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**The World as Human-Produced World in the
Philosophy of Giambattista Vico**

Abstract

The Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico formed the notion of the world, in his antithesis against Descartes' rationalism, as the human-produced world. The human world is substantially different from the world of nature: history which shapes human world is a human creation and the nature is not. Therefore, we cannot realize the nature or the natural world (which is known only by its creator). Nevertheless, we can realize the history since it is our product (in accordance with the criteria contained in Vico's famous statement verum et factum convertuntur). In his main work The New Science Vico surpasses quantifying reductionism of rationalist Enlightenment naturalism as well as the traditionalist erudite philologism, but not the dualism of nature and history. Vico's "new science", which represents the union of philology and philosophy of history, is based on an examination of the common nature of all people, which refers to all nations, civilizations, and cultures. This new science is focused on discovering the principle according to which people construct their historical world. It is precisely the concept of common human nature which offers an explanation how it is that similar ideas, structures, practices, and institutions develop in different eras and diverse environments. Therefore the world, no matter how diverse and differentiated, essentially is a unique world of humanity. But Vico's concept of an ideal eternal history (storia ideale eterna) opens the question whether this world is only a product of logic embedded in its very own structure (expressed with the notion of providence). Accordingly, humans can be seen just as executors of that logic and not free creators of their own world.

Keywords

Giambattista Vico, nature, history, world, providence

**Vico in the light of the contemporary
world-historical situation**

Vico emphasised that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar to them.

“This axiom points to the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of humanity that have been adopted by entire nations and by all the scholars. For when the former began to take notice of them and the latter to investigate them, it was on the basis of their own enlightened, cultivated, and magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude and quite obscure.”¹

In his own case it has taken him twenty-five years “to overcome prejudices of modern intellectualism” to be able to understand and expose Homeric and

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Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca – New York, 1948, p. 54.

pre-Homeric state of affairs.² In the investigation of imagination and historical knowledge in Vico Randall E. Auxier will similarly conclude that “it is not that scholars cannot know the past; rather, they are their own worst enemies in the attempt to do so, owing to a sort of metaphysical provincialism.”³ Taking this into account and knowing that we are condemned to our obscure prejudged knowledge of past, in this paper we are going to start from this “obvious error”. Therefore, we are going to investigate Vico’s principles of the new science through their meaning in the contemporary world-historical situation.

Does the world exist before and outside of man, and in this sense, is man no more than “a product” of the world, or is it man himself who brings the world as such into being? Who determines the possibilities and limits of human production of the world today, and should these limits even be defined? If we rephrase these questions in terms of Vico’s philosophy of history, the question would be: what is the role of man in the creation of the world, i.e. what is the relation between providence and man’s action?

Today, man has never been more open to the world, and the world has never been more accessible to him, while on the other hand the unification of man and the world has been perverted into an attempt at subjugating the world to man. This process could have dangerous and not easily foreseen consequences. Attempt at subjugating the world displayed its dark side when man had began to loosen his ties and breaking his connections with nature, starting from those binding him to his environment and ending with those that bind him to the natural side of his own being (attempts at biomedical enhancement of human nature). While nature has warned about the consequences of its irresponsible exploitation through climate change and frequent ecological disasters, experimental intervention in human nature is still in its beginnings, and therefore we are yet to witness reactions to the scientific-technological invasion.⁴

In the light of this ambiguous process Vico’s concept of an *ideal eternal history* (*storia ideale eterna*) will be seen in an antithesis between metaphysics and historical thinking. Is this world only a product of the logic embedded in its very own structure (expressed with the notion of providence) and thus is man just an executor of that superhuman and nonhuman logic or is man in Vico’s philosophy free creator of his own world? Even more, is methodological necessity of providence in Vico’s philosophy that which determines man by condemning him to his “given” nature, and by that to his unchangeable historical position, or can it maybe today serve as a means to stop the self-destructive process of transferring metaphysics from the outside of man (divine creature) to his inside where he deems himself as the only creator of the world?

The origins of the division between nature and history

In pre-Socratic philosophy logic of history is seen through *logos* that rules the *cosmos* (arranged world of nature). In later Greek and Hellenistic philosophy cosmological and naturalistic descriptions of nature were suppressed and the separation of historical and natural emerged. With this separation philosophy of history was created and articulated within Augustinus and Orosius philosophy in which providence plays a crucial role.⁵ We can find methodological preconditions of the Modern Age in Bacon’s and Descartes’ philosophy where man’s *ratio* takes over the place of providence. Furthermore, thinkers of the

Enlightenment moved away from the idea of religious interpretation of history and instead offered their own teleology – the idea of progress. The idea of infinite progress quickly came into question (Flaubert, Tolstoy) and was dissolved in Nietzsche's philosophy. Nevertheless, today we are witnessing the culmination of the division between history and nature in the idea of biomedical enhancement where man appears on the horizon as a possible creator of himself, and thus the future. This understanding of history as eschatology or endless progress reveals metaphysical background of the contemporary world-historical situation. Metaphysics did not cease to exist, but was transferred from the outside (the divine creature) to the inside of man who now sees himself as an absolute being.

After the medieval understanding of the history, where everything began and ended with God, today, when man is taking the power of creation in his hands, it is necessary to resolve the dilemma whether this is the end of history or actually the beginning of a history as self-creation. After cosmological and eschatological understanding of the world, the question arises of whether history is finally becoming true human history or just a reincarnation of a never really surpassed metaphysical thinking that ends in the destruction of man and the world.⁶ Even more, can Vico's ambiguous role of providence serve today as a means to stop this destructive process or is the contemporary "situation" a consequence of the onto-theological understanding of the world?

Vico's providential determinism vs. the role of free will

In his main work *The New Science* Vico surpasses quantifying reductionism of rationalist Enlightenment naturalism as well as the traditionalist erudite philologism, but not the dualism of nature and history. Croatian philosopher Milan Kangrga,⁷ one of the rare Croatian philosophers who took seriously into consideration Vico's philosophy, admonished Vico for overlooking the fact that people create their own world by active, transformative attitude towards nature. By changing nature they are appropriating the nature itself as humanised nature. Vico on the other hand saw the human world as a substantially different from the world of nature: history which shapes the human world is a human creation and the nature is not. Therefore, we cannot realize the nature or the natural world (which is known only by its creator). Nevertheless, we can realize history since it is our product.⁸

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Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1949, p. 119.

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Randall E. Auxier, "Imagination and Historical Knowledge in Vico: A Critique of Leon Pompa's Recent Work", *Humanitas*, vol. X, no. 1, 1997, <http://www.nhinet.org/auxier2.htm>.

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Cf. Lino Veljak, "The Man-Made World", in: Ivana Zagorac, Ivica Martinović (eds.), *23rd Days of Frane Petrić*, Croatian Philosophical Society, Zagreb, 2013, pp. 11–13.

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For a more detailed investigation of the origins of philosophy of history cf. Lino Vel-

jak, "Povijest i metafizika", in: Aleksandra Golubović, Iris Tićac (eds.), *Vječno u vremenu*, Kršćanska sadašnjost – Teologija u Rijeci, Zagreb – Rijeka, 2010, pp. 101–112.

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Marija Selak, *Ljudska priroda i nova epoha*, Naklada Breza, Zagreb, 2013, p. 162.

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Milan Kangrga, *Praksa-vrijeme-svijet*, Nolit, Beograd, 1984, pp. 123. 439–445.

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G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 93.

Vico's "new science", which represents a union of philology, philosophy of history, and theology,⁹ is based on an examination of common nature of all people. It is precisely the concept of common human nature which offers an explanation how similar ideas, structures, practices, and institutions develop in different eras and diverse environments. Therefore the world, no matter how diverse and differentiated, is essentially a unique world of humanity. Vico, as Karl Löwith points out, reverses the methodical doubt of Descartes, finding the "single piece of certain truth" in an "immense ocean of doubt" in the conversion of *verum* and *factum* due to the fact that the historical world has been created by man. Hence, its principles can and must be found within the modifications of our own human mind. With this "conversion" human emancipation from scientific determinism was possible as well as the "philosophical truth about 'philological' certainties which appear in the human world of languages, customs, laws, and institutions."¹⁰ Has thus man become a free creator of his own world?

According to Vico, man has free will, although weak, to transfer his passions into virtues, but God also helps him naturally through providence and supernaturally through the act of God's mercy. The emphasis on providence is also a part of the criticism of the belief in fate and chance of Stoics and Epicureans since providence, unlike fate or chance, acts together with the free will of man.¹¹ Although man has created the world of nations, this world has come from one mind, often different and contrary, but always supreme to particular human aims, used in order to preserve mankind on earth.¹² Providence reveals in *thaumazein*, worship and desire to follow and investigate elusive wisdom and to unite with the indefinite wisdom of God. Therefore, as Ernst Cassirer noticed, history is for Vico a true fulfilment of *sapientia humana*.¹³

Karl Löwith, similarly as Friedrich Ueberweg,¹⁴ claims that

"... in Vico's philosophy providence has become as natural, secular, and historical as if it did not exist at all... It is nothing else than the universal and permanent order of the historical course itself (...) Vico's God is so omnipotent that he can refrain from special interventions. He works completely in the natural course of history by its natural means: occasions, necessities, utilities. And for those who can read this natural language of factual historic providence in man's social history, history is, from its first to its last page, an open book of admirable design."¹⁵

Löwith concludes that "the eminent place of providence in the allegorical picture, as well as in the whole of Vico's work, shows that the principle of *verum* = *factum* would be completely misunderstood if interpreted in the modern secular way, that is, as though Vico had intended to say that the civil world of man is nothing else than the product of his spontaneous creativity."¹⁶ On the other hand, "the final statement of his work that one cannot have science or wisdom without piety-was certainly no concession to the church (as modern interpreters want to have it) but pure sincerity."¹⁷

Providence indeed seems as something close to Vico's idea of a true Homer. Historical Homer, according to Vico, did not exist. Rather he has represented an idea, a heroic character of the Greeks.¹⁸ Hence, providence as representation of the absolute goodness serves as a guideline for man.

"Our new Science must therefore be a demonstration, so to speak, of the historical fact of providence, for it must be a history of the forms of order which, without human discernment or intent, and often against the designs of men, providence has given to this great city of the human race."¹⁹

Vico, indeed, did not create or imposed providence on us. He has observed it as a constitutive part of human society, along with burial and marriage. There

is, according to Vico, no civil world which has ever been established on atheism. The *New Science* is therefore just a demonstration of the historical fact of providence. Pessimistic about the real state of affairs among people and their destructive nature, which distanced Vico from eschatological point of view and led him to a more classical understanding of history as *corso* and *ricorso*, Vico introduces providence as a regulating principle that is preserving men from self-destruction. Nevertheless, although maybe rather Aristotelian than Christian, the actuator and terminator of human action still is the divine providence. So the real question is how much this preservation costs, i.e. what the relation between providential “work” and freedom of humankind is.

From ontological (epistemological) to anthropological hierarchy

In the introduction to *Scienza Nuova*, while describing the famous illustration of his work, Vico says that the darkness in the bottom is a subject of the science. The light which divine providence shines on breasts of metaphysics are axioms (*degnità*), basic definitions, and postulates. They are the crucial principles that ground the science and they also represent the method according to which it is being implemented.²⁰

This axiomatic epistemological determination enabled Vico to introduce the principle of analogy, which could be, according to Collingwood, a further suggestion for solving the problem of historical knowledge in Vico,²¹ and thus the *ideal eternal history*. Since the natural tribal law is a result of “common sense”, which is determined by the divine providence, nations recognise this principle as common while encountering each other. Hence, providence has introduced the order that is general and eternal in the world created in time and in moments. Deterministic consequence of the given order is that once these orders were established by the divine providence “the course of the affairs of the nations had to be, must now be and will have to be such as our

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According to Ante Pažanin, another Croatian philosopher who, by referring to recent German literature, commented Vico’s philosophy of history. Cf. Ante Pažanin, *Um i povijest*, HFD, Zagreb, 1992, pp. 129–145.

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K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 119–120.

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G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 55–56.

12

Ibid., p. 382.

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Ernst Cassirer, *The Logic of the Humanities*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1960, p. 52.

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Ueberweg stated that: “Providence, acting in no mysterious way, but through the spontaneous development of human activity, is the basis of all history, which reveals itself in the evolution of language, mythology, religion,

law and government.” Friedrich Ueberweg, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, Scribner, Armstrong & Co., New York, 1874, p. 474.

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K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 122.

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Ibid., p. 121.

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Ibid., p. 116.

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G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, pp. 269–300.

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Ibid., p. 91.

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Ibid., pp. 3–23.

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Cf. Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2005, p. 67.

Science demonstrates”.²² Even more, this is the primary evidence in Vico’s “new science”. Providence is the “method” of the “new science”, but it is also a subject of the science, since science, in an Aristotelian manner, deals only with what is general and eternal.

The questionable part of this providential governance is not just its supremacy over human kind which results in the epistemological predetermination. As a result of the transfer of hierarchical logic into man-created history, it has also much more concrete socio-political consequences.

Vico distinguishes three kinds of authority: *divine* (meaning that one does not search the reason from providence), *heroic* (the one that is hidden in the ceremonial forms of law), and *human* (the one that is hidden in the trust to the experienced persona).²³ Thus, the authority of providence works through her representative, the human authority. That is why the first recovery step in the destruction of civilisation is that providence tries to find and to impose to the falling nation new leader as Augustus, and only if that is not possible the other, well-known solutions follow. Even more, since hierarchy is not just the outside practice of the social order, but it is inherent to human nature, Vico will conclude that when one cannot rule himself, then others rule him and the world is always ruled by those who are by their nature better.²⁴

Vico obviously liberated man from scientific determinism, by acknowledging him the creative role in history, but then, by subduing him to providence, he has denied him the possibility to influence his “naturally determined” position in the world order. When Vico states that those who rule are the ones who are by their nature better, he is no longer just an impartial observer of the religious pattern in the world, but one of the upholders of the human political practice which incessantly needs to be questioned.

Nevertheless, Randall E. Auxier asked if providence, in Vico’s view, could be understandable in terms of some idea in our own time which is viable in our view.²⁵ One should also take this into consideration. Hence, after revealing the negative side of Vico’s providentially constructed world, what remains is to answer the question if there is something in Vico’s understanding of the role of providence that can be instructive today.

The importance of Vico’s criticism of Cartesian method today

Giambattista Vico formed the notion of the world in his antithesis against Descartes’ rationalism as the human-produced world. As Ernst Cassirer points out:

“Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (is) a work which was conceived in deliberate opposition to Descartes and was destined to remove rationalism from historiography and based rather on the logic of fantasy than on the logic of clear and distinct ideas.”²⁶

Therefore, as Randall E. Auxier states,

“... the real value in Vico’s ‘philosophy of history’ does not lie in what it teaches (in terms of content) concerning the historical process and the rhythm of its individual phases (...) But what he did see clearly, and what he defended with complete decisiveness against Descartes and that is the methodological uniqueness and distinctive value of historical knowledge.”²⁷

To the contemporary reader this can seem not as big contribution, but, as Löwith emphasises, “to measure the effort which it had cost him to establish socioreligious history as a science, one has only to remember that even a hun-

dred years after him Comte still laboured to found his ‘social physics’ on the pattern of natural science and mathematics.”²⁸

With his critique of Cartesian method Vico has anticipated modern times. Therefore, in the era of domination of the techno-scientific worldview Vico can serve more than ever as a critical starting point.

The humankind has created the historical world, but the humankind cannot and should not try to overcome the created world, the nature in itself. For Vico the fear of divinity is the only strong device to confine our unrestrained nature. Consequence of Vico’s axiom 120 “is that man in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe.”²⁹ Thus, the secularisation of the world resulted in the transfer of metaphysics from the divine creature towards the inside of man. Does man need a notion of sacred to coerce him and preserve him from the “arrogance of mind which leads to atheism”³⁰ and consequentially to self-destruction or is he able to reverse the injustice of diverse hierarchical orders with the secular means? Hence, does overcoming of dualism between the nature and history, which is the thing that Kangrga objects to Vico, lead to self-destruction or self-preservation?

The possible consequences of both, techno-scientific self-creation and a God-given refraining from interventions, show us that this is the question which we will perpetually have to deal with. While doing the inevitable concession on both sides, Vico can serve us as a reminder to maintain and follow the historical knowledge rather than the set of calculable data offering us fast but not clear solutions.

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Svijet kao ljudski proizvod u filozofiji Giambattista Vica

Sažetak

Napuljski filozof Giambattista Vico oblikovao je u svojoj antitezi spram Descartesova racionalizma pojam svijeta kao ljudskoga povijesnog svijeta. Svijet ljudi bitno se razlikuje od prirode time što povijest kojom se ljudski svijet oblikuje prave ljudi, a prirodu ne. Stoga mi ne možemo spoznati prirodu ili prirodni svijet (što ga zna samo njezin stvoritelj), već jedino povijest jer je ona naš proizvod (u skladu s kriterijem koji je sadržan u njegovoj znamenitoj postavci verum et factum convertuntur). U svom glavnom djelu Načela nove znanosti o zajedničkoj prirodi narodâ Vico nadmašuje kako kvantificirajući redukcionizam racionalističko-prosvjetiteljskog

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G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 92–93.

23

Ibid., p. 311.

24

Ibid., pp. 378–380.

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R. E. Auxier, “Imagination and Historical Knowledge in Vico”.

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Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1955, p. 209.

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R. E. Auxier, “Imagination and Historical Knowledge in Vico”.

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K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, p. 117.

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G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, p. 116.

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Vico will say: “From this nature of human things arose the eternal property that minds to make good use of the knowledge of God must humble themselves, just as on the other hand arrogance will lead them to atheism, for atheists become giants in spirit, ready to say with Horace: Caelum ipsum petimus stultitia, ‘heaven itself we assail in our folly.’” Ibid., p. 152.

naturalizma tako i tradicionalistički eruditski filologizam, ali ne i dualizam prirode i povijesti. Vicova »nova znanost«, koja predstavlja jedinstvo filologije i filozofije povijesti, utemeljena je na uvidu u zajedničku prirodu svih ljudi, a to onda znači i svih naroda, civilizacija i kultura. Ta je nova znanost usmjerena na spoznavanje zakonomjernosti na temelju kojih ljudi prave svoj povijesni svijet. Upravo se zajedničkom ljudskom prirodom može objasniti to da se u različitim epohama i raznovrsnim sredinama razvijaju slične ideje, strukture, običaji i ustanove. Svijet je, dakle, koliko god bio raznolik i diferenciran, u svojoj osnovi jedinstveni svijet čovječanstva. No Vicov koncept vječne idealne povijesti (storia ideale eterna) otvara pitanje nije li takav svijet u konačnici tek produkt jedne u samu njegovu strukturu ugrađene logike (iskazane i pojmom providnosti), pri čemu su ljudi tek nezjni izvršitelji, a ne slobodni graditelji vlastitoga svijeta.

Ključne riječi

Giambattista Vico, priroda, povijest, svijet, providnost

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Die Welt als eine menschenproduzierte Welt in der Philosophie Giambattista Vicos

Zusammenfassung

Der neapolitanische Philosoph Giambattista Vico schuf in seiner Antithese zu Descartes' Rationalismus den Begriff der Welt als einer menschenproduzierten Welt. Die Menschenwelt unterscheidet sich wesentlich von der Welt der Natur: Die Geschichte, die die menschliche Welt prägt, ist eine menschliche Schöpfung, und die Natur ist es nicht. Daher können wir die Natur oder die natürliche Welt nicht erkennen (die nur ihrem Schöpfer bekannt sind). Nichtsdestotrotz können wir die Geschichte erkennen, da sie unser Produkt ist (in Übereinstimmung mit den Kriterien, die in Vicos berühmter Aussage verum et factum converuntur enthalten sind). In seinem Hauptwerk Grundzüge einer Neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinschaftliche Natur der Völker übertrifft Vico sowohl den quantifizierenden Reduktionismus des rationalistisch-aufklärerischen Naturalismus als auch den traditionalistischen gelehrten Philologismus, jedoch nicht den Dualismus der Natur und Geschichte. Vicos „neue Wissenschaft“, die die Einigkeit der Philologie und Geschichtsphilosophie darstellt, beruht auf der Untersuchung der gemeinsamen Natur aller Menschen, was alle Völker, Zivilisationen und Kulturen betrifft. Diese neue Wissenschaft ist auf die Entdeckung des Grundsatzes konzentriert, nach welchem Menschen ihre geschichtliche Welt aufbauen. Es ist genau das Konzept der gemeinsamen menschlichen Natur, der eine Erklärung bietet, wie es dazu kommt, dass ähnliche Ideen, Strukturen, Bräuche und Institutionen sich in verschiedenen Epochen und diversen Umgebungen entwickeln. Deshalb ist die Welt, egal wie vielfältig und differenziert, im Wesentlichen eine einzigartige Welt der Menschheit. Allerdings greift Vicos Konzept der idealen ewigen Geschichte (storia ideale eterna) die Frage auf, ob diese Welt nur ein Produkt der Logik ist, die in ihre ganz eigene Struktur eingebettet ist (mit dem Begriff der Vorsehung ausgedrückt). Dementsprechend können die Menschen lediglich als Vollstrecker dieser Logik angesehen werden und nicht als freie Schöpfer ihrer eigenen Welt.

Schlüsselwörter

Giambattista Vico, Natur, Geschichte, Welt, Vorsehung

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Le monde comme production humaine dans la philosophie de Giambattista Vico

Résumé

Le philosophe Napolitain Giambattista Vico a formé, dans son antithèse contre le rationalisme de Descartes, le concept de monde en tant que monde historique de l'homme. Le monde humain se différencie substantiellement de la nature: l'histoire qui façonne le monde humain est une création humaine alors que la nature ne l'est pas. Ainsi, nous ne pouvons connaître la nature ou le monde naturel (connu que par son créateur), mais uniquement l'histoire qui est notre production (en accord avec le fameux critère verum et factum converuntur de Vico). Dans son oeuvre

principale, Principes d'une science nouvelle relative à la nature commune des nations, Vico dépasse non seulement le réductionnisme quantifiant du naturalisme rationaliste des Lumières, mais aussi le philologisme érudit traditionaliste, sans pour autant dépasser le dualisme de la nature et de l'histoire. « La science nouvelle » de Vico, présentant l'union de la philologie et de la philosophie de l'histoire, est basée sur un examen de la nature commune de tous les êtres humains, et ainsi de tous les peuples, civilisations et nations. Cette science nouvelle se concentre sur la découverte du principe sur la base duquel les êtres humains construisent leur monde historique. C'est bien à travers le concept de nature humaine que nous sommes en mesure d'expliquer l'apparition d'idées, de structures, de coutumes et d'institutions similaires au sein d'époques différentes et de milieux divers. Ainsi, peu importe sa diversité et ses différences, le monde est essentiellement un monde humain unique. Toutefois, le concept d'histoire idéale éternelle de Vico (storia ideale eterna) ouvre sur la question de savoir si ce monde est uniquement le produit d'une logique intégrée dans sa seule structure (exprimée également dans le concept de providence). Par conséquent, les êtres humains ne seraient que les exécuteurs de cette logique, et non des être libres qui créent leur propre monde.

Mots-clés

Giambattista Vico, nature, histoire, monde, providence