

FRANCESCO FIORENTINO

LETTERS ON THE NEW SCIENCE TO THE MARCHESA FLORENZI-WADDINGTON, 1865
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Letter 1

Distinguished Lady and Friend:

In our frequent talks together about the enormous value of *The New Science*, you have pointed out to me various statements that clearly foreshadow German philosophy, and you have asked why people have tried so hard to conceal these similarities and twist the teaching of the greatest Neapolitan philosopher into such strange shapes. I have answered with a few words about this, but since the question is a serious one and needs more clarification, I have decided to write about it, in confidence that this will please someone who finds philosophical debate (a rare thing in our day) neither tiresome nor annoying.

Now that Vico's name has escaped the oblivion that gripped it for so long in the previous century, Italians and foreigners alike invoke it today, making it the object of praise as excessive as the derision heaped upon it in the past [*altre fiate*]. The way of the world, as we almost always discover, is Golgatha yesterday, Tabor today, the Bastille then, and now the Pantheon.¹ After Vico had published *The New Science*, he avoided crowded places so that he would not run into anyone whom he had slighted [*ai quali l'aveva mandata*], probably fearing their rebukes and sneers. Were he alive today, he would have quite a different reason to hide.

Rightly or wrongly, everyone wants to be seen as Vico's follower. For every statement he made, there are a thousand interpretations, and his words are cited and distorted **to the point where there is nothing one can do** [*fin dove non ha niente che fare*]. In the academies, among philosophers and jurists, there is a real struggle to be or to appear to be Viconian – at any cost. In my opinion, however, going overboard with praise is as harmful as the ceaseless denigration used to be. And I have always felt that one bit of misplaced praise takes Vico to be the author of a metaphysics not just *unlike* the one begun by Descartes and cultivated with special care in Germany but also completely *opposed* to it, thus cutting Italy off from the progress of knowledge in the rest of Europe. Should we welcome this privilege as our heritage, we would be forced either to certify what we know as infallible or confess its impotence, stuck in a rut that would embarrass the Chinese.

But I think I am built neither for the arrogance of the first claim nor the fecklessness of the second. We Italians are people like everyone else, fit to share the common destiny of our kind, frequently off course but always moving toward the goal that never changes, on

¹Golgatha was the hill where Christ was crucified, Tabor the mountain where he was transfigured. Fiorentino actually mentions the Gemoniae, not the Bastille; it was a notorious Roman site where the execution of criminals began. And the Pantheon he had in mind was the famous Roman temple in Rome, not the later Parisian monument.

the path that always leads there. The haughtiness that nations have, a stimulus useful to peoples in decline – and one that our heroes therefore revived at the right moment [*in buon punto*] – would be awkward and childish today. And in our boasting surely we would not be forgiven what people put up with a little while ago when times were bad. Having grown stronger, we therefore seek to be fairer, and we set national hatreds aside when the stakes are the fate of human knowledge.

And you, my lady, have you not read or heard it said that philosophy – true philosophy, anyhow – is all Italian and only Italian, not much done by other peoples and done just to the extent that they have imitated us; that Vico set up the columns of Hercules for philosophy; that he is the only leader worth following, any other being untrustworthy and ready to rush headlong into a bottomless abyss; and that he was the steadfast opponent of Descartes, implacably objecting to the modern aberration, as it is called? Speaking for myself, I have heard all too much of such things, frequently even from people of talent, and this confirms my intention to air the main arguments because a view so widely accepted deserves serious examination. It must have come from some deep source.

It was as if Vico foresaw the disputes that would arise from the secret inner workings of his genius for he had the brilliant idea of providing his own self-revelation. He set about writing a *Life* where he speaks at length about his studies and the thinking that produced his books. But this provident effort was not much help because any truly creative genius has something inside that remains unclear to the person himself. Something flashes through his mind unawares, which he can neither escape nor hold still enough to see it squarely from every side. There is inspiration in science as in poetry, and this sudden flash, where the mind catches an unexpected glimpse of an unknown world, evades the searching thoughts of anyone who finds himself struck by it.

The task of real criticism, then, is to investigate what not even the author himself understood, to uncover the hidden struggles of his genius and shed light on the shadowy workings of the remotest reaches of his mind. In every great genius, the old person confronts the new, and they fight so fiercely that the battle stays long undecided while the soul wavers in doubt. Then, as if by instinct, the soul takes shelter in the past, and the old person prevails. But final victory always goes to the new person. The struggle makes him stronger while the other weakens and, in the long run, gives up.

The creator of a new system can be called an opposition that no one grasps [*che piglia persona*]. Hence, it is not a wise plan to make one of the elements of this conflict disappear by suppressing it or by describing great people as if they were cast in a mold [*colati di getto*]. History done in this way by butchering its coming-to-be is a falsification of science.

Not departing from our project, we are presented with two lines to notice in Vico, as we had two before him in Descartes, and two after him in Kant.

Vico lays out one of these lines; he traces its origin to Plato, and he is on the right track. But the other line, unknown to him, is based on the new principle of Descartes –

the Descartes whom Vico followed and made productive while believing that he was attacking him.

In his learned work on Vico's thought, Ferrari does not need to know about these various details that the modest Neapolitan investigated in the history of his great predecessors. For him *The New Science* is a solitary monument with no basis in past advances, rising as if by enchantment from the [*palagi*] described by Ariosto. In his view, neither Plato nor Tacitus nor Bacon nor Grotius – the four authors from whom Vico took inspiration – had enough power to cause the new science to be born.

Ferrari is right, in one sense, because no random erudition does any good without a mind to develop it. Books create opportunities, but they are useless without intellectual energy. The apple that fell in front of Newton cannot be called the author of universal attraction, and the lamp in Pisa's cathedral, swinging there in plain sight for Galileo, did not disclose the laws of the pendulum to him.

But besides external events and the talent that belongs to the individual, which are almost accidental factors in discovery, there is a logical and necessary process by which the human spirit develops. When it reaches a fixed boundary, the spirit needs another route, and, if it finds one, new ideas are required. These ideas the spirit knows how to call up as necessary, and they present themselves in obedience to its irresistible command. The route is still the old one, but new demands have broadened it, and these ideas that seem so new were latent and implicit in those that came before. Vico was there in Plato, then, but incomplete, undeveloped. There were seeds to be fertilized and then sprout, causing the *New Science* to spring forth from the *Republic*.

As a matter fact, Plato said that there were as many ways to rule as the mind has faculties and that the latter sequence also preserves what we take to be our soul's structure and hierarchy. And since reason comes first among powers of the soul and reigns supreme among all the others, rule by the best and the wise, which corresponds to reason, must likewise necessarily be first. After reason, courage comes second, submitting to reason's wishes and defending it against the force of the sensual appetites, and the corresponding result is that rule by warriors follows rule by the wise. Finally, since appetite is the lowest of our faculties and by nature formless and variable, the democracy that derives from it also takes the lowest place and represents just that manifold variety of inclinations that Dante symbolized by the beast with the speckled hide.²

Vico acknowledges that after he read Plato there began to form in him, without his being aware of it, the notion of thinking about *an ideal eternal law*, and, along with that law, an eternal city which, in turn, would be the model for the polities of all eras and all nations. There is no need for us to treat this idea as outside Vico's plan or dragged in by force and unnaturally, after the *New Science* was written, to explain a work already completed. When we read how all forms of government arise from one another in a way explained not by chance external circumstances but by the internal order of the faculties of the soul,

²[Dante, *Inferno*, 1.42.]

we cannot help noticing that the Greek philosopher's *Republic* and the Neapolitan philosopher's *New Science* are based on a common design.

Next, once I saw that Vico had reached two very weighty conclusions, I was persuaded that he took Plato's principle seriously. The first is that Plato's ideal *Republic* is a consequence of the metaphysics that he adopted, meaning, in fact, that the science of ideas **and that of the spirit** [*come quella dello spirito*] must proceed in tandem, bound together by unbreakable bonds. The second conclusion is the brief but profound criticism that Vico makes of Plato's *Republic*, which deals with mankind not as it is, after the fall, but only as it ought to be.

Vico therefore noted that the Athenian philosopher misses that development which, supposing humanity to be what is in primitive times, then gradually arrived at that model government which Plato depicts right away, almost hurriedly, in the *Republic*. Thus, where Plato starts his series with the initial assumption that reason rules, Vico, by contrast, begins with the animal appetites and proceeds along exactly the opposite path. One assumes that man is perfect and starts his account with the ruling faculty; the other, treating man as fallen, takes up [*piglia*] the movements of the senses. Plato models the *Republic* on metaphysics. Vico disconnects the two things and claims that the world of human souls moves away from the world of minds, and, while metaphysics uses the faculty of contemplation to go straight for God [*si affisa di lancio in Dio*], the philosophy of history, basing itself instead on faculties of will, uses a process by which we get closer and closer to the immobile idea contemplated directly by metaphysics. In short, metaphysics for Vico lies [*si versa*] in the true, and it has no process, just as the idea has no process. But the philosophy of history is based on the certain, and it has a process, just as mankind has a process.

Who is right, Plato or Vico? This is the question that follows automatically from what has been said above. But before answering, I wish to note that between Plato and Vico there is a real shared design, and that the Greek philosopher's *Republic* is the first earlier work connected with the *New Science*. For the sake of the immobile idea, Plato forces human facts within limits equally immobile. Vico breaks these boundaries and sets mankind free, but he does not dare to unshackle the idea. He is half-modern and half-antique, and for now I believe I must content myself with having described him in this latter way. At another time, I will write you about what I take to reveal the first traces of the modern Vico, and all this chatter of mine may not seem entirely pointless to you.

Meanwhile, guard your friendship for me, which is precious.

Sincerely,

Bologna, March 27, 1865

Letter 2

Distinguished Lady and Friend:

I'm not sure what it amounts to, this bit of babble that I've started to put together for you, nor if it seems mostly a waste of time. When it's no bother for you, anyhow, I intend to go on with it to the finish. Who knows? By continuing, we might get to an issue that more reluctant minds and those more remote from theoretical subjects might find worth thinking about. I cannot conceal from you that I have become hopeful about this, convinced as I am that in Vico's new science we find not only [*non tanto*] discussions of a philosophical problem but also material with implications for problems of origin – the origins of history, art, religion and law, topics continually discussed but never finally resolved.

In the meantime, we cannot do without these things [*farne senza non se ne può*], and anyone who gives the appearance of wishing to pass them by [*chi fa le viste di volersene passare*] often turns back to them despite himself. But in getting back to origins, the more the thing you're looking for strikes you as petty [*ti si fa piccina*], the gloomier your expression becomes [*ti si abbuia l'aria*], and, for one reason or another, dismay overcomes you and you're tempted to abandon the task. Proof of having great talent – and a privilege that comes with it – is not letting oneself be defeated by difficulties, redoubling one's effort at every obstacle. For a good twenty-five years Vico labored over his book and gave it a title that he himself calls invidious, the *New Science*. Over so long a period, he had to overcome many serious obstacles even within himself, not counting external impediments, for it is in the nature of the human spirit to turn on itself if there is nothing outside it to attack. The Neapolitan philosopher therefore had plenty of problems, and they came to him from the very teachings that had helped him in his early efforts [*che gli avevano agevolato i primi passi*].

The last time I wrote you, I mentioned that it was Plato who first suggested to Vico the design for thinking about the new science, and this theory, which was effective when he first started his project, began to be half-useless to him quite soon/he began to trim for himself quite soon [*ad ammezzargliela*]. Plato, being too fond of ideas and their immobility, was happy to squeeze everything inside this cage, as he did with the history of humanity in his *Republic*. From his own experience, Vico perceived – and would have occasion to say – that the ideal nature of Plato's conception cannot be identified with history without doing grave harm to it. He therefore hastened to extract history from this ideal and base it on a different principle.

Vico thus arrived at the cardinal distinction between the true and the certain: where the philosophy of history was a science of the true for Plato, for Vico it becomes a science of the certain. And we can describe the certain as the living truth and human fact, which gradually escapes the confines of particularity that encumber it and keeps reaching for universality and convertibility with the true. In this exchange, as the true acquires awareness, the certain, for its part, gets the benefit of universality, with the following result: although the true lies beyond the mind that contemplates it, according to Plato, and

therefore cannot attain awareness of itself within human consciousness, Vico claims that it can do so by means of a process.

But this very process whereby the human spirit comes to be recognized as such is *history*, which is either completely missing in Plato or else stuck on like an ornament attached to something else [*intrusa piuttosto ad ornamento, che ad altro*]. This defect did not escape Vico, who observed of Plato ‘that instead of making his secret wisdom solid with the common speech [*la volgare*] of Homer, he decorates it.’ This remark is quite profound, for the Neapolitan philosopher reveals the secret that he used to make the half-full theory of the Athenian complete [*ond’egli ha ridotto a perfezione la dottrina dimezzata dell’ateniense*]. History cannot be for the idea what a frame is for a painting, an empty ornament and nothing more. On the contrary, history needs to be so connatural with the Idea that the Idea becomes history and history becomes a confirmation of the Idea. Should that marriage not take place, the Idea would be sterile, and history in turn would stay empty and disconnected.

Moreover, note that what Vico wants is not a systematic, artificial history produced without spontaneity, but the common history recounted by Homer. And Plato could find no excuse in the *Cratylus*, where he resorts to philology in order to authenticate philosophical systems, which is why the two schools called on philology, rather than reason, to serve them in that the most celebrated era.

Vico took the historical element seriously, on the other hand, and made it one of the foundations supporting the new science that he was devising. He makes two things converge on history as if on a single goal: the philosophy that moves toward [*si versa sul*] the true and bases itself on reason; and the philology that springs from the authority of human will as it labors for knowledge of the certain. Reason and authority are therefore the two components of the new science, and if it was Plato who suggested the first to Vico, the second had an entirely modern origin. For any compatriot of Machiavelli, examples of this must have been available right next door.

The two main ingredients, quite lovely and well fitted out, were right in front of Vico but disconnected – indeed, regarded as incompatible. Philosophy worked by abstractions: arrogant about the heights it had to attain, it paid little attention to the course of history and human events. And history did just the opposite: valuing [*paga*] the solidity of its documents, it either took no notice of ideal processes or went even farther and mocked them. Both philosophy and history were both losers, the first being short on evidence, the second on rationality and coherence.

Johann Georg Hamann, whom Goethe compared to our Vico in talent, used to say that nature is a Hebrew word having only consonants, and that reason must add the vowels. It seems to me that this is exactly how Vico looked at knowledge as a whole, dividing it into two domains, one covered by reason, the other by authority. And then he showed that philosophy provided the vowels of history, while philology provides only its consonants.

Vico gave philology a very large role, describing it as ‘the theory of everything that depends on human will.’ His solitary researches may lack the evidence and support from oriental languages that assist modern philologists. Being too shut up in the world of Rome, neglecting the rest of it and evaluating what little he knew of it by the Roman standard may have done him harm. Despite all these failings, we still cannot deny that he is immeasurably far ahead of those who travelled the same road after him. He made philology powerful, raising it from the detailed study of words to the height of a scientific system. And he studied the life of the people in all the most important phenomena that usually characterize it, never content with collecting witty remarks [*strambotti*] and cute stories [*novelline*] as many do today – to what end, I am not sure.

When Vico came on the scene, there was no shortage of erudition. Every book published carried an unbearable load of it, or else it would have had no value, giving the swarm of learned experts no motive for applause. The only thing lacking was to use erudition moderately and know how to direct it to some reasonable purpose. In order to do so, erudition had to be subjected to regular laws, distinguishing what was real and solid from the worthless and spurious, tracing the provenance of learning and using such connections to link it with thought.

No longer trusting that this could be done, Descartes took himself out of it and disowned the attempt: rather than untie the knot, he cut it. *The Discourse on the Method* marks a cross on the back of [*bandisce la croce adosso*] all research of that kind, revealing its uselessness and showing that a mind encumbered with so many little bits of information would then be ill-equipped for the richer and very important task of knowing oneself. Descartes may not have been entirely wrong about the academies and scholars of his day, but he had not perceive that while a person or an academy might look for childish amusement, the human spirit produces nothing without meaning.

His plan went too far, then, for there was an alternative not opposed to the Cartesian principle, I believe, but derived from the very same method – a plan to redo those learned inquiries from a different point of view, inasmuch as they uncover the hidden nature of the spirit that becomes concrete its products. And had Descartes reinstated [*rinsediato*] the thinking which has been banished for so long, he would not have needed to leave it [*lasciarlo*] naked and impoverished to complete its restoration; instead, he could have diligently procured it a retinue worthy of so great a power. He would have needed to look at every move already made and look deep inside, in order to extract the seed, uncared-for but still fertile, from the shining husk.

And this was the inquiry that Vico undertook, a plan to enlarge the Cartesian method without altering it. In his hands, philology was no longer the irreconcilable enemy of philosophy, as it appeared to Descartes. Each is bound to the other by a knot that cannot be untied, as speech makes use of [*servendo la parola di*] the transparent mirror that reflects thought. History becomes philosophy’s mightiest adjutant, and the fact can actually substitute for the deepest truth. Vico thus completes Descartes by re-clothing his thought in forms that had been stolen [*rivestendo il pensiero delle maltolte forme*]. He took on the task that the Touraine philosopher no longer believed in, and he reconciled

Plato and Tacitus for ever, the man of ideas with the man of history. By sealing that marriage, Vico made the philosophy of history possible, though as long as the world had kept reason in confinement, this philosophy could not aspire to the level of science, ending up in Bossuet with the threadbare concept of a heavenly providence regulating human actions until their ultimate and external resolution by the Incarnation. It never hurts to repeat that an external cause is never enough to make knowledge. If a person does not look inside himself to dig out the true causes of facts, he will wait a good long time before heaven rains them down on him.