrei n'ebbero anco ajuti straordinarj dal vero Dio; per lo che tutto il mondo delle nazioni era da essi diviso tra Ebrei, e Genti [...]», Vico, *La Scienza nouva*, §109.

²³ Vico, *The New Science*, §136, «L'uomo abbia libero arbitrio, però debole di fare delle passioni virtù»; «da Dio è aiutato naturalmente con la divina provvidenza, e soprannaturalmente dalla divina

Providence in Ordinary

evident; but what of God's "ordinary help" of the Gentile race? If God's "supernatural help" is synonymous with aid given "supernaturally by divine grace," and the difference between the Hebrew's "supernatural help" and the Gentile's "natural help" lies along a gradient of divine intervention, can we say in consequence that his "ordinary help" is a lower, but nevertheless real, form of grace?

Following Vico's twofold providence, this grace would need to be immanent to history without supplanting human agency. «Of these two kinds of providence», Fisch avers, «the former [direct and transcendent providence] is incompatible with full human agency in the making of institutions, and so also is any combination of the former with the latter, but the latter [immanent providence] by itself is not»²⁴. What would it mean, on Fisch's account, to speak of an immanent, non-intrusive grace? In what would it consist, if it must «operat[e] according to uniform laws» and «us[e] means as natural and easy as human customs themselves»?²⁵.

2. Part Two. Providence Realized in/as Language

One suggestion, following Vico's own methodological suggestion in the *New Science* that «[d]octrines must take their beginning from that of the nature of which they treat»²⁶, is that this ordinary help and natural providence of the Gentile race is the gift of language.

If we are to develop a coherent doctrine of divine providence with respect to humanity in history, we might thus fruitfully begin with «the time these creatures began to think humanly»²⁷ i.e. with the birth of language. Indeed, the myth of the birth of language as the origin of the human being, sociality, and history grounds the entire *New Science*. Insofar as Vico's text concerns «the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall»²⁸, one might analogously posit that internal to the history of every nation is the rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall of language itself.

2.1. Giganti and the Birth of Language

More concretely, the founding *dramatis personae* of the *New Science* is not so much the abstract concept of language as concept, as the mythical pre-historical

grazia», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §75.

²⁴ Bergin and Fisch, introduction to Vico, *The New Science*, xxxii.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, §314, «Le dottrine debbono cominciare, da quando cominciano le materie, che trattano», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §110.

²⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, §338, «da che quelli incominciaron' a umanamente pensare», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §118.

²⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, §349, «le storie di tutte le nazioni ne' loro sorgimenti, progressi, stati, decadenze, e fini», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §124.

giganti, or giants, that first shaped it. These «first men, stupid, insensate, and horrible beasts» are the first subject to be treated in Book II, Section 1, entitled “Della metafisica poetica” (“Poetic Metaphysics”). Here, Vico locates the genesis of religion in the imagined encounter by pre-linguistic *giganti* with the cacophonous and protean bursts of thunder and lightning. He writes,

il cielo finalmente folgorò, tuonò con folgori, e tuoni spaventosissimi [...] Quivi pochi giganti [...] eglino spaventati, ed attoniti dal grand’effetto, di che non sapevano la cagione, alzarono gli occhi, ed avvertirono il cielo: e perchè in tal caso la natura della mente umana porta, ch’ella attribuisca all’effetto la sua natura [...] si finsero il cielo esser’ un gran corpo animato, che per tal’aspetto chiamarono Giove, il primo dio delle genti dette maggiori²⁹.

In the first metaphor of history, the insensate *giganti* identified their «very violent passions» of shouting and grumbling with the sky, calling it Jove. The first god was thus born; and in a Vichian sense, so too was history.

Retrospectively, Vico names the metaphoric theogony of the *giganti* as a «confused idea» of divinity. Nonetheless, he determines this confused encounter to be a founding moment of divine providence:

Questa dignità stabilisce, che nello stato eslege la provvidenza divina diede principio a’ fieri, e violenti di condursi all’umanità, et ordinarvi le nazioni, con risvegliar’in essi un’idea confusa della divinità, ch’essi per la lor’ignoranza attribuirono a cui ella non conveniva; e così con lo spavento di tal’ immaginata divinità si cominciarono a rimettere in qualche ordine³⁰.

If the *giganti* attributed divinity to «that to which it did not belong», to what did this divinity belong? What is the true referent of “Jove”? The *gigantic* appeared to discover a god, but what they functionally divinized and “discovered” was language itself. It is true that «[t]heir poetry was at first divine»: not, as they believed, because «they imagined the causes of the things they felt and wondered at to be gods»³¹, but because they literally obeyed their own language *as* divine, and so sought to better understand and reverence this inchoate language. Vico writes,

²⁹ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §140, «the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning [...] Thereupon a few giants [...] were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know, and raised their eyes and became aware of the sky. And because in such a case the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own nature to the effect [...] they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes», Vico, *The New Science*, §377.

³⁰ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §84, «This axiom establishes that divine providence initiated the process by which the fierce and violent were brought from their outlaw state to humanity and by which nations were instituted among them. It did so by awaking in them a confused idea of divinity, which they in their ignorance attributed to that to which it did not belong. Thus through the terror of this imagined divinity, they began to put themselves in some order», Vico, *The New Science*, §178.

³¹ Vico, *The New Science*, §375, «ch’essi immaginavano le cagioni delle cose, che sentivano, ed ammiravano, essere Dei», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §139.

Providence in Ordinary

credettero [...] che Giove comandasse co' cenni, e tali cenni fossero parole reali, e che la natura fusse la lingua di Giove; la scienza della qual lingua credettero universalmente le Genti essere la divinazione; la qual da' Greci ne fu detta teologia, che vuol dire scienza del parlar degli dei³².

By extension, what would it mean to consider language as the foundational, providential gift to the Gentile race? Language, as immanent to history, allows humanity to experience, author, and record history. Language moreover bears a divine origin in God's act of creation without the threat of occasionalism. That is, language is the ordinary help given naturally by divine providence to the Gentiles, not *in* human history but *before* history, and precisely *as the possibility of* history—historicized here by Vico's imagined figure of the *giganti*. Gentile providence, then, is not a super-imposed interruption or suspension of history, but its pre-condition. Intrinsic to human createdness, on Vico's account, is the capacity for signification, first intuited in the divinization of the thunderbolt. In this light, to criticize God for imposing *upon* the course of human history would be tantamount to criticizing God for creation itself.³³

2.2. Pietà and Corporality

Vico's Gentile or «ordinary» providence of language, moreover, proceeds «from a vulgar metaphysics»³⁴ of confused notions of divinity only insofar as it is also a “corporal” metaphysics: the birth of language as fundamentally wed to the corporal, embodied practices of the *giganti*. As Vico admits, post-Cartesian thought does not readily foreground the body as the source and vehicle of language. Vico furthermore confesses the sheer imaginative difficulty of «enter[ing] into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely im-

³² Vico, *The New Science*, §379, «[t]hey believed that Jove commanded by signs, that such signs were real words, and that nature was the language of Jove. The science of this language the gentiles universally believed to be divination, which by the Greeks was called theology, meaning the science of the language of the gods», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §142.

³³ The harmony of divine and human making, and specifically between *natura* (nature) and *ingenium* (human ingenuity or wit) is a topic explored, if in a more interrogative mode, in *De Antiquissima*. Vico writes, «Porro *ingenium* & *natura* latinis idem: an quia humanum ingenium natura hominis sit: quia ingenii est videre rerum commensus, quid aptum sit, quic deceat, pulchrum, & turpe, quod brutis negatum? An quia ut natura gignit physica, ita ingenium humanum parit mechanica; ut Deus sit naturae artifex, homo artificiorum Deus?», Vico, *De Antiquissima*, VII, §III, 118.

³⁴ Cf. Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §119: «Ma tali primi uomini, che furono poi i principi delle nazioni gentili, dovevano pensare a forti spinte di violentissime passioni, ch'è il pensare da bestie. Quindi dobbiamo andare da una *volgar metafisica*, la quale si è avvisata nelle degnità, e troveremo, che fu la teologia de' poeti; e da quella ripetero il pensiero spaventoso d'una qualche divinità, ch'alle passioni bestiali di tal' uomini perduti pose modo, e misura, e le rendè passioni umane. Da cotal pensiero dovette nascere il conato, il qual'è propio dell'umana volontà di tener'in freno i moti impressi alla mente dal corpo, per o affatto acquetargli, ch'è dell'uomo sappiente, o almeno dar loro altra direzione ad usi migliori, ch'è dell'uomo civile». Emphasis mine.

mersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body»³⁵. Whereas the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy prioritizes the former over the latter in encountering and verifying reality, in Vico we find the exact opposite: corporality produces mind in and through language. He writes, «[t]o sum up, man is properly only mind, body, and speech, and speech stands as it were midway between mind and body»³⁶.

If corporality is the vehicle of language, *pietà* (“piety” or “devotion”) is likewise its virtue. Vico defines *pietà* as the “god-fearing” quality intrinsic to divine metaphor that compels obedience to Jove: «[P]iety sprang from religion, which properly is fear of divinity»³⁷. Just as religion inspires *pietà*, so *pietà* produces a *morale poetica*, or “poetic morality”: «Thus poetic morality began with piety, which was ordained by providence to found the nations, for among them all piety is proverbially the mother of all the moral, economic, and civil virtues»³⁸.

The moral significance of Vico’s piety-inducing religion is etymological: religion concerns the ritual practice of the Latin verb *religando*, meaning «binding»³⁹. The mythological root of religion as binding, he notes, is «those fetters with which Tityus and Prometheus were bound on the mountain rags to have their hearts and entrails devoured by the eagle; that is, by the frightful religion of the auspices of Jove»⁴⁰. Vico further specifies religious “binding” as “obligation” via consideration of the mythical lyre of Orpheus. David L. Marshall explains,

[i]n Vichian inquiry, Orpheus becomes a poetic character for obligation, for the stipulation of connections between persons. In the first households, the force of the patriarchs was expressed not abstractly but concretely as a cord: force was expressed by chorda in Greek and fides in Latin. The lyre of Orpheus stands for taming the wild beasts of Greece, harnessing them with the chords, bonds of obligation, and rendering them, thus, human⁴¹.

³⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, §378, «entrare nella vasta immaginativa di que’ primi uomini; le menti de’ quali di nulla erano astratte, di nulla erano assottigliate, di nulla spiritualezzate; perch’erano tutte immerse ne’ sensi, tutte rintuzzate dalle passioni, tutte seppellite ne’ corpi [...]», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §141.

³⁶ Vico, *The New Science*, §1045, «In somma non essendo altro l’uomo propriamente, che mente, corpo, e favella; e la favella essendo come posta in mezzo alla mente, et al corpo», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §478.

³⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, §503, «E la pietà incominciò dalla religione; che propriamente è timore della divinità», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §212.

³⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, §503, «Quivi la morale poetica incominciò dalla pietà; perch’era dalla provvidenza ordinata a fondare le nazioni; appo le quali tutte la pietà volgarmente è la madre di tutte le morali, iconomiche, e civili virtù [...]», *La Scienza Nuova*, §212.

³⁹ Cf. Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §212.

⁴⁰ Vico, *The New Science*, §503, «Cioè da quelle catene, con le quali Tizio, e Prometeo eran’ inca tenati sull’alte rupi, a’ quali l’aquila, o sia la spaventosa Religione degli auspicj di Giove, divorava il cuore, e le viscere [...]», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §212.

⁴¹ David L. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 217.

Providence in Ordinary

Therefore, while *pietà* originates in fear of an all-powerful god, it translates in practical terms into social obligation. As multiple scholars have noticed, Vico's *pietà* is not so much an affective disposition as a corporal practice: the *giganti*'s development of a *morale poetica* began quite simply with the physically ritualized "bonds of obligation" that obtained within their emergent social relations. Sandra Rudnick Luft thus invites the reader to re-orient one's own conception of humanity's "free will" as fundamentally rooted in embodied ritual practice, i.e. in *pietà*:

The creation of Jove arouses fear in the creators, and with fear *conatus*, the movement of the will that curbs the impulses of the body, giving rise to piety. Once again, piety is not a spiritual or psychological phenomenon, but the practices of public morality associated with observation of the auspices. The extent to which "public morality" is *nothing other* than those practices is obscured, however, by Vico's references to "mind" as that which curbs bodily impulses, such as "lust"⁴².

Vico's theory of human language is also a theory of human embodiment: how ritual, repetitive corporal practices generate social *relation* and thus human sociality. Far from a "spiritual or psychological phenomenon," human language is "nothing other" than the "practices of public morality" produced through the observation of the auspices, i.e. through the linguistic ritual of divination. Vico's ambiguous language of "mind" is here in part clarified. Luft writes that for Vico,

mind *itself* is an artifact constructed by social and linguistic practices. Mental or spiritual activity is no more substantively distinct from the body than is *conatus* or "free will" [...] *conatus* is inseparable from *practices* that the beasts *must* "freely" perform to satisfy human needs and utilities in the face of natural necessity⁴³.

Although the *giganti* purport to discern the abstruse, fearful will of Jove, their augury and divination *de facto* initiate a corpus (quite literally) of language which further establishes systematized networks of interactivity, social practice, and obligation. Luft emphasizes that human *pietà* is significant, not insofar as it fosters true understanding of the nature of Jove, but rather insofar as it creatively re-fashions their own human character. She writes,

For Vico, the act of making human mindfulness begins in the corporeal skills of making a thing—that is, in the making of an image signified and fixed with the language of naming that originates with it, and the practices inseparable from image and name. The act is not only creative, a *poiesis*, but also ontologically significant, modifying the nature of creators who, believing and worshipping their *factum*, bring into existence a human world not given in nature⁴⁴.

⁴² Sandra Rudnick Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 177.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, 146.

⁴⁴ Luft, *Vico's Uncanny Humanism*, 147.

One significant example of this fixed signification in *The New Science* is the grave marker. According to Vico, after the *giganti* became cognizant of the stench of dead corpses rotting near their residence and began the practice of burial,

essi dovettero in segno di seppoltura o sopra o presso a ciascun tumulo [...] detto da' greci φύλαξ, che significa custode, perchè credevano i semplici, che cotal ceppo il guardasse; e *cippus* a' Latini restò a significare sepolcro; ed agl'Italiani *ceppo* significa pianta d'albero genealogico [...]⁴⁵.

From this birth of genealogy, in turn, came the first nobles, Vico's «sons of the earth», and the first class distinction between the nobles and *famuli*⁴⁶.

Following Luft, we can conclude that for Vico, the *poiesis* of language is ontologically formative. The gods are not changed by the linguistic practice of the *giganti*; the *giganti* are. As *pietà* springs from religion and issues into the semiotics of a *morale poetica*, this *morale poetica*—a growing linguistic system of social practices and obligations—likewise molds *giganti* slowly into human beings. For Vico, human *poiesis* is reciprocal: signifiers both shape and are shaped by their signs.

2.3. Providence and the Senso Comune

Just as the embodied socio-linguistic practice of *pietà* can be seen ontologically to humanize the *giganti*, so too, I argue, can we read divine providence as operative within the Gentile race via the genesis and growth of linguistic sociality. The *prima facie* objection to this proposal, however, is its manifestation in and through Vico's mystifying “heterogenesis of ends,” a phrase Milbank defines as

the way in which human intentions issue in unintended results, and public structures are able to operate with perfect “rationality”, despite the fact that they have not been deliberately planned, and despite the fact that none of the individual social actors may fully identify with the interests of the whole⁴⁷.

⁴⁵ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §231, «[A] stake must have been fixed as a burial marker upon or near the mound [...] The grave marker was called by the Greeks the *phylax*, or guardian, because these simple people believed that the post would guard the grave. *Cippus*, the Latin name for the post, came to mean sepulcher, and *ceppo* in Italian means the trunk of a genealogical tree», Vico, *The New Science*, §529.

⁴⁶ Cf. Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §232–3: «Così con essi sepolcri de' loro seppelliti i giganti dimostravano la signoria delle loro terre; lo che restò in ragion romana di seppellire il morto in un luogo proprio, per farlo religioso: e dicevano con verità quelle frasi eroiche, noi siamo figliuoli di questa terra, siamo nati da queste roveri; come i capi delle famiglie da' Latini si dissero *stirpes*, e *stipites*; e la discendenza di ciascheduno fu chiamata *propago*; et esse famiglie dagl'Italiani furon' appellate *legnaggi*; e le nobilissime case d'Europa, e quasi tutte le sovrane prendono i cognomi dalle terre da esse signoreggiate; onde tanto in greco, quanto in latino egualmente figliuoli della terra significò lo stesso che nobile; ed a' Latini *ingenui* significano nobili, quasi *indegeniti*, e più speditamente *ingeniti*; come certamente *indigenae* restaron' a significare i natj d'una terra [...]

⁴⁷ John Milbank, *The Religious Dimension in the Thought of Giambattista Vico: 1688–1744. Part II: Language, Law, and History*, vol. 32, *Studies in the History of Philosophy* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992), 44.

Providence in Ordinary

In Vico's reading of history, vice can thus transmogrify unexpectedly into virtue, violent self-interest into sociality, and private utility into public justice. The theological temptation is to explain away this seemingly inexplicable, inverted causal relationship as a form of divine "intervention." On this reading, providence functions as the *deus ex machina* of occasionalism, whereby God intercepts human agency in pivotal moments in history, like «some divinity which impose[s] form and measure on the bestial passions»⁴⁸. The occasionalist God produces a virtuous, civil society for humanity *in spite of* its egoism. This reading, at least, lurks behind interpretations of Book I, Section IV, entitled "Method," in which Vico paints, in ever widening sociological strokes, the social transformation possible when providence guides humanity's self-interest. He writes:

[m]a gli uomini per la loro corrotta natura essendo tiranneggiati dall'amor proprio; per lo quale non sieguono principalmente, che la propria utilità [...] Quindi stabiliamo, che l'uomo nello stato bestiale ama solamente la sua salvezza; presa moglie, e fatti figliuoli, ama la sua salvezza con la salvezza delle famiglie; venuto a vita civile ama la sua salvezza con la salvezza delle città; distesi gl'imperj sopra più popoli, ama la sua salvezza con la salvezza delle nazioni; unite le nazioni in guerre, paci, alleanze, comerzj, ama la sua salvezza con la salvezza di tutto il gener'umano⁴⁹.

Commenting on this passage, Milbank questions whether one ought to read these concentric circles of self-interest and social commitment as in any clear sense dichotomies, for the sole reason that the distinction itself is anachronistic. Readers, he avers, must resist asking such questions of providence «in terms of the assumption of a highly reflective and "secondary" ethical discourse».⁵⁰ He continues,

[w]e are altogether missing Vico's point if we ask, is the human being's identification with family, city, nation, and world a matter of genuine widening moral sympathy, or rather simply one of a self-interest become more subtle, disguised and indirect, so that it is bound up with that of others?⁵¹

⁴⁸ Vico, *The New Science*, §340, «D'una qualche divinità, ch'alle passioni bestiali di tal'uomini perduti pose modo, e misura [...]», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §119.

⁴⁹ Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §120, «But men, because of their corrupted nature, are under the tyranny of self-love, which compels them to make private utility their chief guide [...] We thereby establish the fact that man in the bestial state desires only his own welfare; having taken wife and begotten children, he desires his own welfare along with that of his family; having entered upon civil life, he desires his own welfare along with that of his city; when its rule is extended over several peoples, he desires his own welfare alongside that of the nation; when the nations are united by wars, treaties of peace, alliances, and commerce, he desires his own welfare along with that of the nation; when the nations are united by wars, treaties of peace, alliances, and commerce, he desires his own welfare along with that of the entire human race», Vico, *The New Science*, §341.

⁵⁰ Milbank, *The Religious Dimension, Part II*, 44.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

For the *giganti* to attain an egoism over against which social obligation might compete for obedience is unrealistic because it presumes a foreign, ironic mentality: one that can, in ever more complex ways, distance itself from one's pious social practices in order to compare them to one's "own" selfish aims, and so calibrate the optimal "compromise" in light of that second-order ethical calculus. In short, the *giganti* cannot dissemble:

the first primitive "giants" – become men – never think of their moral obligation *in abstraction* from socio-linguistic structures, or as something *different* from and "in addition to" the facts which delimit the world. No; it is only the existence of "legal wife" and "legal children" – a *linguistic* existence – which places any bounds upon the giants' natural selfishness [...] these developing human structures *exist* in part *as* a more primary ethical discourse, as a language *defining* human being as something constituted in constraining relations so fundamental that the question – is this genuine sympathy or subtle self-interest – can scarcely even arise⁵².

In a sense, for Milbank, to misread Vico's linguistically emergent *giganti* as self-reflective is to miss the entire point of the "heterogenesis of ends" entailed in providence. There is no such thing as obligation abstracted from and antagonized by human thinking; language is piously "bound" to its social practices necessarily, for it develops out of them and defines their social content. Accordingly, providence is not a divine super-imposition, but embodied language writ large, and realized as a process of unanticipated, creative social development.

We might conclude that providence realized as *pietà* or embodied sociality is what Vico ultimately means by the *senso comune*, or common sense. «At each stage of their journey from *stultus* to *sapiens*», claims Lilla, «men are now said to share the psychological foundations of common sense, whether their instincts or their reason happens to dominate at that stage»⁵³. In and through the social obligations of language, man slowly enters into this shared rationality of the *senso comune*, characterized by «judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, and entire nation, or the entire human race»⁵⁴. Or as Vico concludes, «[u]niform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth»⁵⁵. It is this common ground of truth that for Vico arises from the manifold, philological narratives comprising *The New Science*. Far from anything superimposed upon humanity, an emergent *senso comune* charts the providential diachrony of history, and thus of humanity itself.

⁵² Milbank, *The Religious Dimension, Part II*, 44–5.

⁵³ Lilla, G.B. *Vico: The Making of an Anti-Modern*, 157.

⁵⁴ Vico, *The New Science*, §142, «Giudizio senz'alcuna riflessione, comunemente sentito da tutto un'ordine, da tutto un popolo, da tutta una nazione, o da tutto il gener'umano», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §76.

⁵⁵ Vico, *The New Science*, §144, «Idee uniformi nate appo intieri popoli tra essoloro non conosciuti, debbon' avere un motivo comune di vero», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §76.

Providence in Ordinary

3. Conclusion

Croce writes, «[t]he true and only reality then, in the world of nations, is the course of their history: and the principle which regulates this course is Providence»⁵⁶. Vico's providence in ordinary, ultimately, is the human being becoming human, as it were, in and through ever-developing embodied social practices of language. That humanity's very being is capacitated for language by the divine is perhaps no theological surprise for Vico. Yet for the modern reader, it may appear surprising that the Gentile race's divine origin in creation might so heavily influence his reading of Providence as the harmonious realization of divine gift in human action.

In sum, if Vico's text offers us a "new" science, it might just as easily offer us a glimpse of a "new Gentile": an entire human race created by God for linguistic encounter with and attunement to reality, and therefore dynamically formative of and formed by history. In this light, a new frontispiece emerges: the Gentile's ordinary providence stabilizes a tipping globe as Vico's winged lady, metaphysic, contemplates divine providence realized in human history; that is to say, «in respect of that part of it which is most proper to men, whose nature has this principal property: that of being social»⁵⁷.

⁵⁶ Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, 112, «La vera e unica realtà del mondo delle nazioni è dunque il loro corso; e il principio che governa il corso delle nazioni è la Provvidenza», Croce, *La Filosofia di Giambattista Vico*, 109.

⁵⁷ Vico, *The New Science*, §2, «ch'era più propria degli uomini, la natura de' quali ha questa principale proprietà d'essere socievoli [...]», Vico, *La Scienza Nuova*, §2.