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**REFLECTIONS  
ON GIAMBATISTA VICO**

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The Riverside City College Faculty Lecturer is to be chosen each year by vote of his colleagues to deliver an address on a scholarly subject of general interest. The series is inaugurated with this address by social science instructor Cecil Stalder.

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I've been particularly interested in the relationship of history to some of our other disciplines, such as sociology and psychology.

I go back to a good American humorist, Mr. Dooley, for the theme of this talk. Mr. Dooley made this observation:

"I know histhry isn't thru, Hennessy, because it ain't like I see every day iv Halsted Street. If any man comes along with a history iv Greece or Rome that'll show me the people fightin', gettin' dhrunk, makin' love, gettin' married, owin' the grocery man and bein' without hard-coal, I'll believe they was a Greece or Rome, but not before . . . histhry is a post-mortem examination. It tells what a counthry died iv. But I'd like to know what it lived iv."

Mr. Dooley had gone beyond that stage wherein he could have profited from Christopher Dawson's advice

that, "Happy is the people that is without a history and thrice happy is a people without a sociology," — and there are some students who would say amen to that. But Mr. Dawson continues to say, "For as long as we possess a living culture we are unconscious of it and it is only when we are in danger of losing it or when it is already dead that we begin to realize its existence and to study it scientifically." Mr. Herbert J. Muller, the well-known historian, cynically comments that "There are such happy people among us, on farms, in business offices, and in Congressional chambers." In other words, individuals who are unconscious of our culture and who do not understand what is going on.

But Mr. Dooley was not among these, nor was he the first human who had failed to halt his maturation at the "proper" time. The concerns of Mr. Dooley, while expressed in somewhat different ways, have been the concerns of many before him and many after. Mr. Dooley was raising certain fundamental questions which had been raised by many others before him. What is history? How is history distinguished from or related to whatever else may strike the consciousness of man?

Since it is self-evident that no man can be master of all knowledge, it is also self-evident that some consciousness of the relationship among disciplines is needed. This seems to me to be the function of these faculty lectures. Therefore, it is my purpose to deal briefly with a few significant figures who have wrestled with Mr. Dooley's questions. My selections are symbolic rather than exhaustive.

Particularly important to the consideration of these questions is the examination of an Italian, Giambatista Vico, also referred to as Giovanni Batista Vico, who lived 1688 to 1744.

There is some hope for many of us in taking a look at Vico's life. His father was an illiterate farmer who came down to Naples from a little village about forty miles away, and established, of all things, a book-seller's shop.

This book-seller's row in Naples was just a few blocks from the University of Naples and in close proximity to what one might call the Lawyer's Street, where the practice of law was undertaken. It was in this environment that Vico was raised.

Giambatista showed no promise early in life of being a genius. At the age of seven he had what some would term an unfortunate accident, but which for Giambatista may have been fortunate. He fell, hitting his head a blow which caused a tumor to grow. He underwent a series of operations over the next three years which kept him out of school. Now whether this had anything to do with his later mental acuity we do not know — I am not advising people to try this as an easy path to learning.

Upon recovery, he re-entered school and expressed the same attitude many of our students do — dissatisfaction with the teachers. In Vico's case, he felt that he could learn just as much or more outside of class, therefore he left school without permission. This behavior was repeated some three times, and each time he had proven his point — he had learned more than if he had stayed in school, at least he was ahead of his classmates.

This rather interesting background is to emphasize that he did not arrive at his intellectual ability through the process of formal education. It also suggests a reason for his greater freedom and originality in examining ideas than was shown by others of his day.

While Vico wrote and published numerous articles, most of his thinking is summed up in his major work, *Principi di Scienze Nuova*, or *The New Science*. This was first published in 1725, it then went through a series of revisions, at the insistence of some scholars in Naples, and was brought out again in 1730. Vico was dissatisfied with this presentation; he proceeded to work on it and brought out another revised edition in the year of his death, 1744.

In spite of Vico's concern with his *New Science*, the work went largely unnoticed in Naples. So much so, in fact that Vico, depressed, wrote:

"In publishing my work in this city I seem to have launched it upon a desert. I avoid all public places, so as not to meet the persons to whom I have sent it, and if by chance I do meet them, I greet them without stopping; for when this happens, these people give me not the faintest sign that they have received my book, and so confirm my impression of having published it in a wilderness."

It was only through the attention and interest of some Venetian scholars that he was encouraged to work on the revision issued in 1744. But neither this revised edition nor the interest of the Venetian scholars had any immediate major influence. It was not until the 1790's and the early 1800's that it attracted the attention of the French philosopher Jules Michelet, and the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder. Just how

much influence it had on these is debatable, but its general significance is indicated by the German theologian, Carl Lowith when he says:

"It anticipates the fundamental ideas of Herder, Hegel, Dilthey, and Spengler, the discoveries of Roman history by Niebuhr and Mommsen, the theory of Homer by Wolf, the interpretation of mythology by Bachhofen, the reconstruction of ancient life through etymology by Grimm, the historical understanding of laws by Savigny, of the ancient city and of feudalism by Fustel de Coulanges, and of the class struggle by Marx and Sorel."

One could spend a great deal of time trying to trace these influences, many of them being more indirect than direct. It is more important to examine some of Vico's ideas in *The New Science*.

The first of these concerns the methodology of historical study. Through his own examination of Roman history, to which he was largely limited by the facilities and circumstances of his time, Vico shows us that if we are to have any understanding of history we must study the language of the past, the myths of the past, and the poetry of the past. In other words, Vico's position is that we learn history not just from the written records which appear in the official archives, but from the lives of the people. Or, as Mr. Dooley has suggested, we should know about people. How do we come to really know about people? By studying the language of people; the way they talk, the meaning that is involved in the words they use, the labels they give to things. By studying the myths of people; understanding the poetry they write, or which they pass on by mouth from one generation to another. In short, Vico emphasizes the importance of the anonymous populace. So much of our history con-

cerns the individuals at the top of the heap — the outstanding ones. Very often we forget or ignore what others in our society contribute or how they might have contributed to the position of the outstanding individuals. The influence of Vico in making us conscious of the importance of this anonymous populace is to be seen in the work of later historians, anthropologists, psychologists, political scientists, and philosophers.

The second significant idea is Vico's conception of the three stages of man's knowledge of his past. The first of these stages he labeled the "Age of the Gods," in which advances in civilization were attributed to direct Divine gift or counsel. The second stage he labeled the "Age of Heroes," in which advances in civilization were attributed to great individuals, lawgivers, rulers, and philosophers. The third stage, he called the "Age of Men," in which the advances were attributed to the collaborative, largely anonymous work of the entire people. Corresponding with these three stages of man's knowledge of his past were the three stages of government, theocracy, aristocracy, and a republic or limited monarchy.

The significance of these three stages is to emphasize the idea that man can develop; that there is a possibility of intellectual and social progress. This is not in terms of the idea of progress as expressed in Social Darwinism, *i.e.*, of progress being inevitable. It is more nearly akin to the ideas of humanism, yet without the certainty as expressed in the Enlightenment, for Vico has a fourth stage in which he suggests the danger of arrogant, selfish individualism.

As to this fourth stage, Vico makes a comment that could be taken as applicable to some aspects of our twentieth century. He says:

"If they become rotten in that ultimate civic disease, . . . then Providence, in their extremity of ill, uses the following drastic remedy. Since such peoples, like beasts, have become accustomed to think of nothing, but individual advantage . . . and have been living in a solitude of spirit and desires, not even two of them able to agree, with the result that by obstinate factions and desperate civil wars they make forests of cities, and of forests holes for men to hide in, . . . the sinister subtleties of malicious minds, more frightful than beasts because of the barbarity of reflection, which is worse than the primal barbarity of sense, begin to defeat themselves."

While this may sound like a prophecy of doom, Vico is not pessimistic. He is saying that the condition of selfish individualism may be changed by forces from within and without. He is saying that there is a kind of providence that will force men back into this barbaric stage, in which man is more sensible than in the sophisticated stage of selfish individualism, and that man can rebuild.

This idea of man rebuilding is not the same as the idea of redemption in Christian theology; it is the idea of *man* being able to redeem. This is not the redemption which Norman Vincent Peale conceives of. It is not something which can be done by paying two dollars for a book, going through certain daily mumbo-jumbo and then everything will be wonderful. The redemption Vico has in mind involves a very intensified application of man's mind, and, of course, the spirit of man.

One notices that these stages involve the cyclical concept with which we are familiar in the thought of

Spengler and Toynbee. However, there are significant differences between Vico's idea of the cycle, or to use the Italian term "ricorso," and those of Spengler and Toynbee.

For Vico, the ricorso involves the return to a stage of simplicity, a stage of religious awe, of primitive barbarism. This is in its classic sense, where you have the idea of the rebirth of man, the education of man — the rebirth of man as a social creature, not just the idea of redemption. Vico is optimistic or hopeful; there is the idea of continuity from one civilization to another.

For Spengler, the cycle has a beginning and an end. Once begun, the end is inevitable — the end of a particular civilization. Man has no hope — he is the victim of inevitable forces. Spengler is completely pessimistic; there is no continuity between civilizations.

The comparison between Vico and Toynbee is more complex. Toynbee's view of history is built on three main ideas. The first of these ideas is that of Challenge and Response, in which Toynbee maintains that man cannot advance in ease and comfort. Man must be challenged and overcome these challenges in order to advance. This is to say that pain is the cause of man's achievement. As Charles Frankel observes:

"The 'law' of Challenge and Response is in reality the proposal of a new moral standard — or, rather, a proposal that prevailed in a non-secular society. It suggests that we look upon the suffering of the many as a necessity justified because it leads to the saintliness of the few. It is a grisly idea. . . . If the salvation of contemporary society depends on adopting this moral standard, it will look to most of us not like salvation at all, but like the decline of elementary moral feelings."

You find no such conception in Vico. When he speaks of providence forcing man back into a barbaric stage because of his selfish individualism, "It develops its order as easily as the natural customs of men."

The second idea of Mr. Toynbee is that there is an intelligible field of historical study. Toynbee maintains that all events fall into one all embracing system. As Frankel remarks, ". . . this conception of an 'intelligible field of study' denies, in effect, that anything significantly new can arise in the history of civilization and change its proper course." While Vico is not entirely clear on this point, he would seem to call for a multiplicity of systems, for the great truth was, "That this world of civil society has certainly been made by man, and that its principles can and must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind." One notices that he says "this world of civil society" and not the physical world. The physical world was the work of the divine providence he speaks of, while the civil society was primarily the work of man — with the guidance of providence — and given the variety of men's minds would therefore be capable of presenting a multiplicity of systems.

The third major idea of Toynbee's is that civilization must be an integrated whole. In this idea, Toynbee maintains that human beings must be obedient to a course laid down in advance, or they are certain of destruction. Or, as Frankel, again, points out, "Mr. Toynbee conceives of the idea that all men must become saints, if you are to avoid destruction." This is a return to the earlier conceptions of St. Augustine and Bishop

Bossuet. On this point, Vico is ambiguous. Lowith says:

"Vico's philosophy of history is a 'rational civil theology,' half-way between Voltaire and Bossuet, vindicating God's providence directly as history. It is precisely on the border line of the critical transition from theology to the philosophy of history and, therefore, deeply ambiguous."

It is this ambiguity, the absence of dogma, that makes Vico's a source of seminal ideas. It is an invitation to further reflection and investigation along diverse paths. Paths that have been followed in anthropology, sociology and other disciplines. Paths that have led us to see history as a synthesis and given us a basis for a realistic approach to history. An approach which leads us to the realistic acceptance of triumph and defeat. An approach that gives us an acceptable distinction, yet — a relationship among — mind, spirit, and nature.

This relationship is evident in many of the present day scholars in various fields. These scholars have not necessarily been influenced directly by ideas from Vico; they have not gone to Vico and said, "Ah! Here is an idea." Obviously this isn't the way ideas work. They have accepted these ideas through the process of historical inheritance and evaluation, but we see in their thinking some of the basic ideas of Vico.

The first of these scholars is Seymour Lipset, a sociologist, at the University of California, who has been emphasizing the need for history, the other social sciences, and the humanities to work together. He has pointed out the weakness of some sociologists who have ignored historical factors, e.g., his criticism of Lloyd Warner's study *Yankee City*. He has, also pointed out

the errors of political historians who have not carefully examined records. Sociologists and historians are going back and examining some of these records, and they are coming up with a much different interpretation of past periods in history. An example, is one of Mr. Lipset's own studies which shows that Europe has had a rate of social mobility comparable to the United States. We had always thought that we had the highest rate of social mobility, but Lipset shows us that some of the oversimplified distinctions between the nature of American society and that of European society are simply not tenable.

Another scholar is the historian Richard Hofstadter. If you have read his *Age of Reform* you will have noticed that he uses concepts from the sociology of Max Weber to re-examine American history and explain the seemingly non-rational behavior of a certain part of the older middle class Americans during the Progressive Movement. He helps us to answer the question, "How come middle class people, such as Teddy Roosevelt, supported such wild, liberal ideas?"

To me, one of the most outstanding individuals to exemplify Vico's ideas, or at least his attitude, is the English historian Sir Lewis Namier. He makes this statement concerning his conception of the nature of history: "The function of the historian is akin to that of the painter, not of the photographic camera: to discover and set forth, to single out and stress that which is of the nature of the thing, and not to reproduce indiscriminately all that meets the eye." This idea, ". . . to single out the nature of the thing . . ." is one of Vico's most essential

ideas. This is the basic question we must ask of such disciplines in our society. As our own Lawson Cooper once observed, perhaps Vico was the first to recognize or think about the implications of science in our society. Sir Lewis Namier, in keeping with Vico's ideas concerning the study of the past, re-examined the period of George III and gives a quite different picture from that of the traditional one of tyrant or insane idiot. While George had his frustrations and contradictions, he was no worse than many of us.

Another scholar in the tradition of Vico, is Zevedei Barbu, a social pathologist at the University of Glasgow. In his work *Democracy and Dictatorship* he has given us a new insight into the nature of democracy and dictatorship. He emphasizes that he starts with history, but then goes into the sociological and psychological aspects, drawing the complex interrelationships. Thus he gives us a genuine synthesis. That which is something more than the mere sum of the information of the three areas.

A very provocative individual who has caused some economists to bare their teeth is Karl Polanyi, an economist at the University of London. His work *The Great Transformation* deals with the social implications of the market system of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Polanyi's analysis gives us a very different picture of the nature of our economy from that presented by Alfred Marshall and the nineteenth century classical economists. Robert MacIver said of this work, ". . . he is shedding a new illumination on the processes and revolutions of a whole age of unexampled change." This kind of analysis is of great importance to scholars concerned with the

nature of social change. Polanyi is particularly like Vico in that he has faith in man's ability to rebuild. While his analysis presents a devastating picture, he sounds a challenge to us to go forth to conquer rather than admit defeat.

Two other individuals who represent the ideas of Vico are the philosopher Charles Frankel and the sociologist Theodore Brameld. Each of these scholars attempts to integrate psychology, sociology and history in the understanding of modern man and his institutions.

Time does not permit the citing of other examples, therefore an appropriate conclusion is the challenging idea that suggests a relationship between the fundamental ideas of Vico and those of atomic physics. Douglas Angus, professor of English at St. Lawrence University makes the statement:

"Quantum physics has made possible the view that all phenomena, from the star formation through chemical and biological evolution to the forward groping of human intelligence, form a single unitary process from simplicity to complexity and ever-increasing consciousness."

Angus goes on to explain that he sees this as making man a significant part of the universe and thus influencing the arts in their treatment of man as hero in the tragic and symbolic sense, e.g., *The Bridge over the River Kwai*.

Angus also makes the point that there is involved in this concept of quantum physics a new understanding of the nature of creative thought. Out of quantum physics has come Heisenberger's uncertainty principle. This is of great importance to historians, for they are concerned not only with continuity but also with the more difficult

problem of discontinuity. There are social changes for which there is no adequate explanation than through the introduction of some kind of unique element, *i.e.*, the principle of discontinuity. Thus out of quantum physics there have come ideas which may help us in gaining insight into the progress of man historically and into the social processes of our own time. Here, then, we have Vico's ideas of man's ability to grow intellectually and man as a significant part of the universe.

These ideas of Vico, in which he does not reject the idea of spirit but in which he does emphasize that this world of civil society has been made by man, certainly place upon us the responsibility of being aware of and appreciative of the work going on in the various disciplines. Obviously no one man can be master of all, but on some falls the responsibility of establishing the interrelation of all disciplines. In the opinion of Gerald Holton, the Harvard physicist, this is a major responsibility of the social sciences and the humanities. This means that the physical scientist must be sufficiently aware of and appreciative of the nature of the social sciences so that he can contribute the necessary information to the social scientist. Also, the social scientist must have enough knowledge of the nature of the physical sciences to understand what they have to contribute. Thus, by working as a team, we may bring about a meaningful relationship through which man can apply his mind constructively rather than destructively.

Vico's concepts give us this chance.

## CECIL E. STALDER

Born October 22, 1907, Cecil E. Stalder is a native of Riverside and a graduate of Riverside City College. He attended one-room elementary schools in Lakeview and what was then called Wineville, California, and subsequently was graduated from Riverside's Polytechnic High School.

While attending junior college, Mr. Stalder participated in the co-operative program, working for the California Electric Company in a pre-engineering program. In the meantime, however, he had developed a deep interest in American history and international affairs, and when he transferred to the University of California at Berkeley, he changed his major. He has since done graduate study in the social sciences at Berkeley, the University of Southern California, and Claremont Graduate School.

Mr. Stalder began his teaching career at Chemawa Junior High School in 1934 and moved to Polytechnic High School in 1938. He has been at Riverside City College since 1946. At the College, Mr. Stalder has taught European and American History, Sociology, American Government, and American Literature. In recent years, with the growth of enrollment, he has been able to concentrate his teaching in the areas of American history and government.

Known on campus as a forceful lecturer, Mr. Stalder brings to his classroom insights gained from his studies in literature and in all the social sciences, and he illuminates his remarks with illustrations from the full range of history up to the latest headline.

Mr. Stalder and his wife Evelyn have two children: Richard, a Riverside City College graduate and now a student at Chico State College, and Carol, a student at Polytechnic High School.



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