



Journal Review by Kenny Bellew  
Rhetorical Theory with Anne Aronson  
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Journal 2 of 5: Giambattista Vico  
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### **Part I: Key Ideas of Pages 74 - End**

In this section, Vico continues to make a case for language being the source of invention that verifies truth. He praises the Greek language for its ability to articulate extraordinary ideas and the finer points of difficult-to-understand concepts. Vico points out that this power of language allowed the Hellenes to develop a superior political constitution that was the envy of other nations. However, he incorrectly claims that Greece did not borrow political ideas from other nations [Vico, p.74]. Aristotle was famous for collecting the constitutions of other nations. Thanks, in part, to the help of his pupil, Alexander the Great, Aristotle collected 158 different constitutions [Kagan, p.190]. Aristotle's library was often consulted in the creation of local constitutions

Vico adduces the greater need for universities during his time compared to the Greek or Roman time periods. He asserts that students must learn the history of the Greeks, the Romans and the Lombards (who invaded Italy in the 6th century). In addition, Vico says that students must also learn the theories of the Latin and Arab people. His reasons are fascinating. Vico says, "We must guard against scribal garblings, plagiarism, forgeries, interpolations of alien hands though which is difficult for use to recognize the originals, and to grasp the author's true meaning" [Vico, p.76]

This is especially interesting to me, as I have spent considerable time studying pseudepigrapha, interpolations in historical writings, especially as it pertains to religious histories, hagiographies and the shaping of theological ideas. The fact that pseudepigrapha was in such vogue in the first five centuries must give any student pause in a quest for historical truth. Because Vico believed that history was one of the ingredients needed in his recipe of truth, a proper view of the past was essential for a true understanding of the present.

These types of difficulties are why Vico proclaims universities are needed more during his time than previously. However, in the same breath, he bemoans the disjointed nature of education in the universities and longs for the simpler times of Socrates. In the universities of his day, the student was taught many different subjects by teachers of differing philosophical views. Vico points out several fields of study: discourse was taught by an Aristotelian, physics by an atomist like an Epicurean and metaphysics by a Cartesian (follower of René Descartes). It is the latter mention that is most interesting.

While as much as fifteen centuries separate the ideas of Aristotle and Epicurus from Vico, only one century separates the conflicting teachings of Vico and René Descartes. It seems to me that most academic references to a "Cartesian" usually refer to René Descartes' system of mathematic coordinates. However, Vico links the "Cartesian" to metaphysics. Vico goes on to list Galen, a famous 1st century teaching-surgeon and Accursius, a thirteenth-century legal scholar. Vico's suggestion is that the university professors should consolidate and harmonize the ideologies to make education a more coherent body of learning. However, by targeting the science of René Descartes, it seems to me that Vico is attempting to indirectly elevate his new science as the solution for blending and smoothing heterogeneous ideas.

Herrick mentions that René Descartes despised rhetoric and wished to see it relegated to an obscure corner of the university [Herrick, p.176]. In essence, Vico is defending his craft from such thinking, aggrandizing its superior nature and showing how it can be used to replace the chaos of the current system.

Vico appeals to the example of Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626), who advised King James of England that "young scholars should not be admitted to the study of eloquence unless they had previously studied their way through the whole curriculum of learning" [Vico, p.78]. Vico seems to be building a case that his brand of rhetoric is so deep and broad that it can be used as the foundation for all learning. After which, he brags about his humility [Vico, p.79].

## Part II: Selected Passage from Pages 12 - 20

Vico writes, "It is a positive fact that, just as knowledge originates in truth and error in falsity, so common sense arises from perceptions based on verisimilitude. Probabilities stand, so to speak, midway between truth and falsity, since things which most of the time are true, are only very seldom false" [Vico, p.13].

Vico is saying that we create truth through our understanding of probabilities. We only articulate probabilities through use of our imagination, which is populated from our history. Common sense arises from the collection of the probabilities we understand to be true. This collection of probabilities is the well from which invention draws. Herrick mentions that Vico placed importance on our innate capacity to grasp similarities or relationships. Vico called this *ingenium* [Herrick, p.177]. It is from our understanding of the relationship between probabilities that we invent truth. Vico's principle that truth is verified by invention was called his *verum factum* principle (truth is fact). It contrasts with René Descartes' idea of truth, which stated that truth came from empirical observation versus being created. Descartes discarded probability because it contained a measure of doubt. Vico saw this as a lack of practicality.

I especially find interesting Vico's comment, "Probabilities stand, so to speak, midway between truth and falsity." This is similar to Aristotle's Golden Mean, where truth was found in the middle of two extremes [Nicomachean Ethics, Book II]. Courage, for example, was found between cowardness and recklessness. However, Vico overcomes the Golden Mean's shortcoming of not adequately handling multifaceted problems by seeing truth as compound probabilities. It provided the flexibility needed to sort out a complex issue.

## Part III: Connections with Other Readings or Events

Descartes is famous for the phrase, "cogito ergo sum" or "I think, therefore I am." To formulate his view of truth he felt he needed to discard everything that could be doubted. After doing so, he was left with only his thoughts- only things that could be conjured from his mind. This led him to place great importance on truth which could be perceived regardless of things

outside his mind. He was a veritable genius at mathematics, which he saw as a perfect model of truth. Math was true regardless of any event outside of his mind. Truth, like math, was deductive knowledge. In this sense, he was a rationalist.

Herrick points out that Vico argued that Descartes' mathematical truths were as reliant on symbols as were the orations of the rhetoricians [Herrick, p.176]. In other words, even Descartes empiricism was rooted in subjective symbols. Similarly, Whitburn states, "The new scientists (post-revolutionary) wanted words to approximate mathematical symbols. Such symbols were to possess no virtue in themselves but stand for quantities and relationships. Nothing was to exist between observation and description" [Whitburn, p.125]. As hard as Descartes tried to be an absolutist, as hard as he tried to keep his symbols pure, all knowledge and symbols become relative once filtered through human interpretation.

One of the most influential philosophers of science in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Popper (1902 – 1994) said, "Science never pursues the illusory aim of making its answers final, or even probable. Its advance is, rather, towards the infinite yet attainable aim of ever discovering new, deeper, and more general problems, and of subjecting its ever tentative answers to ever renewed and ever more rigorous tests" [Popper, p. 281].

What Vico realized that Descartes missed is that the goal of science, the goal of empiricism, is not truth at all. The goal is to realize what can be falsified. Science does not prove something true. It proves which related elements and ideas can be falsified. The item left standing garners respect until someone can falsify it, but science never makes claim to absolute truth. If it did, the beauty of discovery would wither and die.

**References:**

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