

Imaginative universals and human cognition in *The New Science* of Giambattista Vico

Imagination or the Human Eternal Body in Every Man ...

Imagination is the Divine Body in Every Man ...

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Universals have occupied a central role in philosophy ever since the Socratic quest for definitions. The need to find concepts both universal and shareable is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, in order to capture the disorder that besets human life. Universals occur as part of rational attitudes, and their features contribute to the content of these attitudes. According to the pioneering work of Giambattista Vico, the objective of this paper is to argue that the traditional way of looking at Universals has problematic implications for any understanding of human life. To do this I am going to focus primarily on this traditional attitude which, focusing on such mental functions as abstracting, categorizing, and predicating for rational evaluation, has neglected the special power of the human mind: imagination. Secondly, I insist on the novelty of Vichian *New Science* by reclaiming both the place of imagination as a method of knowledge, and the role of such imagination as a key to Vico's conception of the cognitive development. Finally, I suggest that products of imagination, the famous

¹ Blake's note in the margins of his copy of Berkeley's *Siris* (K. 773).

imaginative universals, tell us about our lives and help us to make sense of our world. On my reading, Vico's science of imagination, beyond its historical importance, represents a valuable source for considering contemporary questions about human cognition.

The philosophical problem of Universals

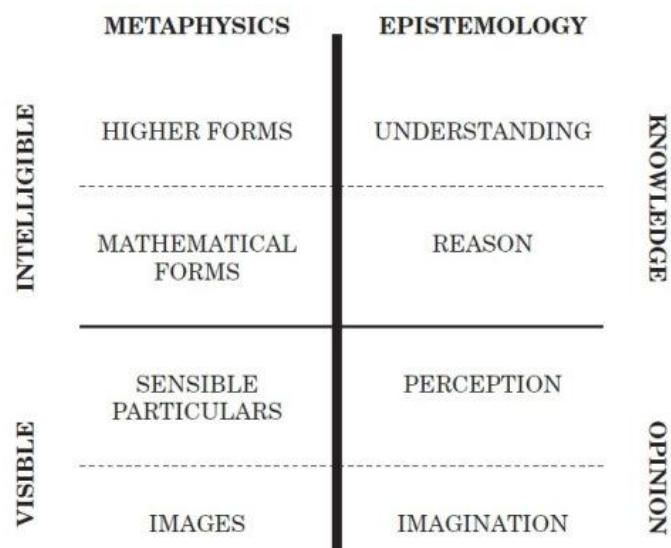
We may readily consider Plato's thinking as emblematic of a philosophical system that requires universal concepts as criteria of rational engagement and which makes them independent of individual people and their actual lives. Especially in his early dialogues, Plato assigns the character of Socrates with the task of defining various universal concepts. Let us take a quick look at the *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue Socrates encounters Euthyphro on his way to court. Socrates inquires about his interlocutor's business there and is told that he is prosecuting his father for the murder of a servant. Socrates expresses his astonishment at the confidence of a man able to take his own father to court on such a serious charge. But Euthyphro overlooks this and states that, if both his father and the rest of his relatives believe that «it is impious for a son to prosecute his father» (4e), his relatives' attitudes towards piety are, however, plainly wrong (4e). On the contrary, Euthyphro has a clear understanding of what is pious and impious, because he has an accurate knowledge of their form in itself. Here, Plato uses the term "idea" to signify an universal concept that concerns everyone in the same way.

(5a-d). This much gives Socrates the opportunity to launch the process that has come to be known as the “Socratic elenchus”, and he makes this philosophical request: «Tell me then what this form itself (*idea*) is, so that I may look upon it, and using it as a model, say that any action of yours or another’s that is of that kind is pious, and if it is not that it is not» (6e).

There are quite a few issues here that deserve examination; for our present purposes, however, it suffices to note just two things. First, the aim of Socrates’ investigation: on the one hand, to discover universal concepts about how one ought to live; on the other hand, to test the person who is answering to determine if he is living a philosophical life. In this light, one might think of universal concepts as self-subsistent abstract entities that constitute a kind of instrument capable of therapeutic attitudes: they do so by determining the abstract conditions under which human life can be tested. It should be noted that this position falls into duality, because it supposes a process of abstraction of universal contents from the actual life, in its both historical and material dimension.

Secondly, on this view the philosopher’s task seems to detect a tendency toward an austere cognitivism that invokes the authority of *Reason* in order to discover universal concepts that exist *independently* of individual people (as abstract models, as Socrates said). Universal concepts have an epistemic obligation in the philosophical setting, and they seem at odds with certain aspects of human experience that would

appear to have problematic implications for a serious philosophical reflection, such as imagination. It is in this spirit that Euthyphro, in order to possess knowledge of what piety is as universal concept, makes several attempts. Leaving aside, for present purposes, that all these attempts to reach a result fail (thus the dialogue culminates in stalemate); it should be noted, instead, that the criteria of rational engagement appear to avoid awkward commerce with mental processes whose role in explaining universal concepts may seem misleading. We must recall the metaphor of the line dividing the soul's cognitive powers at the end of Book VI of the *Republic* (509D-513E). Plato here explicitly places imagination (*eikasia*) below the line, and the purpose of education is to move the philosopher through the various sections of the line, as far as possible from imagination.



Adopting this scheme, we can say that in order to understand what piety is, as universal concept, Euthyphro must not imagine. He must not invent images which stand three times removed from both true reality and true knowledge; he must rather turn his whole soul away from the psychological status of imaginations, feelings and emotions that falsify his judgment. He only needs to try to find the abstract concept of piety, by informatively supplying necessary and sufficient conditions for any action or person to be pious.

In the Western philosophical tradition, the denial of the idea that human imagination has significant implications in our conceptual lives has taken its lead. To summarize: what has drawn philosophers to think or speak in terms of such strict rationality is appreciation of its clarity and precision (as in mathematical science) and, therefore, the refusal of the absurdities and incongruities that can shape our imagination. Motivated by this sense of intellectual responsibility, most philosophers have neglected the remarkable richness and complexity of human imagination and, consequently, they have misplaced a fundamental part of what it means to be human. Let me put this fundamental point in a more amusing way. In *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens provides the most passionate praise of imagination. The headmaster Thomas Gradgrind opens the novel by stating to a group of young students: «Now, what I want is facts, facts and calculations. [...] You must discard the word Fancy altogether. You have nothing to do with it. [...] You don't walk upon flowers in fact; you cannot be allowed to walk upon

flowers in carpets. You never meet with quadrupeds going up and down walls; you must not have quadrupeds represented upon walls. You must use, for all these purposes, combinations and modifications of mathematical figures which are susceptible of proof and demonstration. This is the new discovery. This is fact. This is taste».

An austere rationality, especially from a pedagogical point of view, is one of the targets of this novel. In order to «storm away the tender young imagination», the risk is to view human life *as if* it is simply a huge automated machine (as well as in industrial practices). Thus, Dickens' suggestion: when Mr. Gradgrind laments the absurdities and incongruities of our imagination (because it seems to require our disengagement from the concrete concerns of life), one might reasonably retort that such imagination is largely necessary. There is a crucial symmetry between human life and imagination, because the latter does not simply provide us with occasional moments of refreshment but it gives us an approach to life as a whole. Since Upper Paleolithic human beings use their powerful imagination in everyday life in order to invent new meanings and make discoveries; so too imagination is present to us with the greatest scientific embarrassment, for it appears to indicate a mysterious and unexplained discontinuity between us and the rest of Life.

Nevertheless, very few philosophers have deemed imagination worthy of sustained treatment; so, one may undoubtedly feel that Vico's science of imagination occupies some relatively uncharted philosophical territory. In his *Autobiography*, Vico

speaks about his “philosophical isolation”², his *Hard Times*, and represents himself as having taken up a position against a modern philosophy that neglects the most important questions: how we became human? What does it mean to be human? The constructive role of imagination, as an indispensable function of human cognition, is the key to answer these questions.

The special power of the human mind

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, developments in both metaphysics and the natural sciences abounded as a result of the Cartesian method. As is known, Descartes' method (which Vico called “geometrical method”) was rooted in abstraction and verification, the glories of Modern philosophy. It is trivially true that this method promises knowledge of a more tangible sort; thanks to it we may well describe and classify the world, enumerate its laws and understand its mechanisms. But, as Vico goes on to make clear, Descartes' method has a propensity to usurp its proper role and get out of control. For Vico, our knowledge of the world is inescapably limited to what we can understand only in human terms; of what meaning the world has outside our all-too-human perspective, knowledge is impossible. According to Vico, the modern appetite

²It should be noted that Vico has promoted the portrayal of himself as outside of the mainstream of modern philosophy. If in his *Autobiography* he writes: «Vico lived in his native city not only a stranger but quite unknown»; in *The New Science* he claims: «So, for purposes of this inquiry, we must reckon as if there were no books in the world».

for “clear and distinct” reasoning on the one hand, and the impossibility of reducing the human world to sure and indubitable principles on the other, likewise lead to *barbarie della riflessione* (barbarism of reflection).

Against this barbarism of reflection, Vico invests with much philosophical significance exactly what Cartesian philosophy rejects: history, eloquence, poetry and the human faculties involved in them: memory, sensibility and imagination. In *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione* (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*), presented at the commencement ceremonies of 1708, Vico denounces what was, according to his interpretation, a selfish philosophy, which was combined with the geometrical method in the education of young people at the time. In Vico's estimation, the prevalence of logical viewpoints in educational institutions creates young adults whose imagination has been neglected, due to an over-emphasis on abstraction at the expense of *ingenium*. It is very difficult to translate the Latin *ingenium* into our modern languages. In *De Ratione* Vico defines it as «the faculty that connects quickly and appropriately disparate and diverse things». A logic of discovery and invention characterizes *ingenium*; it is a productive and creative form of knowledge that combines both the art of finding or inventing arguments and that of judging them³. *Ingenium* is also the original and natural faculty of humans. It is original because it is the native ability to make connections; for

³ In his lectures of the rhetorical canon this is the “topical art”, that allows the mind to locate the object of knowledge and to see it in all its aspects (physical and sensible) and not through the abstract glass of clear and distinct ideas.

example, children use *ingenium* in order to achieve certain knowledge. It is natural because, as Vico says in *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia (On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians)*, it is synonymous with nature⁴. *Ingenium* constitutes man's nature because thanks to it we can see similarities between disparate things and we can produce images which frame and construct our reality. *Ingenium* is to us what the power to create is to God. As God easily begets a world of nature, so we ingeniously make discoveries thanks to which we invent and create our human world. Within that perspective, the main issue which concerns Vico can be stated with simplicity: if the geometrical method was Descartes' effort to mathematically define the world, Vico rejects this approach by saying that it can only give a limited view of human world and human affairs. Still, there is no doubt that cultivation of *ingenium* has significant implications for the cognitive development and for practical wisdom too.

With these arguments, Vico comes full circle in his battle against Cartesian philosophy. The development of knowledge takes place, not through rational or inferential thought, but rather through *ingenium*, this innate human capacity to grasp similarities or relationships. By recognizing the central role of *ingenium* to the nature of thought, Vico posits a fundamental relation that links *ingenium* and the faculty of imagining. «As judgment is the eye of intellect, so imagination is the eye of *ingenium*»⁵; imagination is the special power by which *ingenium* can realize its ability. Human

⁴ Cita De Antiquissima

⁵ Phantasia ingenii oculus, ut iudicium est oculus intellectus. Cf. On the most, ed. it. p. 134.

beings develop their intellectual capacities and make sense of the world around them thanks to their natural imagination; the processes of abstraction arise only in the successive phases of cognitive development. A fundamental passage of *The New Science* will make the point of this hypothesis clearer, as well as provide useful materials to introduce Vico's conception of *imaginative universals*: the products of human imagination and «the master key» of his *New Science* (§ 34).

In this passage Vico distinguishes two different metaphysical attitudes, or rather, two different ways to understand, comprehend, and discern. «As rational metaphysics teaches that man becomes all things by understanding them (*homo intelligendo fit omnia*), this imaginative metaphysics shows that man becomes all things by not understanding them (*homo non intelligendo fit omnia*); and perhaps the latter proposition is truer than the former, for when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them» (§ 405).

This passage explains how imagination becomes the fabricator of thought using what it does not know. According to Vico, imaginative knowledge is the effort of moving from the unknown, and through the imagination create something known that is concrete and effectively real. On the contrary, rational knowledge is the effort of moving from the known to the unknown, by way of abstraction from the sensible data. For Vico, the very possibilities of knowledge depends on the synthesizing power of

imagination, because the dynamism involved in the thought processes cannot be reduced to a critical and reflective capacity. In an anthropogenic perspective, we may say that for Vico thought was born as fantastic thought and that imagination has created reality; reality exists when it is imagined. According to Vico's point of view, imagination emerges from the actual circumstances in which men live, that is an ignorance of the true nature of things, due to which he makes himself and his vivacious images the measure of the universe. What it means that «man becomes all things by not understanding them»? It means that when a man understands, he extends his critical and reflective mind to comprehend things; but when he does not understand, he makes them out of himself and, by transforming himself, becomes them. For Vico, this nature of human thought was well elucidated by Tacitus with a «noble expression»: men no sooner imagine than they believe (*fingunt simul creduntque*). This «eternal property of human mind» adverted to by Tacitus is crucial because indicates the direction of Vico's argument. Vico understands all human making to occur under the power of a productive imagination which frames and constructs our image of reality. Without imagination we would not be able to think reality, because abstraction is an ability that men acquired at the price of continuous imaginative efforts. If so, the *facultas imaginandi*, far from being a little mental capacity, is related to a structure of thought at whose centre lies a sense of the vital, mutually enriching bond between the world and human experience, taken in its wide sense. More specifically, we can say that imagination arises at the

junction of the world and human experience; it is relational, neither purely objective nor subjective. This is why Vico insists that the products of imagination must function as a criterion by which philosophical theories can and must be tested: not only in relation to our personal lives, but also to the historical cultural permutations of humanity as a whole.

Vico reaches this conclusion by analyzing the modes of proceeding of the pagan mind. Immersed in their body, at the level of sentiments and sensitivity, the primitive pagans were unable to discern what is corporeal and what is mental, what is sensible and what is abstract. If our modern mind possesses the capacity of abstraction, the pagan mind could not have it; this means that the pagan mind is an imaginative visionary mind. For Vico, primitive human beings followed a logic based on the relations of sensible similarities; they identified and diversified things in the direct proportion that their imagination recognized similarities and dissimilarities in them. So, the cognitive development in the pagan mind was born through a process of thought totally opposite to the one we are inclined to expect. While our mental operations begin from sensible data and on it, by abstraction, we build our knowledge; primitive human beings possess the sensorial faculties, but not the intellectual ones of our modern mind. If abstraction is an ability that humanity acquired at the price of continuous imaginative efforts, then the imaginative metaphysics is truly not about thought, but about the absence of thought in any form: *homo non intelligendo fit omnia*.

At the present, it is difficult to interpret the Latin verb *intelligere*; but fortunately Vico provides this in an passage of *The New Science*: «Now the mind uses the intellect when, from something it senses, it gathers something which does not fall under the senses; and this is the proper meaning of the Latin verb *intelligere*» (§363). As Vico says in this passage, *intelligere* could be interpreted as “to gather between”, try to guess at abstract patterns or plucking out a concept from a set of sensible data. This is pretty much what Euthyphro did in order to have a clear understanding of what is pious and impious. But, thanks to the analysis of the pagan mentality, Vico identifies a form of thought that have no speculative nature and that is constructed on imagination, as well as the ideas that it produces. So, the philosophical novelty of his *New science* becomes more precise: we have no reason to think about imagination as a narrow or fixed reproductive faculty which forms images that beset our rational capacities; we have also no reason to think about imagination as a kind of messenger between sensation and reason (as, for instance, Francis Bacon puts in *The Advancement of Learning*⁶). What we call imagination is something of central to human cognition, an indispensable function of the human mind without which we would be scarcely conscious of our human life. So, the manifest effort in *The New Science* is that of penetrating the logic of imagination (that Vico called “poetic logic”) in order to understand how could the passage from absence to presence of thought happen.

⁶ III. 382.

Regarded this way, Vico's deepest concerns are about the birth and the development of thought as a fantastic art, an art that does not convey abstract meanings, but rather images that are true in the way they are felt, experienced and lived, charged with emotivity and sensible connotations. These images Vico calls "imaginative universals", his most original discovery and the one that is most difficult to understand. Of course, this should not be that surprising: if these universals were easy to grasp, then it would be hard to fathom that they constitute an entirely new science. In order to set the imaginative universals as the backbone of his *New Science*, Vico inserts in his philosophical system the first scientific myth of the history of philosophy: the myth of *orribili bestioni*, that are animal being not yet human, but becoming human at their "encounter" with Jupiter, the first imaginative universal.

In this myth, Vico imagines human beings in the state of nature as enormous beasts (*bestioni*) with deformed bodies that symbolize the force of the senses and the penury of the intellect; beings that have no abstractive faculty but a strong imagination. At this time, in their bestiality, something happened that deranged their life and represented a point of no return; an unusual event, an extraordinary tempest, hit the primordial forests where the *bestioni* lived. Thus, when the *bestioni*, fearful of the great natural events, stopped roaming and looked for shelter, they raised their heads at the surprising effects of the sky in tempest and «they imagined the sky as a great living body, and in this manifestation they called the sky Jupiter, the first god of the so-called

greater clans, which was trying to speak to them through the whistling of his bolts and the crashing of his thunder»⁷. Jupiter is the first imaginative universal, produced through the senses and imagination; it is with these faculties (the only ones that our body can activate), that the human being imposed order on a fundamentally disordered nature. For the *bestioni* imagination is not a faculty among the other faculties of the mind, but the only available faculty of the mind.

With the scientific myth of *orribili bestioni*, Vico sees the history of humanity moving the first steps in the moment in which the bestioni, the infant of humankind, began to imagine and through the idea of Jupiter catapulted themselves beyond the state of nature. If so, imagination is the special power that is crucial to the ordering and humanizing of the world; it is the way by which the thought was born in the brutish being and made it a human being. We are now in a position to expand upon an earlier observation: if imaginative universals become the instrument with which human beings form their mentality, structure their thought, assign a meaning to reality and confer a specific value to their actions; then imagination is an activity essentially in every case of human learning and understanding, that is so say, in every human experience. This gives to the context of *The New Science* a force both anthropological and psychological.

⁷ SN44, § 377.

Imaginative universals and human cognition

In the last section of my paper, I would like to discuss with you how the doctrine of imaginative universals could be related to a general philosophy of man. I will try to use and comment on two important images, the frontispiece of *The New Science* (fig. 1) and the magnificent *Dipintura* (fig. 2), in order to demonstrate that what Vico proposes to us is a shocking reversal of the traditional way of looking at human cognition.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2

