



Metalinguistic Negotiation in Vico's *Scienza nuova*

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1. Introduction

The study of Vico is characterized by a rich variety of perspectives but also divergencies that constitute irreconcilable disagreements. Among these belong the interpretations of Vico, for example, as an “orthodox”, “anti-modern”, “Catholic” thinker, on the one hand, and as an “heterodox”, “modern”, “Enlightenment” thinker, on the other.¹ These starkly opposing views are to be differentiated in turn from Enrico Nuzzo's view of «the “orthodox” character of Vico's thought, while at the same time underlining the extraordinary and far from innocuous qualities of conceptual innovation».² Vico's idiosyncratic, original, theorizing has been noted across diverse currents in Vico studies.³

This essay aims to explore whether Vico engaged in “conceptual engineering”, or, alternatively, “metalinguistic negotiation”. It takes up certain terminology and expressions in *Scienza nuova* that Vico evidently “appropriated” from other early modern thinkers and works, and investigates the way(s) in which he employed them in this, his major work.⁴

¹ E. Nuzzo, *Between orthodoxy and heterodoxy in Italian culture in the early 1700s: Giambattista Vico and Paolo Mattia Doria*, tr. J. Robertson, in S. Mortimer – J. Robertson (eds.), *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy 1600-1750*, Brill, Leiden, 2012, pp. 205-234, in particular pp. 205-209.

² *Ivi*, p. 209.

³ To cite a few examples: T. M. Costelloe, “The Concept of a “State of Nature” in Vico's “New Science”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 16, 3 (July 1999): pp. 321-339, in particular p. 325: «and in what can be none other than an apparent attempt to distance himself from them [natural law theorists' views], he makes no effort to define or circumscribe the “state of nature” in any detailed way. Vico uses the term *consistently*, but does not intend it to be used univocally» (emphasis original); P. Girard, ”La tradizione epicurea e lucreziana nella filosofia di Giambattista Vico”, *Quaderni Materialisti*, 5 (2006): pp. 161-182, in particular p. 167: «I riferimenti vichiani (tanto quelli positivi quanto quelli negativi) non sono mai neutri, ma sono sempre la manifestazione di una strategia, di un lavoro di rielaborazione attraverso il quale questi autori, queste tradizioni vengono utilizzati in una prospettiva nuova»; D. L. Marshall, *Vico and the Transformation of Rhetoric in Early Modern Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2010; Id., “The Current State of Vico Scholarship”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 72, 1 (January 2011): pp. 141-160, in particular p. 147: «Vico does not simply swallow Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, or Tacitus whole. Even as does not claim for himself a mantle of eclecticism, Vico does effectively subject the classical rhetorical corpus to an atomization»; D. Peone, “Vico and His Patron Saint: The City of Man and the City of God”, *Clio*, 45, 1 (2015): pp. 1-14, in particular p. 3: «My own argument is that Vico's general schema of the history of the gentile nations, which is the lifeblood of the *New Science*, is a conscious appropriation and inversion of Augustine's understanding of history»; M. Sanna, “El hechizo viquiano”, tr. M. J. Rebollo Espinosa, *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, 32 (2018): pp. 295-298, in particular p. 297, attributed to Vico «una lectura innovadora y transformadora de la herencia renacentista»; A. Battistini, *Alcune fonti di Vico storico e pensatore politico*, in G. Cospito (ed.), *Politica e storia in Vico*, Ibis, Como, 2019, pp. 15-36, in particular p. 36: «Vico... in quasi tutti gli altri casi contesta e ri-crea le sue fonti per fare emergere agonisticamente la propria inconfondibile originalità».

⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, in this article Vico's *Scienza nuova* refers to the 1744 edition. The English edition used is *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, intro. by G. Mazzotta, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2020. Paragraph numbers in this edition will appear in the article text in parentheses. Other translations consulted include: G. Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, tr. by Th. G. Bergin – M. H. Fisch, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1968; *New Science*, tr. by D. Marsh, Penguin, London, 2001; *La Science Nouvelle*, tr. by A. Pons, Fayard, Paris, 2001; *Prinzipien einer neuen Wissenschaft über die gemeinsame Natur der Völker*, tr. by V. Hösle – Ch. Jermann, Felix Meiner, Hamburg, 1990; *Ciencia nueva*, tr. by R. de la Villa, Editorial Tecnos, Madrid, 2006. Original language quotations are from G. B. Vico, *La Scienza nuova*



2. Multilingual Negotiation

Basically, “conceptual engineering” or “metalinguistic negotiation” refers to situations in which there is a disagreement or dispute over what a certain term or expression means or should mean. “Conceptual engineering” foregrounds “concepts” as subject matter while *metalinguistic negotiation* focuses on the “words” used for concepts. Despite the different terminology, both approaches are equivalent since the concepts referred to in conceptual engineering are in fact the metalinguistic entities of metalinguistic negotiation; these are not merely verbal disputes.⁵ However, there is an undeniable semantic discordance between “engineering” and “negotiation”. In this essay, “negotiation” is preferred over “engineering”.⁶ It has to do with certain underlying propositional attitudes. In the case of conceptual engineering, it is the «*negative valence*» or evaluation that views existing concepts in terms of their «*deficiency, harmness, or malfunction*».⁷ This perceived defectiveness, in turn, prompts the need and call for improvement or amelioration.⁸ Such assessment and improvement, in certain respects, has been compared to «engineers

nell’edizione del 1744, in M. Sanna – V. Vitiello (eds.), *La Scienza nuova. Le tre edizioni del 1725, 1730 e 1744*, Bompiani, Milano, 2012/2013. We are adhering to Vico’s typography, such as lower case or capital letters, roman style or italics, as printed in this edition.

⁵ M. Eklund, “Conceptual engineering and conceptual innovation”, *Inquiry*, published online 31 July 2024: pp. 1-24, in particular p. 6: «Concepts are then not mental words but rather the sort of things that are the meaning of words», <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2384066>>, last accessed 6 October 2025.

⁶ The following are selected references from the extensive literature on conceptual engineering; appropriately, conceptual engineering and metalinguistic negotiation themselves are targets of conceptual engineering and metalinguistic negotiation: D. Plunkett – T. Sundell, “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms”, *Philosophers’ Imprint*, 13, 23 (December 2013): pp. 1-37; Id. – Id., “Varieties of Metalinguistic Negotiation”, *Topoi*, 42, 4 (September 2023): pp. 983-999; Id. – Id., “Metalinguistic negotiation and matters of language: a response to Cappelen”, *Inquiry*, published online 10 October 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.1983456>>: pp. 1-25; A. Burgess – D. Plunkett, “Conceptual Ethics I”, *Philosophy Compass*, 8, 12 (2013): pp. 1091-1101; Id. – Id., “Conceptual Ethics II”, *Philosophy Compass*, 8, 12 (2013): pp. 1102-1110; D. Plunkett, “Which Concepts Should We Use?: Metalinguistic Negotiations and The Methodology of Philosophy”, *Inquiry*, 58, 7-8 (2015): pp. 828-874; A. L. Thomasson, “Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation”, *Analytic Philosophy*, 0, 0 (July 2016): pp. 1-28; ; Id., “Philosophy as Conceptual Engineering”, *The Philosopher*, 109, 3 (Summer 2021): pp. 7-14; Id., “Conceptual engineering: when do we need it? How can we do it?”, *Inquiry*, published online 16 November 2021, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2021.2000118>>: pp. 1-25, not open access; H. Cappelen, *Fixing Language: An Essay on Conceptual Engineering*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018; M. Deutsch, “Speaker’s reference, stipulation, and a dilemma for conceptual engineers”, *Philosophical Studies*, 177 (2020): pp. 3935-3957; Id., “Conceptual analysis without concepts”, *Synthese*, 198 (2021): pp. 11125-11157; D. Belleri, “Ontological disputes and the phenomenon of metalinguistic negotiation: Charting the territory”, *Philosophy Compass*, 15, 7 (July 2020): published online, <<https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12684>>, last accessed 26 October 2024, pp. 1-11; A. Burgess – H. Cappelen – D. Plunkett (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020; M. Pinder, “Conceptual Engineering, Metasemantic Externalism and Speaker-Meaning”, *Mind*, 130, 517 (January 2021): pp. 141-163; L. Decock, “Conceptual change and conceptual engineering: the case of colour concepts”, *Inquiry*, 64, 1-2 (2021): pp. 168-185; M. Fuš, *Assert This: “Philosophers Are Engineers”*. A Study of Philosophical Engineering and Generic Judgments, dissertation, University of Oslo, Oslo - University of St. Andrews, St. Andrews, 2021, <https://www.academia.edu/65320096/Assert_This_Philosophers_Are_Engineers_A_Study_of_Philosophical_Engineering_and_Generic_Judgments>, last accessed 6 October 2025; M. Eklund, *Conceptual Engineering in Philosophy*, in J. Khoo – R. Sterken (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Social and Political Philosophy of Language*, Routledge, New York, 2021, pp. 15-30.

⁷ M. Fuš, *Assert This: “Philosophers Are Engineers”*, cit., p. 46, emphasis original.

⁸ H. Cappelen, *Fixing Language*, cit., p. 3; H. Cappelen – D. Plunkett, *Introduction: A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, in A. Burgess – H. Cappelen – D. Plunkett (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, cit., pp. 1-26, in particular p. 3; M. Pinder, “Conceptual Engineering, Metasemantic Externalism and Speaker-Meaning”, cit., p. 141: «Many concepts, it seems, are deficient. They may be insufficiently precise for theoretical inquiry, they may obscure important distinctions, they may be offensive or politically contentious, or something else».



we look to when we need to assess our old structures – whether a building remains stable after an earthquake, what repairs or maintenance an aircraft needs to safely carry passengers, or what reinforcements a roof needs to withstand a possible storm».⁹ This comparison, however, glosses over the fact that in the case of conceptual engineering, concepts are not structures that might have developed weaknesses or imperfections over time, but are considered fundamentally defective in themselves.¹⁰ In order to remedy such failings, sometimes it may therefore not be sufficient to “revise” or “reform” certain concepts but may require “replacing” or even “eliminating” them.¹¹ This suggests that this approach is motivated by ontology.¹²

An often-cited example is the analytic philosopher Rudolf Carnap (1891-1970), and his concept of “explication”. It also presupposes defectiveness, in this case the defectiveness of language by virtue of its purported inherent “vagueness”: «The task of making more exact a vague or not quite exact concept used in everyday life or in an earlier stage of scientific or logical development, or rather of replacing it by a newly constructed, more exact concept... We call this the task of explicating, or of giving an *explication*».¹³ Carnap’s own example is the replacement of the existing, traditional, term “fish” with the new, formalized, term *Piscis* in scientific contexts on the grounds of the purported superior exactness, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the latter term.¹⁴ Carnap’s program of re-definitions in fact had two levels of motivation, both of which had ontological roots: the first was intellectual in nature in positing that they, the Vienna circle, needed to break away, emancipate themselves, from falsifying traditions; the second was sociopolitical in intent, intending to bring about social changes – socialism, specifically, in Carnap’s vision – through conceptual engineering by way of explication.¹⁵

By contrast, metalinguistic negotiation can be approached as an epistemological phenomenon – even when recognizing commonalities with conceptual engineering at a certain level of analysis, just as ontology and epistemology as such can be intertwined.¹⁶ The difference becomes apparent in the way in which metalinguistic negotiation is presented or defined. Instead of highlighting or focusing on purported “defects”, the key or core notion is “disagreement, conflicting” views, “competing” ways, in

⁹ A. L. Thomasson, “Philosophy as Conceptual Engineering”, cit., p. 10; M. Fuš, *Assert This: “Philosophers Are Engineers”*, cit., p. 81, emphasis original: «engineering... consists in a five-stage (*identification, evaluation, strategic planning, implementation, re-evaluation*) recursive activity... In a nutshell,... philosophical engineering is engaging in a five-stage recursive activity that operates on different philosophical objects».

¹⁰ K. Scharp, *Philosophy as the Study of Defective Concepts*, in A. Burgess – H. Cappelen – D. Plunkett (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, cit., pp. 396-416.

¹¹ D. Belleri, “Ontological disputes and the phenomenon of metalinguistic negotiation: Charting the territory”, cit., p. 2.

¹² *Ivi*, p.1, emphasis original: «It is generally acknowledged that engaging in an ontological dispute means trying to establish whether certain entities, facts, or phenomena *exist*». H. Cappelen – D. Plunkett, *Introduction: A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics*, cit., p. 12: «if conceptual engineering succeeds in a particular case, it will change how people think, talk, and act on the (non-conceptual and non-linguistic) world».

¹³ R. Carnap, *Meaning and necessity*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1947, pp. 7-8, emphasis original; quoted in E. Reck, *Carnapian Explication: A Case Study and Critique*, in P. Wagner (ed.), *Carnap’s Ideal of Explication and Naturalism*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, pp. 96-116, in particular p. 117; C. D. Novaes, “Carnapian explication and ameliorative analysis: a systematic comparison”, *Synthese*, 197, 3 (2020): pp. 1011-1034, in particular p. 1015.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 1015-1017.

¹⁵ *Ivi*, pp. 1017-1019. See also A. W. Carus, *Carnap and Twentieth-Century Thought: Explication as Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007. Cf. John Locke’s concern with words and language, and his own form of “explication”, in K. Bizas, “The Blueprint of Locke’s Remedial Use of Language”, *Laboratorio dell’ISPF*, XX (2023): pp. 1-29.

¹⁶ This does not entail that ontology and epistemology can be conflated, or that the distinction is merely heuristical.



a given linguistic exchange. This does not entail that the term or expression itself is defective, in need of improvement or revision.¹⁷ It is not the case either that the parties to the dispute are necessarily engaging in negotiation in the generally understood sense of its purpose or expectation of reaching a mutually satisfactory agreement.¹⁸

Metalinguistic negotiation has been illustrated in connection with the term “athlete”. In a list of great athletes of the twentieth-century, the racehorse Secretariat was included.¹⁹ In the ensuing debate on a sports radio program, some listeners agreed with this choice, while others rejected it. The problem or issue was not the term “athlete” itself, as if it were inherently deficient, on the one hand, or the physical prowess or performance of Secretariat, on the other hand, but rather whether the term should be extended to animals, regardless of performance. The “negotiation” or dispute thus had to do with, and pointed to, essentially different underlying worldviews, and it was “metalinguistic” in the full sense of the term: first of all, it concerned an actual “linguistic” term, “athlete”, not merely an idea or mental construct, and secondly, the dispute transcended the semantics of the term which does not make any distinction between humans and animals in its intension.

It is with this understanding of metalinguistic negotiation in mind, rather than in terms of conceptual engineering, that certain terminology or expressions that Vico evidently adopted from other early modern thinkers will be examined.²⁰ The basic question that will be addressed is. Does the way Vico uses and discusses these terms or expressions imply an underlying divergent or discrepant framework (theoretically, metaphysically), just as irreconcilable as views expressed of who should be considered an athlete.

¹⁷ D. Plunkett, “Which Concepts Should We Use?”, cit., pp. 833-835, 847. The underlying assumption of defectiveness has been questioned in M. Deutsch, “Speaker’s reference, stipulation, and a dilemma for conceptual engineers”, cit., p. 3955, emphasis original: «This account of the value of conceptual engineering clearly depends on the view that many of our terms, including many of our philosophical terms, such as “knowledge”, “free action”, and ‘woman’, are semantically defective. *Are* these terms semantically defective? Not if their purpose is to allow us to speak of, and communicate about, things like knowledge, free action, and women... So, the usual rationale for engaging in conceptual engineering is a bad rationale: since our terms are not, in fact, defective, relative to the purpose of using them to speak of their semantic referents, there is no need, and no value, in trying to improve them».

¹⁸ D. Plunkett – T. Sundell, “Metalinguistic negotiation and matters of language: a response to Cappelen”, cit., p. 6, note 14: «In many normative metalinguistic disputes, speakers might well not care that much about actually reaching an agreement, as opposed to simply expressing their disagreements with each other... Tied to this, nothing in the idea of “metalinguistic negotiation” suggests that the speakers will always be successful in actually agreeing on a meaning». In the present article, the terms “disagreement” and “dispute” are used interchangeably without the distinction made between “disagreement” as «rational conflict in mental states» and “disputes” as «linguistic exchanges», in D. Plunkett – T. Sundell, “Metalinguistic negotiation and speaker error”, *Inquiry*, published online 4 July 2019, pp. 1-26, in particular p. 4, <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2019.1610055>>, last accessed 6 October 2025. See also Id. – Id., “Varieties of Metalinguistic Negotiation”, cit., p. 985.

¹⁹ This (real-life) example is discussed in more detail in D. Plunkett – T. Sundell, “Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms”, cit., pp. 16-19; D. Plunkett, “Which Concepts Should We Use?”, cit., pp. 840-844. For Secretariat, see <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretariat_\(horse\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secretariat_(horse))>, last accessed 6 October 2025.

²⁰ Metalinguistic negotiation as used here is to be distinguished from pragmatics, as in the case of Vico’s use of irony: «Las ironías de Vico también sugieren una intención metalingüística en la *Scienza Nuova*». (V. Ch. dos Santos, “Cosas recogidas y cosas vistas en la pintura filosófica de la Ciencia Nueva de Vico”, *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, 37 (2024): pp. 77-98, in particular p. 97, note 53). Metalinguistic negotiation also differs from “metasemantics”: «Metasemantics is the body of theory concerning how linguistic expressions obtain their meanings». (M. Pinder, “Conceptual Engineering, Metasemantic Externalism and Speaker-Meaning”, cit., p. 144, emphasis original).



The following discussion will focus on terminology that Vico borrowed or appropriated from Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza: “clear and distinct ideas” from Descartes, “modifications of the mind” and “occasions” from Malebranche, and “the order of ideas and of things” from Spinoza.

3. Clear and Distinct Ideas

Before proceeding to cite Vico’s references to “clear and distinct ideas” in *Scienza nuova*, Descartes’s notion of this concept needs to be understood. It is only in relation to the specific, idiosyncratic meaning that Descartes attached to it that Vico’s use of the same terminology gains purchase. As will be discussed here, the notions of “clarity” and “distinctness” were conceived by Descartes as going beyond their basic, uncontroversial intension: «Clarity requires only a sufficient degree of mental presence; it does not require distinguishing what is mentally present from all other things».²¹

Likely, the most significant case of Cartesian clear and distinct perception is his unique brand of mind-body dualism, setting it apart from both Aristotelian and scholastic antecedents.²² As Descartes eloquently narrated it in Part IV of *Discourse on the Method*, his intellectual autobiography, he first came to the realization of certainty, dispelling any doubt, afforded by the self-conscious act or performance of thinking.²³ This gave rise to a concomitant certainty, that «the soul by which I am what I am – is entirely distinct from the body».²⁴ Therefore, mind-body dualism became the ontological basis of the epistemic notions of clarity and distinctness, not the other way around.²⁵

The «blinding certainty» of mind-body dualism has been related, in Cartesian studies, to Descartes’s mathematical mindset and approach to geometry.²⁶ This approach deals only with «the simplest and most general things regardless of whether they really exist in nature or not», and this is what makes them «certain and indubitable».²⁷ Ontology precedes epistemology, or, stated equivalently, epistemology supervenes on ontology.²⁸ It is to be noted that Descartes employs the term “simple” in harmony with,

²¹ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method: The Formation of the Subject of Science*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2023, p. 343.
²² *Ivi*, pp. 219-230.

²³ J. Rometsch, *Freiheit zur Wahrheit. Grundlagen der Erkenntnis am Beispiel von Descartes und Locke*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 2018, p. 139: «Beim Denken wird unhintergehbar bemerkt, dass das Denken ohne eine denkende Instanz nicht stattfinden kann».

²⁴ *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, tr. by J. Cottingham – R. Stoothoff – D. Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988, p. 36.

²⁵ L. Newman, *Descartes on the Method of Analysis*, in St. Nadler - T. M. Schmaltz – D. Antoine-Mahut (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Descartes and Cartesianism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, pp. 65-88, in particular p. 86, emphasis original: «Likewise, the rule of clarity and distinctness—itself a foundational epistemic principle – purports to be derived, rather than assumed». In this essay, we do not make an issue out of the semantics of “clarity”, on the one hand, and “distinctness”, on the other, but accept this conclusion: «Since every distinct perception is also clear, we may refer simply to distinctness as a shorthand» (*ivi*, p. 81, emphasis original). This is not necessarily invalidated by Descartes’s reference to the common observation that certain bodily sensations, like pain, may be physically clearly felt without being distinctly identified or located in a specific part of the body. For Descartes, clarity and distinctness occur at a higher level of analysis or ontology, at the level of his metaphysical notion of «the close and intimate union of our mind with the body». (T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., pp. 337, 344). At this level, pain is perceived not only clearly but also distinctly from other experiences.

²⁶ S. Blackburn, *Think: A compelling introduction to philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 33.

²⁷ G. Moyal, “A Brief Note on Clarity and Distinctness in Descartes’s First Meditation”, *Studia Leibnitiana*, 31, 1 (1999): pp. 91-98, in particular p. 93.

²⁸ This is analogous to “semantic” properties supervening on “non-semantic” properties. (L. Gasparri, “Semantic Supervenience”, *Inquiry*, 67, 1 (2024): pp. 429-453). Descartes’s method is therefore not to be considered a neutral, general, or “stand-alone” methodology of inquiry but an extension of his ontology: «The description of Descartes’ strategy as “hypothetical-deductive” cannot be left unqualified, for Descartes did not leave the domain of allowable hypotheses



and integral to, his overall epistemological and philosophical framework: “simple” things or natures can be conceptualized in a variety of ways, depending on one’s viewpoint, such as «first principles, first truths, basic truths, simplest component parts, primitive notions, cognitive indivisibility, more universal things». ²⁹ Simple natures or notions were initially categorized into three classes: «intellectual (e.g., knowledge, doubt, ignorance, volition, etc.); material [or corporeal] (e.g., extension, shape, motion, etc.); common (e.g., existence, unity, duration, instant, and... inferential principles)». ³⁰ By special pleading, Descartes added “God” and “the human body” as separate categories to the general notion of simple natures. ³¹

It is in terms of simple natures in this sense that Cartesian mind and body distinctness constitutes the paradigm for distinctness of all other kinds of things in the world. For example, bodies are defined by the simple natures of “size, shape, position, motion”, and “number”. ³² Of course, Descartes makes the stronger claim that bodies are only and strictly intelligible by these purely geometrical properties of extension, thus essentially defining the essence of body. ³³ On the one hand, Descartes called them

unrestricted...; it was restricted by metaphysically determined principles, including the equation of matter with extension, and the laws of motion». (G. Hatfield, “Science, Certainty, and Descartes”, *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, Vol. 2 (1988): pp. 249-262, in particular p. 259). This may be compared with *On Method* in *Book One of Scienza nuova* (338-360). Most of *On Method* is taken up by elucidation of theoretical presuppositions rather than proceeding on the basis of tacit assumptions. A key, if not the key, assumption, is stated: «For grant that this science must start where the subject matter starts,... we have thus sought for this starting point» (338, 347).

²⁹ L. Newman, *Descartes on the Method of Analysis*, cit., pp. 66-71; T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., pp. 272, 333-336; J. L. Bermúdez, “Scepticism and Science in Descartes”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 57, 4 (December 1997): pp. 769-770. The concept of simple natures, in fact, seems to be central not only to Descartes’s metaphysics, but also to his physics: «The problem of demonstrating that reality is composed of simple natures is what leads Descartes to see metaphysics (God) as the foundation of physics after *Rules*... it is clear that this distinction [between mind and body] in his metaphysical treatise must have rested on the distinction between the intellectual and material simple natures... God creates body according to the material simple natures, which establishes the possibility of a purely mechanical physics based on extension, shape, and motion alone... The order of the sciences, in which metaphysics is the foundation of physics, would never have arisen had Descartes not set out to demonstrate his supposition in Rule 12 that reality is reducible to simple natures». (T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., pp. 323-324). In the Preface of the French addition of *Principles*, Descartes used the metaphor of “the tree of knowledge”: «Thus the whole of philosophy is like a tree. The roots are metaphysics, the trunk is physics, and the branches emerging from the trunk are all the other sciences» (*ivi*, p. 328) The message is not only the unity of all science, but also the priority of metaphysics, it being the root system. In *Scienza nuova*, Vico used the tree metaphor also, but here metaphysics is the trunk, and physics is one of the two branches (367). Vico uses “metaphysics” and “physics” very differently from Descartes, and in a different context, hence the tree metaphor conveys a very different message, but that is a separate topic for discussion.

³⁰ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 287; J. L. Bermúdez, “Scepticism and Science in Descartes”, cit., p. 747.

³¹ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., pp. 333-345.

³² G. Hatfield, “Science, Certainty, and Descartes”, cit., pp. 254-259; D. E. Flage, “Descartes and the Real Distinction Between Mind and Body”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 68, 1 (September 2014): pp. 93-106, in particular p. 99. J. L. Bermúdez, “Scepticism and Science in Descartes”, cit., pp. 743-772, concurs with the view that these «are the simple natures that Descartes thinks are ontologically basic».

³³ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., pp. 319-322, emphasis original, explains how Descartes dealt with the fact that «arithmetic and geometry remain irreducibly heterogeneous mathematical sciences», given the distinct nature of discrete and continuous magnitude, evincing the inadequacy of either discipline or methodology exclusively to apply to all of science. In order to save his chosen method (as outlined in *Rules*), Descartes «redefines the object of mathematics... In *Meditations V*, he reduces the object of pure and abstract mathematics to extension *alone* (and, therefore, geometry)». This is the underlying rationale for Descartes’s “mathematization” or “geometrization” of nature: «[H]e was simply expressing the doctrine that the essence of matter is “pure extension”. For this doctrine amounts to the view that matter is wholly describable in terms of the geometrical properties of size, shape, position, and motion». (G. Hatfield, “Science, Certainty, and Descartes”, cit., p. 259).



sensory ideas, but used the term in such a way that it deliberately opposed it to the way in which scholasticism evaluated the role and grasp of the senses.³⁴ His example of the sensory experience with a ball of wax illustrates the difference. Through the senses we are able to perceive the ball of wax as an object, and observe that it undergoes changes in size and overall shape as a result of being impacted by other bodies or inherent conditions such as its mass or moisture content. However, according to Descartes, this sense-based experience is categorically different from the higher-level mental process of forming clear and distinct ideas about the ball of wax, such as its “extension, flexibility” of shape, and inherent “changeability”. These are general concepts not supplied by the senses but by the mind alone.³⁵ Thus, Descartes’s clear and distinct ideas are to be considered «metaphysically determined principles».³⁶

This brief exposition of what Descartes meant by clear and distinct ideas confirms the initial motivation: the challenge of radical or methodic, systematic doubt.³⁷ Accordingly, clear and distinct ideas, not putatively scholastic reliance on the senses, should be the basis of science. Repeating what has been stated earlier, they are inextricably linked to, and embedded in Descartes’s idiosyncratic metaphysics and ontology, thus begging the question of what it has to do with the nature and scope of scientific knowledge. It is important, even crucial, to make this distinction, that is, distinguishing between a general philosophical problem, on the one hand, and “scientifically serious” problematics, on the other.³⁸ An example of a general philosophical problem is Hume’s view according to which

It is, however, not necessarily the case that Descartes’s approach to problems of physics started out with mathematical concepts or assumptions, in the manner of modern mathematical physics, deriving physical phenomena from mathematical equations; to the contrary, it can be shown that Descartes’s own research proceeded «*from physics to mathematics*, not vice versa». (T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 276, emphasis original).

³⁴ J. L. Bermúdez, “Scepticism and Science in Descartes”, cit., p. 766: «Scholastic physics is underpinned by a faith in the senses, and the world of scholastic physics is very much the world of common sense unscientific perception». This may be an oversimplified assessment of scholasticism, but likely a fairly accurate statement of Descartes’s own view, or the way he set up scholasticism as a foil. Cf. L. Newman, *Descartes on the Method of Analysis*, cit., pp. 66-74.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 764. In *Meditation VI*, Descartes contrasts «my sensory grasp» with the scholastic «grasp of the senses» (*ivi*, p. 766). This may be considered a case of multilingual negotiation in the sense developed in this paper. With respect to the wax example, see also J. Rometsch, *Freiheit zur Wahrheit*, cit., pp. 199-200, where wax and its properties, or correlates, are analogues of epistemic activity and its correlates: «Wie es kein konkretes Stück Wachs ohne seine Form oder Gestalt (“figure”) gibt, so konkretisiert sich keine Tätigkeit einer epistemischen Instanz ohne ihre jeweilige Korrelate». This philosophical proposition thus transcends any experience of wax purely as a physical object.

³⁶ G. Hatfield, “Science, Certainty, and Descartes”, cit., p. 259. For the larger historical context of Descartes, cf. T. Prunea-Bretonnet – D. Matei, “Introduction: Emancipation from Metaphysics? Natural History, Natural Philosophy and the Study of Nature from the Late Renaissance to the Enlightenment”, *Perspectives on Science*, 32, 5 (2024): pp. 549-553, in particular p. 549: «In the early modern and modern periods the critique of systems of natural philosophy and of Cartesian metaphysics goes hand-in-hand with the prioritization of experimental facts and collected data».

³⁷ For various views of Descartes’s skepticism or doubt, see Sibajiban (S. Bhattacharyya), “Descartes’ Doubt”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 24, 1 (September 1963): pp. 106-116; Id., *Doubt, Belief and Knowledge*, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi, 1987, pp. 1-18; P. A. Schouls, “The Extent of Doubt in Descartes’ ‘Meditations’”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 3, 1 (September 1973): pp. 51-58; M. Lipson, “Psychological Doubt and the Cartesian Circle”, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 19, 2 (June 1989): pp. 225-246; M. Greene, “Descartes and Skepticism”, *The Review of Metaphysics*, 52, 3 (March 1999): pp. 552-571; J. Rometsch, *Freiheit zur Wahrheit*, cit., pp. 146-155.

³⁸ M. Egg, “Quantum ontology without speculation”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 11, 32 (2021): pp. 1-26, in particular p. 3, emphasis original: «Accordingly, ontological content of a theory counts as speculative if it is subject to such underdetermination between scientifically serious alternatives. The restriction to *scientifically serious* alternatives is important, because otherwise, *any* ontological claim could be classified as speculative... underdetermination should not be taken seriously if it merely collapses the issue into a general philosophical problem, such as responding to Cartesian skepticism or to a radical agnosticism about all theoretical claims».



«[physical] laws are nothing more than convenient summaries of regularities that obtain in the mosaic of particular facts».³⁹ Its implicit radical underdetermination precludes constraints on scientific inquiry. On the other hand, a (modern) example of “scientifically serious” problematics is quantum mechanics. It has given rise to a number of divergent competing theories, all being able to claim compatibility with the empirical body of evidence.⁴⁰ This then is a case of «underdetermination of theory by evidence».⁴¹

This distinction is directly relevant to what to make of Cartesian skepticism in the context of science. Descartes, at one point, justified his radical doubt by his thought experiment of assuming being under the influence of an Evil Demon deceiving him in holding the beliefs that he did.⁴² Was this the same kind of underdetermination that science deals with? Not at all; the fundamental difference lies in the fact that «[s]uch radically skeptical scenarios pose an equally powerful (or powerless) challenge to any knowledge claim whatsoever, no matter how it is arrived at or justified».⁴³ Underdetermination of scientific theories, on the other hand, is not absolute or open-ended but constrained by empirical investigation and data.⁴⁴

To conclude the appraisal of Descartes’s approach to science argued here, it would seem to agree with the recent assessment that «[t]he idea of scientific method is no longer understood today the way it was understood by Descartes»⁴⁵. And the reason is that Descartes’s approach to science is a *habitus*, understood as being a practice or an art, not a specifically scientific methodology, «capable of responding to problems in a supple, sensitive way».⁴⁶ This *habitus*, however, can be invoked to work in the formation of any number of subjects, not just the subject of science, such as law, society, history, and others.⁴⁷ Viewed from this point of view, Descartes’s method falls short of being scientifically serious.

³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 14.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 2-3. See also T. Menon, “On algebraic naturalism and metaphysical indeterminacy in quantum mechanics”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*, 105 (June 2024): pp. 1-16.

⁴¹ M. Egg – J. Saatsi, “Scientific realism and underdetermination in quantum theory”, *Philosophy Compass*, 16, 11 (2021): pp. 1-13, in particular p. 1.

⁴² K. Stanford, *Underdetermination of Scientific Theory*, in E. N. Zalta – U. Nodelman (eds.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2023 Edition, no pagination, Section 1, <<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-underdetermination/>>, last accessed 6 October 2025.

⁴³ *Ivi*, Section 3.2.

⁴⁴ P. K. Stanford, “Refusing the Devil’s Bargain: What Kind of Underdetermination Should We Take Seriously?”, *Philosophy of Science*, 68, 3 (September 2001): pp. S1-S12, in particular p. S3, note 4: «the prior plausibility of electrons, phlogiston, or curved spacetime is simply not on par with that of Cartesian Evil Demons». For Stanford, Cartesian skepticism is the result of «Cartesian fantasies» and «skeptical fantasies» (*ivi*, pp. S3-S6, S10, S12).

⁴⁵ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 349.

⁴⁶ *Ivi*, pp. 59, 351. Even acknowledging Descartes’s method as *habitus*, however, does not provide closure as to the way toward scientific truth, since *habitus* itself depends on underlying commitments, such as «the plausible extent of scientific ontology: the study of what things and kinds of things exist, what they are like, and how they behave». (A. Chakravarty, “Resolving Debates about Scientific Realism: The Challenge from Stances”, *Philosophy of Science*, 00 (2023): pp. 1-10, in particular p. 2, emphasis original). As noted earlier, Descartes’s method in fact is inextricably entangled with his ontology; to reiterate this key point of relevance for the present study: «this method contains an ontology (the simple natures), which defines the nature of the world insofar as it can be known by the human intellect and therefore, science». (T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 350, emphasis original).

⁴⁷ In this connection, Queen Christina of Sweden’s (1626-1689; ruled 1632-1654) conversion to Catholicism might be relevant as a case-in-point. Her conversion followed her engagement with Cartesianism under the tutelage of Descartes. (E. Cassirer, *Descartes und Königin Christina von Schweden. Eine Studie zur Geistesgeschichte des 17. Jahrhunderts*, in T. Berben (ed.), *Descartes. Lehre – Persönlichkeit – Wirkung*, Felix Meiner Verlag, Hamburg, 2005, pp. 128-204, in particular



With this analysis of Descartes's concept of clarity and distinctness in mind, we will now turn to Vico's usage.

4. Clear and Distinct Ideas in *Scienza nuova*

Vico's use of the expression «luminous and distinct (*luminose, e distinte*)» (344) has been called «an echo of Descartes's “clear and distinct”». Similar echoes can be heard at §§ 367, 390, 444, 502, 905»,⁴⁸ with the implication that Vico's adoption of Descartes's terminology meant to signal his agreement. As has been shown earlier, for Descartes “clear and distinct” meant more than, and something fundamentally different from, the conventional, non-philosophical, meaning of clarity and distinctness. Only metaphysically determined (simple) ideas can be clear and distinct, modelled after his mind-body distinction. Simplicity and distinctness are convertible.

The opposite of clear and distinct employed by Descartes is “obscure and confused”, and it is as much a term of art as clear and distinct. For example, regardless of whether one deals with complex ideas or problems, in Descartes's epistemology they «must be reduced to their simplest component parts... When irrelevant conditions [not being proper component parts] are included, the problem becomes obscure and confused».⁴⁹ Thus, epistemic judgment or outcome, positively or negatively, is understood always relative to the ontology of simple notions or natures. Obscurity and confusion result from inability to apprehend the difference between simple or primitive notions and those that are not.

At times, Descartes distinguishes between obscure and confused, with the preponderance of instances concerning confusion. As mentioned earlier, the human body has, according by Descartes, its own status as simple nature by virtue of the fact that it is the indivisible *union* of the soul or mind and the body. Attempting to fully grasp (by “intuition”, in Descartes's terminology) this type of union by the intellect alone, on the one hand, or by the intellect aided by the imagination, on the other, is bound to fail, the reason being that these ways of understanding are capable of grasping (intuiting) the simple natures of mind as thinking and of body as extension, but fall short woefully of grasping the radically different nature of *union* of mind and body of the human being, as simple or primitive *sui generis*. This is what Descartes considers knowing “obscurely”; it is not a matter of degree or relativity, it is absolute, in other words, knowing *obscurely* is knowing nothing at all. On the other hand, understanding the union of mind and body clearly is possible by means of (the Cartesian notion of) intellect aided by the senses.⁵⁰

pp. 145-154 (or. ed. Bermann-Fischer, Stockholm, 1939, pp. 177-278); E. Cassirer, *Descartes e la regina Cristina de Svezia. Studio sulla storia dello spirito del diciassettesimo secolo*, in G. Salzano (ed.), *Il moderno. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz*, FedOA Press – Federico II University Press, Napoli, 2022, pp. 27-97, in particular pp. 44-52, <<http://www.fedoa.unina.it/id/eprint/13365>>, last accessed 6 October 2025).

⁴⁸ *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, p. 117, note 263.

⁴⁹ T. R. Dika, *Descartes's Method*, cit., pp. 98-99.

⁵⁰ *Ivi*, pp. 337-345. It is to be noted, parenthetically, that by Descartes's own declaration, his use of “intuition” was deliberately different from its ordinary, conventional meaning. (L. Newman, *Descartes on the Method of Analysis*, cit., p. 78, note 23). This may qualify it as a case of intentional conceptual engineering on his part; Spinoza, in turn, may be said to have done something similar in defining intuitive *knowledge* as monism, contrary to Descartes's metaphysics of distinct component parts in the form of simple natures. Consequently, Spinoza's monistic metaphysics presented a diametrically opposite ontology of the union of mind and body: «Spinoza breaks with Descartes' conception of the psychophysical union and deeply changes the ontological statute of men». (Ch. Jaquet, *The Mind-Body Union*, in Y. Y. Melamed (ed.), *A Companion to Spinoza*, Wiley Blackwell, Hoboken, 2021, pp. 296-303, in particular p. 296). As noted earlier, Carnap's new notion of “explication”, too, was intended as conceptual engineering, and shares with Descartes's and Spinoza's notions of intuition that these seemingly categorically epistemological concepts have ontological roots and motivations, in accord with the earlier observation that epistemology supervenes on ontology.



Accurate cognition, in this case, is thus shown to be a function of understanding the simple or primitive nature of the mind-body union, and *mutatis mutandis*, other simple natures or primitive notions.

Considered on its own, “confused” in Descartes means something different from “obscure”. Rather than failing to apprehend simple natures or primitive notions at all, or being unable to differentiate them from irrelevant factors, confusion involves mistakenly assuming a certain simple nature/primitive notion to be the case rather than another, thus confusing them. According to Descartes, this can happen in various ways or situations. For example, the Aristotelian category of substance is fraught with confusion due to the fact that it is conceived as a compound of both matter and form. In Descartes’s ontological framework, this substance consists both of intellectual simple nature and material simple nature, rendering it possible for these two classes to be confused with each other.⁵¹ Something similar could occur in the case of analysis of the human body. As pointed out earlier, the human body is the union of mind and body, with union to be understood in the way described by Descartes, namely, as a (ontologically) distinct simple nature.⁵² However, there is also the primitive notion of body as extension. And these two primitive notions of body could be confused with each other.⁵³ Another scenario for confusion discussed by Descartes involves the experience of bodily pain. It could be perceived as located in a certain part of the body like the foot. Descartes is interested in this experience as illustrating two kinds of primitive notions. Perception of pain as located in a certain part of the body refers to the body alone, or, alternatively, to the mind alone, on the assumption of material simple nature, or intellectual simple nature, respectively. This erroneously applies these primitive notions in a state of affairs where a different primitive notion, namely, the union of mind and body is called for.⁵⁴

Whether we speak of clear and distinct or obscure and confused, simple natures or primitive notions are at the heart of matters. In order to determine whether Vico was echoing Descartes or was engaged in metalinguistic negotiation or dispute, the presence or absence of such notions can serve as the primary criterium.

In § 344, noted earlier, Vico says that «[t]hese proofs (*pruove*) turn out to be luminous and distinct». What are these proofs, and what are they proofs of? As indicated in the context of this statement, they are supposed to be evidence of «providence (*Provvedenza*)» (342). There are diverse views of providence or divine providence in Vico studies.⁵⁵ However, our analysis of Vico’s narrative does not hinge on any particular sense of providence: our purpose is strictly to determine whether Vico has in mind simple natures or primitive notions by proofs that are said to be luminous and distinct. These proofs or aspects become immediately problematic if viewed in terms of simplicity and distinctness: the way things come into being are «often quite far apart and sometimes completely contrary to what men propose», thus, these developments are different from simple natures in not appearing always in the same mode but unpredictably varying in frequency and impact. Secondly, the timing, or «the order in which the things which ought to come into being come into being», of such developments is also indeterminate; they may «now do come into being at their proper times and in their proper places», or they may «defer their

⁵¹ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 333.

⁵² Speaking of “distinct simple natures” is obviously redundant since in Descartes’s metaphysics distinct and simple imply each other.

⁵³ T. R. Dika, *Descartes’s Method*, cit., p. 339.

⁵⁴ *Ivi*, pp. 343-344.

⁵⁵ This author has interpreted it as Vico’s (inchoate but insightful) articulation of what now goes by the term path dependence. (H. Steinke, “Religion, Marriage, and Burial in Vico’s *Scienza nuova*: A Reappraisal”, *Laboratorio dell’ISPF*, XIX (2022): pp. 1-41, in particular pp. 30-39).



coming into being until their time and place»: this «order» of occurrence is anything but simple or primitive. Lastly, Vico speaks of the need to consider counterfactual scenarios, «whether by these occasions, places, and times, it would be possible for different divine benefits to have come into being».

These luminous and distinct proofs or phenomena bear no semblance or relationship to the intellectual, material, or common primitive notions that underlie much of Descartes's ontology and epistemology.

The next occurrence of clear and distinct in *Scienza nuova* is in § 367: «And we will make it possible to see, in each of these clear and distinct (ischiariete, e distinte) fashions, how the founders of gentile humanity... imagined the gods,... discovered languages,... generated the heroes,... founded families,... cities». This statement is part of a short section titled *An Exposition and Partitioning of Poetic Wisdom* (367-368) that reads like an abstract for the lengthy *Book Two. On Poetic Wisdom*. It introduces the major sections or topics of *Book Two*, as well as their order of appearance: poetic metaphysics, poetic logic, poetic morals, poetic economics, poetic politics, poetic physics, poetic cosmography, poetic chronology, and poetic geography.

The repeated and common qualification of “poetic” serves a crucial purpose in Vico’s extended argument throughout *Book Two*. He explained that he used the term in its original or basic meaning in Greek of “making, producing”: «the very men who, in devising things, they created them; hence, they were called poets, which, in Greek, means the same as “creators”» (376). Thus, the achievements of the founders of gentile humanity listed in the abstract, and more fully described and elucidated in *Book Two*, are identified and categorized as human-made, or human-produced. The reason for this characterization is to make explicit its connection with the fundamental assumption underlying his work «that this civil world has certainly been made by men (*è stato fatto dagli uomini*)» (331), and therefore is intelligible, and suited for scientific inquiry, in harmony with the *verum-factum* principle of maker’s knowledge, extended to the social human world.⁵⁶ In the context of the tree metaphor, metaphysics is likened to the trunk, but it is only a part of «POETIC WISDOM» just as are the two major branches, one of which, poetic physics, by mixing metaphors, is likened to a mother of two daughters, poetic chronology and poetic geography. What indicates the family resemblance in this picture is that every member is “poetic”, human-produced.⁵⁷

This (all-too-brief) commentary, however, allows us to answer the query of how Vico employed the clear and distinct standard. He called each of the “poetic” topics “clear and distinct” when they actually could not be further from clear and distinct in the Cartesian sense, in at least two ways: they are first of all subject matters, unlike simple natures or primitive notions, that are replete with complexity and instabilities, as evident in their elucidation in the course of *Book Two*, and, secondly, their “poetic”, that is, human-produced origin and development belies any claim to a fundamental and unchangeable ontology.

We come across the third instance in the section titled *COROLLARIES concerning the principal aspects of this science* sandwiched between *On Poetic Metaphysics* and *Poetic Logic* in *Book Two*, thus (strategically) placed between the trunk and the branches of the metaphorical tree of poetic wisdom (367). It provides a wide-ranging synopsis of Vico’s approach in the form of seven “principal aspects” of his science (385-399). The passage comes at the end of the second principal aspect, dealing with

⁵⁶ *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 110, note 231.

⁵⁷ See also my “«An eternal golden braid». Rhetoric, law, and science in Vico’s *Scienza nuova*”, *Laboratorio dell’ISPF*, XXI (2024): pp. 1-45, in particular pp. 27-35.

authority of various kinds, «taking the term “authority” (*autorità*) in its primary significance as “property”, the sense in which the term is always used in the Law of the Twelve Tables. Hence the term “author” (*autori*) in the Roman civil code retains the sense of someone who has claim over some domain» (386). The passage of interest reads: «the former [the philosophy of authority] with its philosophical proofs renders clear and distinct (rischiara, e distingue) the philological proofs (these three kinds of proofs are all enumerated in the Method)» (390). Thus, it is actually a succinct comment on the more extensive argument of philosophical and philological proofs in *On Method* (350-359); as a comment it is second-order, if not third order, and therefore far removed from primitive notions.

Another occurrence of clear and distinct in *Scienza nuova* takes place in an altogether different context: «However, the grammarians encountered a great number of terms (*vocaboli*) which give confused and indistinct ideas (*idee confuse, & indistinte*) of things, and since they did not know the origins which must have originally formed luminous and distinct ideas (luminose, e distinte), they established as a universal maxim... that human words expressed significations which are conventional» (444). The issue was the origin of certain words or terms. Vico argued against a school of thought that certain words or terms are merely conventional, or essentially arbitrary; this only resulted in confused and indistinct understanding, that is, utter lack of understanding. To the contrary, certain terms do have specific origins, the knowledge of which is illuminating. The context of this passage (443-445) is sociopolitical, concerning heroes and plebs, and, in this context, Vico emphasizes the influence of «heroic language» (443) and «heroic origins preserved with concision within vernacular tongues» (445). Earlier, Vico gave the example of the origin of «the word *lex* [“law”]» (240). Like other Latin words, it originated in «forest life or rustic life», in general, and specifically in the custom of gathering together of acorns. And how did it come to mean “law”? Not by convention: «the necessity of civil nature dictates that *lex* must have been a gathering together of citizens – that is, the public assembly in which the presence of the people was the law». ⁵⁸ The idea of law, at its origin, as collective rule-making is luminous and distinct. Here, as elsewhere, there are no signs of Cartesian ontology.

The next passage to be considered is found in the introduction to *Poetic Morals* in *Book Two*: «Just as the metaphysics of the philosophers, by means of the idea of God, performs its first labor, that of clarifying the human mind (*schiarire la mente umana*), and needs logic in order, by the clarity and distinction of ideas (*chiarezza, e distinzione d’idee*), to inform its own reasoning (*raziocini*)» (502). Vico’s choice of terminology shows that he had in mind not philosophers, epistemology, and reason, in general, but pointedly Cartesianism;⁵⁹ the term *raziocini* is used pejoratively for rationalism, as he did also in another passage at the end of *Book Two*: «One can say that within these myths, the nations have in a rude way and by the human senses described the principles of this world of sciences, a world that later by reasoning (*raziocini*) and maxims has been clarified (*schiarito*) for us by the particular reflection of the learned (*riflessione de’ Dotti*)» (779).⁶⁰ Thus, accurately, clear and distinct ideas are associated with, and given prominence in, Cartesian philosophy. It claimed that «by the clarity and distinction of ideas..., the mind descends to purge the human heart with morals» (502), whereas, contrarily, Vico found that «poetic morals took its start from piety... And religion alone makes the work of virtue

⁵⁸ Vico terms this etymology, trading on the early modern popularity of etymological studies and dictionaries. However, it is rather an inquiry or research into the origins of social or other phenomena; critical comparison with modern etymology would be a category mistake.

⁵⁹ See also my “«An eternal golden braid». Rhetoric, law, and science in Vico’s *Scienza nuova*”, cit., p. 26.

⁶⁰ The «learned (*Dotti*)» are subjected to criticism throughout *Scienza nuova*.



effectual, for philosophy is better at reasoning (*ragionarne*) about virtue» (503). In effect, Vico rejected Descartes's overall philosophical framework with clear and distinct ideas at its core.

The last passage to consider is part of the last section of *Book Three. On the Discovery of the True Homer*, titled *A Rational History of Dramatic and Lyric Poetry*, which reads: «Now, the same metaphysical art of criticism that was applied to the history of the most obscure (*oscurissima*) antiquity... can illuminate and distinguish (illuminar', e distinguere) the history of dramatic and lyric poetry, on which the philologists have written too obscurely and confusedly (oscura, e confusamente)» (905). Vico's “metaphysical” approach, that is, an approach that assesses matters from a high level of analysis, consists of relating the literary genres under discussion (dramatic and lyric poetry) to the scheme of the age of gods, on the one hand, and the age of heroes, on the other, as well as the conflict between nobility and plebs (908, 912), just as he approached «the history of the most obscure antiquity». He saw the characteristics of these times reflected in the different forms and contents of ancient Greek and Roman poetry. It was this hermeneutics, then, not simple natures or primitive notions, that provided clarity and distinctions for a literary taxonomy of poetry.

These few passages have been discussed in some detail because they include the compound term clear and distinct which most obviously harks back to Descartes. However, Vico's substantive arguments in the various cases do not depend or center on clarity and distinctness; the insertion of Cartesian language was therefore intentional. At the same time, it needs to be noted that Vico liberally used also a variety of single terms that are related, positively or negatively, to clarity and distinctness.⁶¹ Taken together, it provides a measure of Vico's engagement with Descartes. The passages analyzed testify that rather than echoing Descartes agreeably, he engaged in metalinguistic negotiation by employing the term clear and distinct in diverse contexts in flagrant opposition to or disregard of Cartesian criteria. It was polemics without being polemical.

Is this significant or minor with respect to Vico's reception of Cartesianism? Briefly stated, by disputing Descartes's simple natures and primitive notions, expressed in clear and distinct ideas, Vico struck at the foundations of Descartes's overall philosophical framework, both ontologically and epistemologically;⁶² when a key structural member of a scaffolding is removed, the entire structure will

⁶¹ See M. Veneziani (ed.), *Concordanze e indici di frequenza dell'edizione Napoli 1744*, Leo S. Olschki editore, Firenze, 1997, s.v. chiaramente, chiarezza, chiaro, confusamente, confusion, confuse, distinguere, distintamente, distinto, distinzione, illuminare, illuminato, illustrare, indistinto, luminoso, oscuramente, oscurare, oscurezza, oscurità, oscuro, rischiarare, schiarire, schiarato.

⁶² Contra E. Nuzzo, *Die Logiken des Unmöglichen und des Notwendigen. Vico und die Entzifferung der „sagenhaften Zeiten“ zu Beginn des 18. Jahrhunderts*, in M. Beetz – G. Cacciatore (eds.), *Die Hermeneutik im Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, Böhlau Verlag, Cologne, 2000, pp. 287-309. Nuzzo states: «Unsere These lautet, daß Vicos Denken... auch prägnante begriffliche Elemente „cartesianischer“ Prägung auf der „konstruktiven“ Ebene übernahm», and: «Es ist ziemlich leicht, da naheliegend, und deshalb weitgehend überflüssig, über Vico und die Entwicklungslinien Cartesianischer Herkunft oder Prägung – im Hinblick auf das Wissen von der Geschichte – im Sinne vollständiger oder starker Gegensätze zu sprechen. Die von mir vertretene These zielt dagegen auf the Abtragung einer gewissen „Dankesschuld“ Vicos dem „Cartesianismus“ gegenüber» (*ivi*, pp. 292, 296-297). Nuzzo highlights Vico's thinking of the development of certain social order, as gradually from the simple to the complex (e.g., from “families” to “cities” to “nations” to the “human race”), as adoption of the Cartesian concept of simplicity: «Während Vico mit diesem Vorbild eindeutig die „Cartesianischen“ Merkmale der „Universalität“ und „Einfachheit“ des Wahren teilt, fügt er mit einer ganz ihm eigentümlichen Haltung... jenen Merkmalen dasjenige der „Diffusivität“ hinzu» (*ivi*, p. 304). Contrarily, this author argues that Vico repudiated Cartesian simplicity (simple natures, primitive notions, clear and distinct ideas), through metalinguistic negotiation, with radical consequences for Cartesian metaphysics and methodology. Vico's antagonism toward Cartesian metaphysics may therefore be even more profound than often acknowledged.



fail.⁶³

We next turn to Vico's use of "modifications of the mind" and "occasions" with the same exegetic approach that involves both exploration of the source(s) and the way(s) in which Vico referred to them.

5. Modifications of the Mind and Occasionalism

We might begin the discussion by reaffirming that Vico borrowed or appropriated the expression "modifications of the mind" from Nicolas Malebranche, in particular his work titled *The Search After Truth (De la Recherche de la Vérité (1674-1675))*.⁶⁴ Should this be understood on Vico's part as belonging to «an extension to history of Malebranche's philosophy against adversaries that the latter had not taken on»?⁶⁵

For an accurate comparison of modifications of the mind in Malebranche and Vico, it needs to be determined what is meant by "modifications", on the one hand, and "mind", on the other hand. As the subtitle of Malebranche's work promised, it treated «the nature of man's mind».⁶⁶ Malebranche presents his philosophy of mind in contradistinction to Descartes's ontology of mind. Malebranche agreed with Descartes on a general or generic level on the mind as a simple, indivisible substance, and the need for a method to help avoid error. However, in more specific aspects, Malebranche rejected key Cartesian concepts, such as clarity and distinctness as guarantors of certainty in the face of radical doubt.⁶⁷ Malebranche's formulation of the mind as a thinking substance seems to echo Descartes, however, in reality, Malebranche meant something entirely different: the mind is a pure intellect «only in the very minimal sense of a passive capacity to be affected by God's efficacious ideas».⁶⁸ In other words, «it has no active, native faculty for attending to... objects of thought».⁶⁹ And, significantly, precisely because the locus is God, knowledge of the physical world in logical ways is possible, unlike Descartes's purely "psychological" approach centered on self-knowledge or self-consciousness.

It is also necessary to attend to Malebranche's own way of thinking about modifications of the mind. In *The Search After Truth* he stated: «we can discover the modifications of which the mind is capable.

⁶³ Cf. M. De Benedetto, "What conceptual engineering can learn from the history of philosophy of science: Healthy externalism and metasemantic plasticity", *HOPOS*, 14, 1 (Spring 2024): pp. 1-24, in particular p. 16: «to revise a theoretical term... requires a radical modification of the whole theory, as the meaning of the theoretical term is (at least partially) holistically determined by the central laws of the theory».

⁶⁴ A. Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism*, tr. by C. Lancellotti, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2021, p. 413. Malebranche's work was known to Vico in its Latin version *De inquirendo veritate libri sex*. (E. Nuzzo, "Ai limiti dell'ortodossia cristiana. "Principi di semplicità" e ordine naturale e storico in Malebranche e Vico", *Laboratorio dell'ISPF*, XIV (2017): pp. 1-76, in particular p. 7, note 3).

⁶⁵ A. Del Noce, *The Problem of Atheism*, cit., p. 399. Another Vico scholar who considers Vico to a great extent a follower of Malebranche is Gustavo Costa, for which see G. Costa, *Malebranche y Vico*, tr. by J. M. Sevilla, *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, 9/10 (1998): pp. 75-87.

⁶⁶ Th. M. Lennon, *Malebranche and Method*, in St. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 8-29, in particular p. 8.

⁶⁷ *Ivi*, pp. 15-25; N. Tolley, *Malebranche on the Soul*, in St. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, cit., pp. 31-57, in particular pp. 31-32.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 33-34, 37. Malebranche uses the terms "reason, soul, human mind, intellect" interchangeably (*ivi*, p. 33).

⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 37. See also J. Walsh, *Malebranche on Mind*, in R. Copenhaver (ed.), *Philosophy of Mind in the Early Modern and Modern Ages*, Routledge, London, 2019, pp. 107-133, in particular p. 124, emphasis original: «According to Malebranche, our access to ideas is mediated by God. Indeed, human minds cannot even be said to *have* ideas. Rather, we *see* ideas in God»; A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, London, Routledge, 2003, pp. 56-57. Vico refers to this part of Malebranche's philosophy of mind, without naming Malebranche, in § 696: «the lofty truth which the natural theology of the metaphysicians later demonstrated... namely, the truth that ideas come to man from God».



If we had never felt pleasure or pain... If a man had never eaten a melon, or seen red or blue, he... would never discover distinctly whether or not it [the soul] was capable of these sensations or modifications».⁷⁰ Thus, it is the mind that experiences these sensations or sensible qualities, and as such they are modes of mind, or belong to the mind without ontological status of their own.⁷¹ Thus, in Malebranche's philosophy of mind, it is not any supposed changes in mental abilities or the brain itself that comprise its modifications but rather the experience of sensations of all kinds.

The expression modifications of the mind as intended by Malebranche lets us conclude some basic notions: (1) the expression is used subjectively, that is, it is the mind that undergoes modification; (2) «the nature of man's mind» is essentially “passive” in its receptiveness to ideas whose source is God; and (3) the modifications are at the level of sensations experienced.

There are just three explicit occurrences of the expression in *Scienza nuova*: the modifications of our own human mind (*le modificazioni della nostra medesima Mente Umana*) (331); the modifications of our own human mind (*le modificazioni della nostra medesima Mente Umana*) (349), and the modifications of the mind of the one who meditates upon it (*le modificazioni della propria mente di chi la medita*) (374).

As will become apparent, Vico is using this expression in the same context in the three places. The context is the beginnings of the «world of nations—that is, the civil world (Mondo delle Nazioni, o sia *Mondo Civile*)» (331). In each instance, Vico points out «that this civil world has certainly been made by men» (331, 349, 374). It is possible to understand its structure and the way it works because it is the product or creation of «our own human mind», as he emphatically phrases it. In this first passage under consideration, in the section titled *On the Principles of Book One*, he also identifies what he considered “modifications”: certain “principles” of the civil world which first of all consisted of three fundamental human customs or institutions: religion, marriage, and burial of the dead, adding: «Accordingly we have taken these three eternal and universal customs as three first principles of this science (*Principj di questa Scienza*)» (333).⁷² The rest of the *Principles* is taken up by an elaboration (334-337). These modifications of the mind, therefore, are neither internal states of mind, nor psychological phenomena, but “worldly” institutions outside the human mind.⁷³

The next occurrence is in the section titled *On Method of Book One*. It occurs in a subsection that Vico calls «the second principal aspect» of his «science» (346-349). This major part of Vico's study involves «a strict analysis of human thoughts about the human necessities or advantages of social life, which are the two perennial sources of the natural law of the gentile peoples» (347). This topicality of social life and natural law frames this particular occurrence of «the modifications of our own human mind» (349), thus encompassing more than just religion, marriage, and burial of the dead. In fact, Vico raises the matter to a diachronic level by relating the modifications of the mind to the «ideal eternal history upon which the histories of all the nations run their temporal course» (349). And as indispensable part of «this entire eternal history», in this subsection he consistently focuses on «those earliest origins»

⁷⁰ N. Tolley, *Malebranche on the Soul*, cit., p. 45.

⁷¹ Malebranche in *The Search After Truth*: «Therefore, pain, heat, color and all other sensible qualities belong to the mind» (ivi, p. 46). See also J. Walsh, *Malebranche on Mind*, cit., pp. 109, 114, 116.

⁷² *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 110 n. 232, comments on Vico's *scienza*: «Readers will want to look for both genuine continuities and deep differences between Vico's use of the term *scienza* and the connotations of present-day “science.”». For a defense of Vico in modern scientific terms, see my “«An eternal golden braid». Rhetoric, law, and science in Vico's *Scienza nuova*”, cit., pp. 6-42.

⁷³ “Worldly” in the sense suggested by H. Cappelen, *Fixing Language*, cit., pp. 137-147, namely, the social world.



(346), «their starting points» (347), «when and where those human thoughts came into being» (348), and «the fashion in which this world comes into being» (349). The genitival construction of the expression has, therefore, an objective sense: the modifications are «the things of the nations (*le cose delle Nazioni*) that are reasoned about by this science» (348), including institutions and concomitant ideologies.

The third occurrence of the modifications of the mind, in the section titled *On Poetic Metaphysics* of *Book Two*, reads like a continuation of the argument of §§ 346 to 349 to the effect that it was «the earliest men» rather than «philosophers» who were the «authors», or originators, of the «nations», or the civil world. Now, in this later section, Vico refers to the «earliest men» as «stupid, insensate, horrific beasts», and that «philosophers and philologists» should have recognized this (possibly distasteful) fact rather than to think in terms of «the [purported] wisdom of gentle antiquity» (374). Vico argues that it was these «giants... in proper significance of the term... (“giant”... signifies “pious, venerable, brilliant men”), who, by divination, founded religions for the gentiles». For Vico this was a case-in-point that «this world of nations has certainly been made by men», which is just another way of saying that «it is within these modifications [of the mind] that one must look to find the beginnings of that world». As seen earlier, here, too, the sense of the genitive is objective since the modification of the mind is the religion(s) practiced by the non-Hebrew cultures and the practice of divination.

We are now in a position to state Vico's appropriation of Malebranche's expression as a case of metalinguistic negotiation since it contravenes all three characteristics of Malebranche's concept outlined earlier: (1) the genitive of modifications of the mind is objective; the modifications constitute the *cose*, the institutions and related ideological frameworks of the civil world ; (2) the nature of man's mind is not passive, but active in that «the world of nations» or «the civil world» is made by men, and (3) they have nothing to do with mental states *qua* mental states or cognitive psychology *qua* cognitive psychology but with the categorically different realm of the civil world.⁷⁴

Malebranche's philosophy of mind, and specifically the mind's “passivity” by virtue of its dependence on God for its ideas, must be viewed or understood within the larger context of Malebranche's philosophy which involves “occasionalism”. Occasionalism, in turn, concerns the meaning of causality and causal relations in general, a hotly debated issue in early modern philosophy. Malebranche asserted programmatically that «there is only one true cause, because there is only one true God; that the nature or power of each thing is nothing but the will of God; that all natural causes are not true causes, but only occasional causes».⁷⁵ The principle that God is the only true cause extends therefore beyond the realm of human thoughts to any and all realms, including the sphere of sensations. When the mind experiences sensations, such as the ones referred to earlier, it is actually God that brings them about.⁷⁶ For example, when I will or decide to move my arm, this is merely the “occasion” for God to

⁷⁴ Cf. R. Carbone, *Malebranche, Locke, Vico: momenti della riflessione sulla ragione universale*, in M. Cambi – R. Carbone – A. Carrano – E. Massimilla (eds.), *Ragione, razionalità e razionalizzazione in età moderna e contemporanea*, Federico II University Press – FedOA Press, Napoli, 2020, pp. 191-218, in particular p. 217: «Il progetto di Vico sembra dunque divergere notevolmente rispetto a quello malebranchiano, in primo luogo nella misura in cui fa valere il principio secondo cui conosciamo a fondo solo ciò che abbiamo fatto noi stessi, principio che egli rinnova e rielabora individuando nello studio del processo storico in cui gli uomini agiscono la base di quella conoscenza che è alla loro portata – seppure non viene costruita senza fatica».

⁷⁵ Quoted in A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, cit., p. 97, emphasis original; J. Walsh, *Malebranche on Mind*, cit., pp. 112-114; T. Schmaltz, *Nicolas Malebranche*, in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), <plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/malebranche/>, no pagination, Section 4. Occasionalism, last accessed 6 October 2025.

⁷⁶ A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, cit., p. 110.



actually move my arm; God is the only one with the power to cause any event, including the physical motion of bodies or objects.⁷⁷

By his doctrine of occasionalism, or more positively stated, the doctrine of true causality, Malebranche the Oratorian intends to ward off «attributing to the creature too high a degree of independence of its Creator», inevitably leading to paganism and idolatry.⁷⁸ This account is underpinned by Malebranche's doctrine of “continuous creation”.⁷⁹ Thus, occasionalism is both a philosophical and a theological project for Malebranche.⁸⁰

Turning now to Vico's “occasionalism”, or rather his metalinguistic negotiation of it, in *Scienza nuova*, an explicit reference to the philosophical notion is found in the introduction to *Book Two. On Poetic Wisdom* (361-363). He begins the book in an antithetical fashion, that is, highlighting first what it is not.⁸¹ The methodology he objects to is what he calls «the vanity of the learned (*boria de' Dotti*)» (361). Here it consisted in the fundamental error of seeing in the worldviews and practices of the ancient «gentile nations (Gentili Nazioni)» (362) exemplars and precursors of their own philosophies, the so-called «recondite wisdom (*Sapienza Riposta*)» (363). To the contrary, the worldviews of early civilizations consisted of «commonplace wisdom (*Sapienza Volgare*)» (363), which is categorically as different from the former as, metaphorically, the senses are from the intellect. Vico here refers to intellect (*l'intelletto*) pejoratively as pertaining to the «philosophers» that he mentions half a dozen times in this short introductory section since they misconstrued the nature of the early civil world (*Mondo Civile*) (362).

At the same time, it could be said, historically, that without the initial «commonplace wisdom» there would be no later «recondite wisdom»: «it will be shown that as much as the poets had sensed concerning commonplace wisdom, the philosophers later understood concerning recondite wisdom» (363). Vico restated the same observation in metaphorical language, and related it to occasionalism: «the human mind does not understand a thing (non intenda cosa) for which there is not some impetus (alcun motivo) from the senses, what metaphysicians today call the “occasion”» (363).⁸² Two elementary but essential points stand out in Vico's argument leading up to Malebranche's occasionalism. First, the theological dimension is missing from the process of «recondite wisdom» developing out of «commonplace wisdom»: it is the «philosophers» who used the «commonplace wisdom» as the “occasion”, or the

⁷⁷ S. Peppers-Bates, *Nicolas Malebranche: Freedom in an Occasionalist World*, Continuum, London, 2009, p. 9.

⁷⁸ A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, cit., pp. 97, 109. Cf. A. R. Platt, *One True Cause: Causal Powers, Divine Concurrence, and the Seventeenth-Century Revival of Occasionalism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020, p. 369: «His goals are, in part, theological: He uses occasionalism in order to argue for theological conclusions. (For example, he argues that it follows from occasionalism that we should love and obey God alone)».

⁷⁹ A. Pyle, *Malebranche*, cit., pp. 112: «For a body to continue to exist, God must continue to will its existence: creation and conservation are one and the same for God»; see also T. Ryan, *Bayle and Occasionalism: The Argument from Continuous Creation*, in W. van Bunge – H. Bots (eds.), *Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), le philosophe de Rotterdam: Philosophy, Religion and Reception*, Brill, Leiden, 2008, pp. 33-50, in particular pp. 37-43; A. R. Platt, *One True Cause*, cit., pp. 330-341; T. M. Schmaltz, *Continuous Creation and Cartesian Occasionalism in Physics*, in M. Favaretti Camposampiero – M. Priarolo – E. Scribano (eds.), *Occasionalism: From Metaphysics to Science*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2018, pp. 41-60; S. Lee, *Conservation as Continuous Creation: Just like Creation but not Necessarily Recreation*, in M. Favaretti Camposampiero – M. Priarolo – E. Scribano (eds.), *Occasionalism: From Metaphysics to Science*, cit., pp. 61-83.

⁸⁰ A. R. Platt, *One True Cause*, cit., p. 369, calls Malebranche's occasionalism «philosophical theology».

⁸¹ For Vico's regular (rhetorical) use of antitheses, see my “«An eternal golden braid»: Rhetoric, law, and science in Vico's *Scienza nuova*”, cit., pp. 12-13.

⁸² *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 126, note 9: «The reference is to Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715) and his followers».

“impetus”, for their development of «recondite wisdom». Secondly, it is only in some vague sense that one could argue causality in this context, possibly as some debatable form of *causae formales*, however, certainly not as true, immediate causes. In view of these radical discrepancies, we are led to conclude that we are dealing here with another case of metalinguistic negotiation on Vico’s part.

This line of thought finds support in some of the more specific ways in which the «philosophers» are said to receive or appropriate the «*Sapienza Volgare*» in the language of “occasions”. This introductory section of *Book Two* identifies myths as source material: «The third cause was occasions... which these myths offer to the philosophers... for conducting inquiry into... the highest things in philosophy» (362, also 37, 901). A similar non-causal use of our term is used later in *Poetic Economics*: «The poor reception of this tradition [that the Fathers must have been monarchical rulers in their families] gave occasion to an error to all political theorists» (522).

Of the twentytwo occurrences of the term occasion(s) in *Scienza nuova*, more than half refer to events to which individuals or people reacted, as «occasions» (13, 26, 59, 146, 307, 344 (twice), 420, 526, 587, 620, 636, 658, 664); additionally, «human necessities and advantages» that inspired action on the part of men are called «occasions» (7, 69, 734).

This discussion of Malebranche’s occasionalism begs the question of its positional value: is it just an (admittedly significant, but not necessarily essential) aspect of his philosophy, or is it a linchpin of his entire philosophy? In Steven Nadler’s view, shared by other Malebranche readers, «Occasionalism is a grand system that informed Malebranche’s thinking on a host of philosophical and theological issues».⁸³ In this perspective, Vico’s metalinguistic negotiation of occasionalism has far-reaching consequences: from its rejection, rejection of Malebranche’s entire philosophy follows *ipso facto*.

We will now turn to Vico’s use of Spinoza’s concept of «the order of ideas following the order of things».

6. The Order of Ideas and the Order of Things

The expression in question is found in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, Part II, Proposition 7: «The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things».⁸⁴ Vico’s version of Spinoza’s original statement in *Scienza nuova*, Axiom 64 in *Book One*, reads: «The order of ideas must proceed in accordance with the order of things» (238), which certainly could be read intertextually as a faithful, albeit not verbatim, copy of Spinoza’s precept.

Before engaging with these statements in detail, they provide us with an occasion for a brief methodological and hermeneutical reflection. Ricardo Caporali, in a study of Vico in relation to Spinoza, raised a relevant general objection to the methodology advocated in this study: «As long as we dwell solely on the explicit references to Spinoza in Vico’s works... we can not get beyond direct, and essentially *banal*, comparisons».⁸⁵ Thus, this critique targets the very concept of metalinguistic negotiation in that the latter focuses on explicit referents of a “linguistic” nature, that is, specific terms

⁸³ St. Nadler, *Malebranche on Causation*, in St. Nadler (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Malebranche*, cit., pp. 113-138, p. 136.

⁸⁴ O. Koistinen, *Spinoza on Mind*, in M. Della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018, pp. 274-294, in particular p. 285: «E2p7... has deserved an enormous amount of attention in Spinoza scholarship».

⁸⁵ R. Caporali, “Vico e Spinoza moderni eccentrici”, *Studi Filosofici*, XXXIX (2016): pp. 113-126, in particular p. 113, abstract, and p. 114, emphasis original: «il senso del rapporto appare infatti destinato a esaurirsi rapidamente, nella direzione di una contrapposizione frontale e tutto sommato *banale*».



and expressions used. However, as the term suggests, it is also *meta*-linguistic; it is not about semantics, arguments about words themselves, rather, it grapples with the underlying ideas and concepts that are attributed to the language, and engages in their examination which may result in disagreements and disputes on several levels of analysis.

Furthermore, in the specific case of Spinoza's and Vico's language before us, any attempted comparison of Vico and Spinoza becomes quickly a study with results that are anything but obvious or self-evident. This is due to the fact that there is no single interpretation or understanding of the meaning of the variables and relations (order, connections, process, ideas, things) on either side of the equation. On the one hand, there is no consensus on whether Vico followed Spinoza or not. Ricardo Caporali is not the only scholar affirming Vico's debt to Spinoza on this particular subject; others include, for example, Jonathan Israel and Olivier Remaud.⁸⁶ But there are at the same time other voices that dispute Vico's adoption of Spinoza's precept.⁸⁷ And, on the other hand, Spinoza scholarship itself is divided on the interpretation of E2p7, a topic which will be taken up next. So, in the end, a study of the two thinkers cannot not only not dispense with a close comparison of their shared language but, in fact, must make it its starting point, and the fulcrum of their interpretative frameworks.

For our argumentative purposes, we will focus on two particular discrepant proposals, the first of which is the “psychophysical identity theory”, and the other, the “epistemological interpretation”, focusing on bare essentials to facilitate comparison. In the psychophysical identity theory, there rules parallelism between “ideas” and “things”.⁸⁸ The things referred to are Spinoza's extended bodies distinguished by motion and rest. The world as an absolute whole, or “nature” in Spinoza's philosophical parlance, of which the physical universe in the modern astrophysical sense is only a (proper) part, is the result of a so-called infinite hierarchical order of ever more complicated composite individual bodies. In this metaphysics, there are motions that are communicated among the parts or bodies – at different levels of individuation, as well as subject to certain rules and conditions; however, nature, the absolute whole, is immutable, which is the hallmark of Spinoza's monism.⁸⁹ Psychophysical identity holds that Spinoza's precept means parallelism of ideas and human bodies, in other words, that «mental events are identical to bodily events».⁹⁰ or stated more specifically, that thought consists of «a chain of causal influences whose links are the complex extended individual corresponding to the human body in different states of

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 118; J. I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 669; O. Remaud, “Vico Lector de Espinosa (Sobre la reprensión de la *Etica*, II, 7 en la *Scienza nuova* [1744] § 238)”, tr. by M. F. Pérez-Alors – J. A. Marín-Casanova, *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, 7/8 (1997): pp. 191-206; Id., “Vico et l'idée d'une science compare”, *Noesis*, 8 (2005): §§ 1-15 and Notes, § 2. With respect to the view of Spinoza's influence on Vico in general, see also J. C. Morrison, “Vico and Spinoza”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 41, 1 (January-March 1980): pp. 49-68, including a bibliography on page 49, note 2.

⁸⁷ For example, H. S. Stone, *Vico's Cultural History: The Production and Transmission of Ideas in Naples*, Brill, Leiden, 1997, pp. 302-303; St. Otto, “Contextualité scientifique et convertibilité philosophique”, *Noesis*, 8 (2005): §§ 1-26 and Notes, §§ 3-4; A. Sangiacomo, “«Historia sincera»: ermeneutica dell'immaginazione in Spinoza e Vico”, *Bollettino del Centro di studi vichiani* (hereafter *BCSV*), XLI, 1 (2011): pp. 43-73, in particular p. 66, note 36; A. Montano, *Ontologia e Storia: Vico versus Spinoza*, Bibliopolis, Napoli, 2015, pp. 91-95.

⁸⁸ This account follows R. B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 2002, pp. 121-136.

⁸⁹ It is not our task to debate Spinoza's monism, for which see M. Gabriel, *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt*, 2nd ed., Ullstein, Berlin, 2013; Id., *Why the World Does Not Exist*, tr. by G. S. Moss, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2015; Id., *Perché non esiste il mondo*, tr. by S. Maestrone, Bompiani, Milano, 2015.

⁹⁰ O. Koistinen, *Spinoza on Mind*, cit., p. 287.



motion and rest».⁹¹ Thus, under this view, both the ideas and things have to do with phenomena internal to humans, physiology, on the one hand, and psychology, on the other, and in that sense, this view is unitary.

The "epistemological interpretation", comparatively, takes a "dualist" turn.⁹² The ideas in question are in the human mind, but the things in question are material things outside the mind.⁹³ The fundamental points in asserting that «[t]he order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things» are threefold: first of all, that there is «a single natural causal order that applies equally to all things, human as well as non-human».⁹⁴ secondly, «actual ideas cannot exist without the things that are their objects».⁹⁵ and, thirdly, "order" and "connection" imply causal relations on the part of both external material objects and ideas of them in the mind.⁹⁶ To illustrate the epistemological approach, one might start by saying that «there needs to be a horse corresponding to the idea of a horse», in other words it is indispensable «being in empirical contact with a horse».⁹⁷ This topicalization of (material) things played a key role in Spinoza's refutation of Descartes's skepticism.⁹⁸ Despite fundamental differences with the psychophysical identity theory, there is commonality in that the epistemological interpretation, too, has as its subject matter what we now might label cognitive psychology, and Spinoza termed "the order and connection of ideas".⁹⁹

Turning now to Vico's Axiom 64 (238), the first observation to be made is that it is not a stand-alone statement but part of a grouping comprising Axioms 64 to 68 (238-245). Each axiom centers on the notion and presence of "order". The type(s) of order referred to will help inform whether Vico is following Spinoza: first forests, later lodges, thereafter villages, then cities, finally academies (Axiom 65 (239)); first gathering of acorns, later gathering together of vegetables, then gathering together of citizens, finally the gathering together of letters (Axiom 65 (240)); first what is necessary, later what is advantageous, then what is convenient, later still what is pleasurable, subsequently what is luxurious, finally wasting their substance (Axiom 66 (241)); first crude, later strict, subsequently benign, then refined, finally dissolute (Axiom 67 (242)); first the huge and gullish, later the magnanimous and haughty, thereafter the valorous and just, later the morose, the reflective, finally the dissolute, the impudent (Axiom 68 (243)); first man to obey, second republics, third popular liberty, fourth introducing monarchy, fifth establishing it, sixth overturning it (Axiom 68 (244)); springing forth, progress, maturity, decadence, end (Axiom 68 (245)).

⁹¹ R. B. Brandom, *Tales of the Mighty Dead*, cit., p. 134.

⁹² O. Koistinen, *Spinoza on Mind*, cit., p. 293: «Even though Spinoza was a substance monist, he was a dualist of a very peculiar sort».

⁹³ This account follows O. Koistinen, *Spinoza on Mind*, cit., pp. 285-288; D. Perler, *Spinoza on Skepticism*, in M. Della Rocca (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, cit., pp. 220-239, in particular pp. 221-233.

⁹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 234.

⁹⁵ O. Koistinen, *Spinoza on Mind*, cit., p. 285.

⁹⁶ A. Montano, *Ontologia e Storia*, cit., p. 92, note 218: «nella concezione dello Spinoza pensiero ed estensione sono attribuiti di una stessa sostanza, che può essere considerata ora sotto un aspetto ora sotto un altro».

⁹⁷ D. Perler, *Spinoza on Skepticism*, cit., p. 228.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, pp. 220-222; U. Renz, *The Explainability of Experience: Realism and Subjectivity in Spinoza's Theory of the Human Mind*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2018, p. 83.

⁹⁹ In the view of T. Armaner, *The order of ideas: Vico and Spinoza*, in M. Riccio – M. Sanna – L. Yilmaz (eds.), *The Vico Road, Nuovi percorsi vichiani*, Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, Roma, 2016, pp. 93-99, p. 94, «the relationship between an idea and a thing, in Spinozan context between a mind and a body, is a representational one». This, also, falls under cognitive psychology.



As Vico himself points out at the end of the section, the sense of order that he has in mind is temporal: «all nations run their temporal course (*corrono in tempo*) (245)». The passage also depicts what he means by ideas and things. The things, consistently, refer to human activities, customs and institutions, in short, the social dimension, and even more specifically, «civil nature (natura civile)» (240). At different levels of analysis, these include villages, cities, academies, the familial state, the civil state, republics, popular liberty, monarchy. Vico matches up the civil institutions, the *cose*, with the ideas or characteristics said to prevail in the respective peoples, such as the huge and gullish, magnanimous and haughty, valorous and just, reflective, and, finally, dissolute, respectively (243).¹⁰⁰

This short section in *Book One* actually reads like an abstract of *Book Four. On the Course That the Nations Make*. It closely resembles, but is not limited to, the section titled *Three Kinds of Authority* (942-946); the temporal order, also, is described in more detail in *Three Sects of Times* (975-979).¹⁰¹ Social, political, and juridical “things” and “ideas” are interwoven throughout *Book Four*.

Comparing Vico’s “social” view of the order of ideas and things with Spinoza’s sense of individual psychophysicalism or epistemology, as the case may be, inseparable from his monistic metaphysics, leads to view Vico’s formulation as metalinguistic negotiation.¹⁰² In doing so, he, in effect, swept aside Spinoza’s entire philosophical structure. Vico’s recourse to metalinguistic negotiation may also shed light on his decision not to include in *Scienza nuova* his *Reprehension of the Metaphysics of René Descartes, Benedetto Spinoza and John Locke*.¹⁰³ On a rhetorical level, *Reprehension* is argumentative; Vico takes up specific ideas of the three philosophers and marshals counter-arguments to them. These ideas are not randomly chosen but relate to the issue of man’s free will or lack thereof.¹⁰⁴ This polemical approach, however, required Vico, in the first place, to enter the philosophical debate on the terms established and defined by Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke, respectively, which meant allowing them to frame the discourse.

Throughout *Scienza nuova*, Vico rejected explanations on the basis of what he called chance and fate, as well as philosophies he judged as implicitly grounded in them, including the legal philosophies of Grotius, von Pufendorf, and Selden (394-397). However, he did not engage in the type of arguing that characterizes *Reprehension* which revolves around various metaphysical notions topicalized by Descartes, Spinoza, and Locke. In contrast to *Reprehension*, by means of metalinguistic negotiation he did engage with key early modern philosophers, but at a level of analysis that called into question the very *metametaphysical* presuppositions underlying such notions, be it Descartes’s clear and distinct ideas, Malebranche’s modifications of the mind and occasionalism, or Spinoza’s monistic order and connection of ideas and things. Having disproven their existence or relevance in «the order of human

¹⁰⁰ A. Montano, *Ontologia e Storia*, cit., pp. 92-93; St. Otto, “Contextualité scientifique et convertibilité philosophique”, cit., § 4, views the ideas as referring to philosophical ideas, or «philosophy» in Vico’s terminology, and the things as referring to human facts or deeds, or Vico’s «philology».

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 93: «Non è considerata in rapporto al piano metafisico, ma a quello storico»; cf. H. S. Stone, *Vico’s Cultural History*, cit., p. 303: «He used Spinoza’s proposition to summarize and introduce his ideas that our mental concepts are the spontaneous result of an historical process».

¹⁰² A. Sangiacomo, “«Historia sincera»”, cit., p. 66, note 36, argues that Vico’s wording is radically different from Spinoza’s, in saying «must proceed (de procedere)», as normativity, rather than «is», as identity.

¹⁰³ D. Ph. Verene, *Vico’s Reprehension of the Metaphysics of René Descartes, Benedetto Spinoza and John Locke*, in T. I. Bayer - D. Ph. Verene (eds.), *Giambattista Vico: Keys to the New Science. Translations, Commentaries, and Essays*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2009, pp. 179-198, in particular pp. 179-182.

¹⁰⁴ This is elucidated in R. Evangelista, *Freedom and necessity. A ‘reprehension’ of Spinoza’s metaphysics in Scienza nuova* 1730, in M. Riccio – M. Sanna – L. Yilmaz (eds.), *The Vico Road*, cit., pp. 81-91.



things» (239), it was no longer necessary to further engage with them on their own terms: inclusion of *Reprehension* in *Scienza nuova* would have been not only superfluous but also counterproductive.

Obviously, Vico scholarship displays a significant hermeneutical fault line in this context. As mentioned earlier, there are views that portray Vico as following Descartes; others, Vico's adherence to Malebranche, and still others, Vico's indebtedness to Spinoza. In view of their incommensurability, they cannot all be the case. This study, on the other hand, has explicated (in the ordinary language sense of the word, rather than the Carnapian sense) Vico's rebuttal of all three philosophers through metalinguistic negotiation.

This rebuttal is directly related to Vico's claim of his work as being "scientific". As pointed out earlier in discussing Vico and Descartes, Descartes's philosophy involving clear and distinct ideas turned out "not to be scientifically serious"¹⁰⁵ The same could now be said of Malebranche and Spinoza.¹⁰⁶

To further gain purchase on Vico's approach, we will need to move up a level of analysis or abstraction. At this higher level of analysis it is possible to see how metalinguistic negotiation fits into the form and content of *Scienza nuova* overall. This inquiry is needed because *Scienza nuova* consists of two major constituent parts or components as its own title advertises: *Principles of the New Science of Giambattista Vico about the Common Nature of the Nations*.¹⁰⁷ The subject matter itself is «the common nature of the nations», however, additionally, and separately, the title announces an exposition of a new science-based approach to the subject matter. The thesis which is discussed next is that Vico approaches these two distinct topics or areas of investigation in two different ways, or in two different perspectives.

¹⁰⁵ For more recent views on the relationship between philosophy and science, see P. West, "Philosophy is Not a Science: Margaret Macdonald on the Nature of Philosophical Theories", *HOPOS*, 14, 2 (Fall 2024): pp. 527-553.

¹⁰⁶ *Contra J. I. Israel, Spinoza, Life and Legacy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford. 2023, pp. 385-408. Israel gives an account of the Spinoza-Boyle debate, both at the first-order level, that is, of specific experiments, and also, at the second-order level, of "philosophy of experiments". It is the latter level that is (briefly) considered here. Israel points out repeatedly that Spinoza subordinates experiments to metaphysics: «how readily our sense deceive us, that feed human error causing the philosophical and general scientific usefulness of experimental results to be often marred and usually limited» (p. 399); «demanding the research scientist's zeal be buttressed by philosophical insight, critical scrutiny, rigorous inference, directness and a coherent framework of reference» (p. 401); «certain key features of Spinoza's worldview, aspects of truth he deems characteristic of and inherent in everything – his rigid universal determinism, the interconnectedness of all things, and the principle, much beloved by Einstein, that... [the order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things], guaranteeing the accuracy of mathematical recording of natural processes—could never be confirmed or refuted by any experiment» (pp. 403-404). Thus, it is Spinoza's monistic metaphysics on which everything else supervenes. In this respect, Spinoza and Boyle were talking past each other. As P. R. Anstey, *The Philosophy of Robert Boyle*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 153, notes: «It must be re-emphasised that Boyle shied away from metaphysical disputes». For more on the Spinoza-Boyle dispute(s), see E. Guillemeau, *Le statut de l'expérience dans la discussion entre Spinoza et Boyle sur la nature du salpêtre*, in P.-F. Moreau – A. Sangiacomo – L. Simonutti (eds.), *Spinoza en Angleterre. Sciences et réflexions sur les sciences*, Brepols, Turnhout, 2022, pp. 150-167; St. Harrop, "Essence, Experiment, and Underdetermination in the Spinoza-Boyle Correspondence", *HOPOS*, 12, 2 (Fall 2022): pp. 447-483.

¹⁰⁷ *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 2.



7. Perspectives in *Scienza nuova*

The two perspectives in question have been termed “prospective externalism” and “retrospective internalism”, respectively.¹⁰⁸ They are fundamentally different perspectives that are only imperfectly, or obliquely, captured in their nomenclature: “externalism” makes the topic or subject matter the focus or center of attention, such that the discourse and debate revolve around it; it might be properly considered externalist by virtue of approaching the subject from the outside, as it were.¹⁰⁹ In contrast, internalism is not concerned with engaging with the subject matter itself, but with the views and understanding that others have of relevant subject matters.¹¹⁰ The term internalism is not entirely infelicitous in that it may involve getting inside the minds of others, metaphorically speaking. The difference between these two perspectives is akin to first-order *versus* second-order discourses.¹¹¹

The characterization of externalism as prospective and internalism as retrospective should not be read necessarily as time-related modalities, since both externalism and internalism could have to do with contemporary or past topics, respectively. Externalism is prospective in being an “outlook” of getting a particular subject right, whereas internalism is retrospective, as has been noted, as not being concerned with this objective; rather, it endeavors – unjudgmentally, non-critically – to make sense of the (linguistic) behavior under scrutiny. Thus, these two adjectives reinforce and accentuate the differences in the perspectives themselves.¹¹²

These two perspectives can be mapped onto Vico’s two subject matters of *Scienza nuova*. When matters of methodology arise, Vico takes an externalist perspective since he must demonstrate that his own approach is the right and accurate one. It often consists of explicitly contradicting others, such as various renowned philosophers and philosophical currents, and influential law theorists, singling out Grotius, von Pufendorf, and Selden, for pointed criticism. When it came to chance and fate as propelling the *mondo civile*, Vico saw no alternative but to explicitly denounce them as explanations. This often took the form of antitheses. However, as discussed earlier, his disagreement also took another form, metalinguistic negotiation; in some ways this was more devastating as it consisted in turning the key concepts themselves developed by influential philosophers, against them, as in the case of, but not limited to, Descartes, Malebranche, and Spinoza, featured in this study.

¹⁰⁸ M. Shields, “Conceptual change in perspective”, *Inquiry*, 63, 9-10 (2020): pp. 930-958; preprint at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SSltA96JH73He26uKE6F3r5c2pOeL_2/view?pli=1>, last accessed 8 October 2025.

¹⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 932: «speakers are taking up the perspective of trying to arrive at a correct understanding of [the] subject matter».

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*: «speakers [or writers] are not trying to get the relevant matter correct; they are trying to get other speakers [or writers’] respective understandings of the subject matter correct»; in other words, «analyzing this speaker [or writer] in order to render their linguistic behavior intelligible» (*ivi*, p. 955, note 15).

¹¹¹ It is worth noting, at least in passing, that a similar dichotomy has also been recognized and discussed in modern historiography of science, albeit in different language and contexts, such as «contextualism/antiquarianism vs. presentism/appropriationism». (Th. Uebel, “Philosophy of History and History of Philosophy of Science”, *HOPOS*, 7 (Spring 2017): pp. 1-30, in particular p. 1, note 2). Regarding the historian Quentin Skinner, Uebel writes: «Skinner’s contextualist methodology for intellectual history demands that all thinkers and ideas be understood on their own terms in their own place and time» (*ivi*, p. 3). Thomas Kuhn is another historian who problematized perspective. (P. Hoyningen-Huene, *Reconstructing Scientific Revolutions: Thomas S. Kuhn’s Philosophy of Science*, tr. by A. T. Levine, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993 (or. ed. *Die Wissenschaftstheorie Thomas S. Kuhns: Rekonstruktion und Grundlagenprobleme*, Friedrich Vieweg, Braunschweig, 1989), pp. 19-24, section subtitled *The New Internal Historiography of Science*).

¹¹² *Ivi*, p. 947, note 12.



On the other hand, internalism can be identified as Vico's approach to and treatment of the subject matter or substance of *Scienza nuova*.¹¹³ Within the scope of this essay, the *Conclusion* of *Scienza nuova* (1097-1112) will be read with this perspective in mind, beginning with the very last words of the work:

In sum, on account of everything that has been reasoned (ragionato) upon in this work, one is given finally to conclude that this science (*questa Scienza*) brings as inseparable from it the study of piety and that if one is not pious, one cannot in truth be wise.

This passage contains a *crux interpretum*, consisting of the phrase «if one is not pious, one cannot in truth be wise». The same thought appeared earlier in *Scienza nuova* in the phrase «the beginning of wisdom is piety ('l principio della Sapienza sia la Pietà)» (391). These phrases have been associated with certain Bible passages that use virtually identical wording.¹¹⁴ For example, *Psalm* 110:10 reads in part: «The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom».¹¹⁵ An overview of patristic comments on this verse states the following:

Whenever people acknowledge and believe in God there is fear of God, gravity in life and the various virtues and qualities that enhance life (TERTULLIAN). The wisdom of God is more beautiful and valuable than anything we have ever seen or can imagine (GREGORY OF NAZIANZUS). Reverential fear is the main distinguishing mark of our respect for God, and it has its beginning in divine wisdom (AMBROSE). The Holy Spirit works in us sevenfold gifts, beginning with the wisdom of God and ending in the fear of the Lord (AUGUSTINE).¹¹⁶

Fear of God, or piety, is thus understood to be a personal, private attitude toward God, resulting in a certain manner of personal conduct and life. On the other hand, Paolo Cristofolini called attention to the fact that Vico attributed the phrase in § 391 to «philosophers», not Scripture.¹¹⁷ And with respect to the variant but equivalent expression in § 1112, Cristofolini points out that due to the immediate context (1109), «questo sì che è un placito da filosofi, tratto non della Bibbia ma da un dubbio retorico di

¹¹³ This approach seems to be implied in § 338: «we have encountered difficulties so harsh that it has cost us well over twenty years of research to descend from this gentle human nature of ours to a human nature so completely savage and brutal that we are completely forbidden from imagining (*immaginare*) it and only with great toil are we permitted to understand (*intendere*) it»; §§ 378, 700 contain similar statements. Cf. *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 115, note 258. H. Aronovitch, *Vico and Verstehen*, in G. Tagliacozzo (ed.) *Vico: Past and Present*, Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, 1981, pp. 216-226, emphasis original, highlights the distinction between “imaging” and “understanding”, and while the former is impossible, the latter involves «showing that they had a *system of thinking*, and we have understood them when we have grasped its existence and structure». (ivi, p. 219).

¹¹⁴ *La Scienza nuova. Le tre edizioni del 1725, 1730 e 1744*, cit., p. 926, note 19, refers of *Psalm* 110:10, which reads in the Latin Vulgata: «res principium sapientiae timor Domini». (*Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Edition Zulu-Ebooks.com); *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 142, note 83, refers to *Psalm* 110:10; *Job* 1:7 and 9:10 [these chapters and verses refer to *Proverbs*, not *Job*]; *Ecclesiastes* 1:16; P. Cristofolini, *Vico pagano e barbaro*, Edizioni ETS, Pisa, 2001, p. 103, attributes to Andrea Battistini references to *Psalm* 110:10; *Proverbs* 1:7 and 9:10; *Job* 28:28; *Ecclesiastes* 1:17.

¹¹⁵ Q. F. Wesselschmidt (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, VIII, Psalms 51-150*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove 2007, p. 268; numbered as *Psalm* 111.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; see also M. Simonetti – M. Conti (eds.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, VI, Job*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2006, pp. 144-147; J. R. Wright (ed.), *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament, IX, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2005, pp. 1-7, 71-77, 201-205.

¹¹⁷ P. Cristofolini, *Vico pagano e barbaro*, cit., p. 103, finds that the expression «stranamente per un versetto biblico, è attribuito ai «filosofi»».



Cicerone».¹¹⁸ Indeed, the context of the entire *Conclusion* serves to establish that the “piety” and “wisdom” in view do not derive from or suggest biblical sources or allusions. For example, piety is ascribed to the «Fathers» who «developed republics based on orders belonging to those who were naturally superior...: they were superior because of their piety in worshiping a divinity... and furnished with this piety, they were superior in their prudence in taking counsel from the auspices of the gods», that is, they were able to control access to the «auspices», the most effective instrument of power in classical Rome. The primary social and political connotations of piety are further commented by Vico: «these were by nature Herculean republics [Roman patrician rule, “Herculean” in their self-perception and self-representation] in which those of piety, wisdom, chastity, fortitude, and magnanimity which might defeat the proud and defend the weak, which is excellent with regard to the form of civil governance» (1099).¹¹⁹ This is part of the overall topic of the *Conclusion* of different forms or (general) types of governance exemplified in Roman history, collapsed into four broad categories: familial sovereignty, aristocratic governance, popular governance, monarchical governance (1100-1104, 1108-1109).¹²⁰ Rather than understanding piety, or religion, as well as wisdom, in terms of solipsistic religious attitude, Vico relates it to the civil/civic realm: «Hence, when religion is lost for a people, nothing remains for them to live in society (vivere in Società)» (1109), or the *mondo civile*, their prevailing, but changeable, legal and institutional framework.¹²¹ In this context, wisdom, also, takes on socio-political connotations, as when Vico refers to «the times of Scipio Africanus, in whose age civil wisdom and military valor both happily established Rome upon the ruins of Carthage as the imperial power of the world» (1101), and to «wise lawgivers, those like Solon, Lycurgus, and the decemvirs» (1107).¹²² Vico’s phrases in §§ 391 and 1112 are therefore glosses of fundamental Roman socio-political practice, with no intentional or unintentional intertextuality with Scripture, or, for that matter, with Classical authors like Cicero.¹²³

Understanding the *crux interpretum* of the ending of *Scienza nuova* in this way clears the ground for recognizing Vico’s retrospective internalism with respect to early civilizations. To begin with, he could readily acknowledge that early rulers claimed their authority by «the governance of the Best and Greatest One whom they themselves devised, and in whom they believed... Hence, later all the human advantages

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 104.

¹¹⁹ By extension, judging by the virtues he enumerated, likely Vico also had in mind the early modern southern Italian aristocracy whose heyday as ruling elite was past by the end of Spanish rule and its succession by Austrian and Bourbon rule. For comments on the virtues, see R. Bassi, “The New Science of Virtues”, *Synthesis Philosophica*, 60, 2 (2015): pp. 189-202, in particular pp. 196-197.

¹²⁰ Cf. the matching section titled *Three Kinds of Governance*, in *Book Four. On the Course that the Nations Make* (925-927).

¹²¹ Cf. J. L. Mackey, *Belief and Cult: Rethinking Roman Religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2022, p. 126-127: «*Pietas* was a deontology. It was a package of informal social and formal legal norms... as to actions permissible (*fas*), obligatory (*religio*), and forbidden (*nefas*)... It was not individualistic but social». Varro integrated it in *theologia civilis*, the public cult of the Roman *civitas*. The Roman concept of *piety* and its opposite, *impiety*, was even applied to relations between Rome and foreign powers, by being «connected with the observance of an impeccable religious ritual, in order to avoid the risk that impiety of a political decision should become an injustice in international relations». (M. Rocco, *The leges regiae in Livy: Narratological and Stylistic Strategies*, in S. W. Bell – P. L. du Plessis (eds.), *Roman Law before the Twelve Tables: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2020, pp. 77-96, in particular p. 82).

¹²² Cf.: «Later, “wisdom” came to be used of men who, for the good of peoples and nations, wisely ordered republics and governed them» (365).

¹²³ In saying that «it became all too easy for philosophers to insert the tenet that “the beginning of wisdom is piety”» (391), Vico obviously had no particular author in mind.



(*utilità*)... and... human necessities (*necessità*), they imagined (immaginarono) to be gods and, as such, feared and revered them» (1098).¹²⁴ These were «false religions» (1110). In view of this fundamental critique, one would expect his historical treatment of the world they created and lived in to be just as critical and judgmental. However, that is not the case. To be sure, his gaze is unblinking and his account, unvarnished, but they bespeak a methodological decision and determination to gain a measure of understanding of the peculiar dynamics that were operative inside ancient civilizations, with classical Rome being taken as paradigmatic (1107).¹²⁵ One of the main takeaways of his studies was that religion saturated the ancient civil world, and that without this recognition, no historical understanding is possible: «For in this work it has been fully demonstrated that the earliest governance in the world had as its form a religion based on providence, and that the familial state rested on this religion alone» (1109).¹²⁶

It was this “internalist” perspective that set Vico apart from thinkers that addressed religion from a prospective externalist perspective. As noted earlier, this latter perspective is directed at the subject matter itself, in this case, the matter of religion, for the purpose of arriving at the right view of it, with the genitive being used in the objective sense.

In the *Conclusion*, Vico confronts this alternative perspective, represented by Pierre Bayle, Polybius, and the so-called «learned» (*I Dotti*) (1110-1111). They each manifest externalism in different ways. In Bayle’s case, it takes the form of a direct attack on religion itself, as well as history of religion (1110, see also 334).¹²⁷ Polybius’s approach is indirect in claiming, in Vico’s words, «that if there were philosophers in the world, there would have been no need in the world for religions» (1110).¹²⁸ Earlier in the *Conclusion*, Vico pointed out that philosophy is derivative: «It was from such republics [popular republics] of this sort... that philosophy emerged» (1101), and, «even as popular constitutions became corrupted, so too did the philosophies, which fell into skepticism, as learned fools gave themselves over to calumniating the truth» (1102). Now, at the end of his book, Vico further relativizes philosophy to the status of eloquence, that is, discursive rhetoric, that lacks the power of the mind or the *senses* (which are keywords or key terms in *Scienza nuova*): «the maxims reasoned by the philosophers concerning virtue serve only for an eloquence (*Eloquenza*) good for kindling (*accender*) the senses to do the duties of the virtues» (1110). On the other hand, in «our Christian religion... the mind (*la mente*) moves the senses to virtuous actions», while in «false religions... the senses (*i sensi*) must draw the mind towards doing virtuous works». While Vico distinguishes between the «Christian religion» and «false religions», the

¹²⁴ See also § 1099: «gods formed in accordance with their varied apprehensions».

¹²⁵ Vico went to the extent of labeling it the «ideal eternal history». By positing this purportedly universal and invariant pattern, he opened up his work to critical examination which was only proper for a work that presented itself as being scientifically serious.

¹²⁶ Vico goes on to point out in the same paragraph how religion was also a major factor in the other types of governance, that is, aristocratic, popular, and monarchical governance.

¹²⁷ G. Severino, *Principi e modificazioni della mente in Vico*, Il melangolo, Genova, 1981, pp. 36-42; J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, pp. 216-225; A. Sutcliffe, *Bayle and Judaism*, in W. van Bunge – H. Bots (eds.), *Pierre Bayle (1647-1706)*, le philosophe de Rotterdam, cit., pp. 121-134. For views on Vico’s response to Bayle, see G. Severino, *Principi e modificazioni della mente in Vico*, cit., pp. 42-49; S. Zoli, “Bayle, Vico e la Cina”, *BCSV*, XVII-XVIII (1987-1988): pp. 237-251; L. Bianchi, “«E contro la pratica de’ governi di Bayle, che vorrebbe senza religioni poter reggere le nazioni»: Note su Bayle nella corrispondenza di Vico”, *BCSV*, XXX (2000): pp. 17-30; J. Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760*, cit., pp. 225-255.

¹²⁸ *The New Science*, tr. by J. Taylor – R. Miner, cit., p. 85, note 162, notes that «he [Polybius] does not actually claim that a state of philosophers would eliminate the need for religion as such». Vico evidently thought otherwise, taking Polybius’ words to their ultimate conclusion.



perspective in both cases is internalist by way of understanding the thinking of their adherents, rather than arguing the veracity of their belief systems.¹²⁹ it provided an occasion to broach his own distinction between *mind* and *senses* that departed from the Cartesian mind-body dualism.

On the other hand, in contrast to both Bayle and Polybius, there were others, «all the learned (tutti i Dotti)» (1111), who had nothing but «wonder (*maraviglia*)», «veneration (*venerazione*)», and «ardent desire (*ardente desiderio*)» for «the unaccountable wisdom of the ancients (*Sapienza innarrivabile dagli Antichi*)». This is a portrayal of the fascination with ancient paganism in certain Renaissance and early modern intellectual currents, even to the degree of «profound belief in the existence of an accordance and continuity between classical philosophy, the Jewish tradition and Christianity».¹³⁰ Thus, rather than critiquing and rejecting ancient belief systems, these early modern thinkers embraced them, albeit selectively or eclectically. From Vico's methodological vantage point, nonetheless, it was prospective externalism, just the same, and, like Bayle's and Polybius' critical approaches, detrimental to the scientific study of «the order of civil things (*l'ordine delle cose civili*)» (1111) in past civilizations.

Vico re-stated «the unaccountable wisdom of the ancients» as «the infinite wisdom of God (*Sapienza Infinita di Dio*)» (1111). This appellation is in accordance with similar appellations in the *Conclusion*: «because human society is without order, which is as much as to say, without God» (1100); «the eternal order of God» (1106); «the great city of the nations founded and governed by God» (1107); «knowledge of God» (1110). But, of course, Vico had in mind the «nations» that practiced «false religions». So, these locutions serve to highlight the religious sources and motivations governing early civilizations.¹³¹ And, read from a retrospective internalist perspective, Vico's descriptions could be said to give a voice to the sentiments and convictions of the ancient protagonists, epitomized in the very last words of *Scienza nuova*: «if one is not pious, one cannot in truth be wise».

8. Conclusion

This essay dealt with certain fundamental issues of interpreting Vico's arguments in *Scienza nuova*. The work is replete with references to and ideas of both classical and early modern authors. Is Vico echoing their ideas, adapting them, or opposing them? In order to throw light on this issue, Vico's references to Descartes's clear and distinct ideas, Malebranche's modifications of the mind and occasionalism, and Spinoza's order of ideas and things were examined. This study found that Vico – rather than directly stating his dissent as he did with other thinkers, like Grotius, von Pufendorf, and Selden – employed metalinguistic negotiation to convey disagreement. For Vico, there was nothing wrong with the words used themselves, but with the philosophical concepts intended by each of these three philosophers, respectively. By disputing these underlying concepts, Vico in effect repudiated their overall philosophical systems, and argued that they were not scientifically serious, in contrast to the scientific nature of *Scienza nuova*.

¹²⁹ It would therefore be methodologically problematic to infer Vico's own religiosity from this passage. In other passages in *Scienza nuova*, similar exegetical considerations apply.

¹³⁰ A. A. Chrznowska, “Ghirlandaio, Ficino and Hermes Trismegistus: the *Prisca Theologia* in the Tornobuoni Frescoes”, *Laboratorio dell'ISPF*, XIII (2016): pp. 1-27, in particular p. 11; see also K. Sakamoto, “Creation, the Trinity and *Prisca Theologia* in Julius Caesar Scaliger”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 73, 1 (2010): pp. 195-207; D. Levitin, *Ancient Wisdom in the Age of the New Science: Histories of Philosophy in England c. 1640-1700*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015; F. Borghesi, “From the “Renaissance” to the “Enlightenment”, *Intellectual History Review*, 29, 1 (2019): pp. 1-10.

¹³¹ Cf. B. G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 472-494.



Another aspect of Vico's endeavor to treat (ancient) history scientifically was his retrospective internalist perspective. Unlike various other early modern intellectuals who made it their business to either critically examine the belief systems and societies of antiquity, or consider themselves their legitimate inheritors, Vico insisted on the need to understand the ways of ancient civilizations, with particular focus on the *mondo civile*, that is, the development of forms of governance and types of systems of justice and jurisprudence, exemplified in making classical Rome his case study. *Scienza nuova* could and should therefore be judged on the extent to which it achieved its objective, methodologically and substantively.