

# Vico and Hobbes: The capacity and limits of imagination

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## Introduction

The most general aim of this article is to emphasise the role of imagination in cognition. To do this, I employ the ideas of two authors for whom imagination was a central notion for describing the human mind long before the contemporary research into cognitive faculties – Thomas Hobbes and Giambattista Vico. Among the different Vichian concepts, imagination is certainly the one that is absolutely central to the contemporary semiotic and cognitive scientific interpretation of Vico's ideas. Danesi (1995a, 1995b, 1996), Haskell (2000), Nuessel (1995), Ponzio (2006) and Raudla (2008) among others have all focused on the problem of imagination in their treatments of Vico. At the same

time, Vico is certainly neither the only nor the first scholar to point out the vital part of imagination in human cognition. Thomas Hobbes described the workings of the human mind in a way that gave imagination an exceptionally central role. It can be even claimed that Hobbes reduced the workings of the human mind completely to sense and imagination (Hatfield, 1998, p. 976).

Hobbes represents a certain extreme in the 17th century dispute over cognitive faculties in that he gives to imagination the functions that were at the time more traditionally ascribed to immaterial intellect (Hatfield, 1998, p. 960). ‘For Hobbes, the mind contains sense, imagination, and the workings of language, and no further rational faculty, such as the Cartesian immaterial mind that can grasp natures by clear and distinct perception’ (Duncan, 2013, para. 2.1). At first glance, the centrality of imagination seems to bring Hobbes and Vico close together. ‘There is much in Hobbes’s view with which Vico could agree, in particular Hobbes’s emphasis on the closeness to sense of imagination and memory. The difference is that Vico shifts such terms into a new key. Vico sees sense as itself a form of thought’ (Verene 1991, p. 103). However, according to the interpretation of Barnouw, Hobbes, too, saw sense as a form of thought, and the Hobbesian notion of *conatus* may also be shown to shift the concept of sense in a new key (1980).

To what extent do the concepts of imagination in the works of Vico and Hobbes actually overlap? Is there a theoretical congeniality behind the fact that both of them

ascribed such significance to imagination? A comparison of the ideas of Vico and Hobbes is well in order to answer these questions and to clarify the role of imagination in cognition. I would argue that while Vico provides us with a more far-reaching understanding of the importance of imagination in human creativity, Hobbes's account of imagination may serve not only to underline the uniqueness of the Vichian conception, but also to complement it in aspects that concern the psychological process of image creation.

The historical connections between Vico and Hobbes and the possible influence of Hobbes on Vico's work has been debated and discussed in a number of publications.<sup>1</sup> Benedetto Croce's and Fausto Nicolini's 'Bibliografia Vichiana' (1947–48) and Nicolini's 'La religiosità di Giambattista Vico' (1949) have maintained a substantial authority in this matter. More recent publications include 'Hobbes: il 'quinto autore' di Vico' (1988) by Raffaello Franchini; and to my knowledge, the latest: 'The *Leviathan* in Naples: Vico's Response to Hobbes's Life and Works' (2010) by Emilio Sergio. However, this article will take a different route of enquiry. I will not discuss the historical connections of the authors here, as the sequences of events that led Hobbes and Vico to conceptualise imagination the way they did do not enter my current argument. I will only discuss the ideas of Vico and Hobbes related to imagination as they are presented in their respective publications.

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<sup>1</sup>For a more extended bibliography of the topic see Ratto (2000) and Sergio (2010).

## Sense and feeling

For both authors, the source of all mental activity, including imagination, is sensory perception (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 363, 374; Hobbes 2008 [1651], 9). Vico states that: ‘the human mind does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression /.../ from the senses’ (Vico, 1984 [1744], para. 363). ‘And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things’ (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 374). Hobbes’s discussion ‘Of Man’ in the first chapter of *Leviathan*, meanwhile, begins with assertions concerning the role of sense: ‘there is no conception in a man’s mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense’ (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 9). Whatever the nature of imagination itself is in their respective conceptions, Vico and Hobbes both see sense as its source.

Although both Vico and Hobbes assert that images retained in the human mind have sensory origin, only Hobbes is particularly interested in the actual process of sensory perception. He presents the following description:

The cause of sense, is the external body, or object, which presses the organ proper to each sense, either immediately, as in the taste and touch; or mediately, as in seeing, hearing, and smelling: which pressure, by the mediation of nerves, and other strings, and membranes of the body, continued inwards to the brain and heart, causeth there a resistance, or counter-pressure, or endeavour of the heart, to deliver itself: which endeavour because *outward*, seemeth to be some matter without. And this *seeming*, or *fancy*, is that which men call *sense* [...]

(Hobbes, 2008 [1651], p. 9)<sup>2</sup>

The use of terms like ‘pressure’ ‘counter-pressure’ and ‘causation’ may well give the impression that Hobbes’s account of sense is thoroughly mechanical, that the whole sensory process is comparable to the inertia of physical objects. The entry on Hobbes in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy confirms that this perception is a common one by interpreting the above passage from *Leviathan* as follows: ‘He tells a causal story about perception, which is largely the story of a causal chain of motions. /.../ the sensation is strongly grounded in, perhaps even identical with, the internal motions’ (Duncan, 2013, para. 2.1). The mechanistic essence of Hobbes’s cognitive psychology has been extensively discussed in the history of ideas and philosophy, starting with the classical work on the subject, ‘Thomas Hobbes’ mechanical conception of nature’ by

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<sup>2</sup> Compare also with Vico: ‘The human mind is naturally inclined by the senses to see itself externally in the body, and only with great difficulty does it come to attend to itself by means of reflection’ (1984 [1744], para. 236).

the Danish philosopher Frithiof Brandt, published in English in 1928. Jeffrey Barnouw has, however, argued against the oversimplification of Hobbes's account of sensation by pointing out that 'the role of *conatus*, or 'endeavour,' in the analysis of 'inner motions' epitomises the irreducibility of Hobbesian physio-psychology to the terms of analysis of motion of and in inanimate bodies' (1980, p. 116). So the sensory process Hobbes describes is probably not as void of subjective aspect as one might have thought. 'Hobbes has introduced the properly psychological dimension into his account from the very beginning, in the 'endeavour of the Heart,' but he hardly makes its nature explicit to begin with' (Barnouw 1980, p. 120)

Before turning to the discovery of the Hobbesian 'endeavour of the Heart', I think a discussion of Vico's concept of sense and feeling is in order. Having an affection-based concept of sense as a context will hopefully help to interpret Hobbes's account of sensation in terms of subjective rather than mechanical activity.

Vico's attention is fully on the, in Hobbesian terms, 'inner motion'. He does not ask by what means exactly the human being comes to have a sensation of the external object. Instead, he tries to describe what makes some sensory perceptions so pervasive that they become retained as images. For Vico, perception involves an emotional component from the very first moment: 'Men at first feel without perceiving, then they perceive with a troubled and agitated spirit, finally they reflect with a clear mind' (1984 [1744],

para. 218). Vico goes on to explain that the former is ‘the principle of poetic sentences,<sup>3</sup> which are formed by feelings of passion and emotion’ (1984 [1744], para. 219). Thus, the first instance of conscious perception is preceded and accompanied by strong emotions. Indeed, emotion, represented by the fear of thunder in Vico’s most frequently used example (1984 [1744]: 191, 377, 382), *is* the motivation for forming images of the world.

Emotion is the catalyst that enables the sensation to be transformed into an image retained in the memory. According to the interpretation of the psychologist Robert E. Haskell, in the Vichian understanding the first men made an ‘affective identification’: the perception of thunder was identified with Jove, a god expressing its anger (Haskell 2000, p. 353). This act of identification constituted ‘the primal transmutation of sensory experience into abstraction imagery and language’ (Haskell 2000, p. 353). Having conscious images, images that function as signs in human discourse, is a product of having feelings – the feeling of fear drove the first men to try to make sense of the thundering sky and they made sense of it by recognising it as an animate body that has feelings.

According to Barnouw, Hobbes actually equates feelings (e.g., delight, pain, fear, appetite) with sense in the passage: ‘as all conceptions we have immediately by the sense, are *delight*, or *pain*, or *appetite*, or *fear*; so are all the *imaginations* after sense’

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<sup>3</sup> The term ‘sentence’ does not refer to a syntactic construction here; see Vico, 1984[1744], para. 703.

(Hobbes, 2013 [1640], p. 29). Barnouw points out that the emphasis in the sentence should be on the copula 'are,' the identification:

In the forest of Hobbes's typographical emphases it is easy to overlook what should be stressed in the passage -- the word 'are': representations or thoughts of objects *are* pleasure or pain, solicitation or provocation. The distinction between sensation and feeling, like that between feeling and impulse, is more a convenience or convention of analysis and presentation than a division of real capacities of the mind. (Barnouw 1980, p. 128)

In the light of Barnouw's interpretation of Hobbes, the Vichian concept of image formation is highly compatible with the Hobbesian one. If the fear itself *is* included in the identification, and is not just a momentary motivation behind it, the Vichian model of image creation may be seen in a new perspective. Hobbes as read by Barnouw gives us a confirmation of the Vichian affective identification of the thundering sky and Jove. The thought or representation (Jove) *is* the feeling (fear of thunder). The relation of identity that created the image of the first god Jove is a cognitive imperative – if feelings indeed *are* representations. The moment of the creation of Jove can then be described using the following paraphrase of Hobbes: as the conception of thunder we have immediately by the sense *is* fear; so *is* the imagination of Jove.



According to Verene's interpretation of Vico, the *isness*, the understanding of something existing and being in relation to something else, emerges with the creation of Jove, the first image (1995, p. 206). The Hobbesian concept of endeavour of the heart seems highly appropriate here – the representation of thunder *is* fear, the emotive aspect is always present in the cognitive process.

The affective/emotive aspect of cognition raises the question of significance. What is the cause of pain, pleasure and fear? What makes a man react to some environmental stimuli and ignore others? Here the Hobbesian account seems to be a step ahead again. In Vico's description, the fear of thunder arose with the first thunder the mankind ever experienced (1984 [1744], para. 377). So the process was initiated by the environment, rather than by the humans themselves – the fear was felt and made sense of because the extraordinary meteorological event demanded it. The Hobbesian account, on the other hand, allows the sentient subject to have the initiative:

The 'pressure' exerted by the object is more than the physical motion and physiological propagation needed to transport an impression to the external sense organs and then to the brain (and heart). It is also the sort of contact with the environment that is determined by the need of the sentient to identify, differentiate, and correlate aspects of its world. Physical impact and practical import are indistinguishable within the causal interaction that constitutes

sensation. Sense and significance cannot meaningfully be divorced. (Barnouw 1980, p. 129)

However, even if forced to do so by the environment, Vico's archaic man starts to make sense of the world by identifying the unknown with what is already meaningful – his own bodily being. Thus also in the Vichian understanding subjective meaning precedes the object. Vico states that: 'man in his ignorance makes himself the rule of the universe, for /.../ he has made of himself an entire world' (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 405). Basically, the human being has one tool in coming to terms with the unknown – him/herself in his/her bodily being.

Without this attributing of meaning, the sky would never have been recognised. The sky is not Jove, it is only a portion of him. The sky is the 'body' of Jove. It is the 'medium' through which Jove manifests himself. We may say that Vico expressly affirms that the sky is the sign, the symbol ('the real character') of Jove. (Cantelli 1993, p. 9)

The image-process, the primordial activity of the human consciousness is inexorably tied to significance, the attribution of meaning. For both Vico and Hobbes the perceiving subject, with its endeavour or body-based feelings is at the centre of this

world bestowed with meaning. This view of the primordial way of making sense of the world is based on imagination and memory.

## **Sense, imagination and memory**

The above-described process of identification that enables human beings to bestow meaning on their experience relies on the cooperation of the faculties of sense, imagination and memory. For Vico, imagination assumes the central role. As already stated above, Vico believed that senses are the source for acquiring knowledge (1984 [1744], para. 374); however, throughout the *New Science* Vico seems to be primarily interested in what the human mind was able to *do* with that knowledge. And to describe that, Vico employed his complex notion of imagination as a primordial faculty that also involves in it memory and invention:

Imagination however, is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and ingenuity or invention is nothing but the working over of what is remembered. /.../ since the human mind at the time we are considering /.../ had not developed its powers of abstraction by the many abstract terms in which languages now abound, it exercised all its force in these three excellent faculties which come to it from the body. (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 699)

The Vichian imagination, invention and memory, usually referred to as *fantasia*, *ingegno* and *memoria* (according to the Italian terms), form an integrated whole: ‘all three appertain to the primary operation of the mind’ (Vico, 1984 [1744], para. 699). They are three facets of the same faculty, the primordial imagination. *Fantasia* is the ability to imitate, *ingegno* the ability to form connections, and *memoria* is the faculty that enables ‘the working over’ of images, i.e., going back to and reintegrating already formed images and connections in the thought process (Vico, 1984 [1744], para. 819). The primordial imagination is an extension of bodily experience, including sensory perception. For Vico the images the primordial imagination allows us to have are in no way inferior to sensory perception. The image-process, although based on the sensory perceptions, or in Vico’s own language: coming from the body, has a domain of its own – the primary operation of the mind.

Hobbes, however, seems to give imagination and memory a secondary position in relation to sense. Sense and imagination are connected by the term ‘fancy’ in his discourse: in the second chapter of *Leviathan*, Hobbes equates fancy with sense (2008 [1651], p. 9) as well as with imagination (2008 [1651], p. 10). But fancy as imagination does not seem to have the cognitive power that fancy as sense has. For Hobbes imagination is a ‘decaying sense’. The sensory perceptions, that take the form of images

in the human mind, grow weaker and fade. As Hobbes states in his earlier work, 'The Elements of Law':

though the sense be past, the image or conception remaineth /.../ And this obscure conception is that we call PHANTASY or IMAGINATION: imagination being (to define it) conception remaining, and by little and little decaying from and after the act of sense. (Hobbes 2013 [1640], p. 8)

Contrasting the conceptions of Vico and Hobbes, Verene states that for Vico, 'sense is not passive apprehension which then decays to the point of imagination as it is absorbed away from its object into a mental image, which then continues to the stage of a memory' (1991, p. 103). Verene considers the Hobbesian notion of sense to be passive, and the mental image to be separated, 'absorbed away' from the object of perception. He seems to understand Hobbesian image-process as something essentially linear: sense, imagination and memory work in a predetermined succession, first sense provides the perception, then imagination forms the image and then memory takes over to maintain the image. In his view, each faculty functions separately, being responsible for a separate stage of the process and all the while the image is fading.

Verene's interpretation of Hobbes may, however, be somewhat restricted. Hobbes seems to propose an identity between imagination and memory similarly to Vico:

This *decaying sense*, when we would express the thing itself, (I mean *fancy* itself) we call imagination, as I said before: but when we would express the decay, and signify that the sense is fading, old, and past, it is called *memory*. So that imagination and memory, are but one thing, which for divers considerations hath divers names. (Hobbes 2008, p. 12)

Thus, even if imagination and memory may be discussed separately, they still function as ‘one thing’ in the image-process. The claim that the image is separated or ‘absorbed away’ from the passive sense is also problematic. If Hobbesian sense is indeed driven by the sentient’s need to make sense of the world, as discussed above (p. 6), then it is by no means a passive faculty. Also, Hobbes explicitly states the functional integration of sense and memory:

Wherefore sense, as I here understand it, and which is commonly so called, hath necessarily some memory adhering to it, by which former and later phantasms may be compared together, and distinguished from one another (Hobbes 1839 [1655], p. 393).

Hobbes announces that sense necessarily involves memory and together they permit distinguishing and comparing images, which must involve recognition and

identification. Barnouw accordingly states that Hobbes ‘has made distinguishing and comparing intrinsic to sense from the beginning, but without due emphasis’ (Barnouw 1980, p. 122). The sense-memory process described by Hobbes ‘implies an awareness of sameness or similarity, and of difference’ (Barnouw 1980, p. 122).

That brings us back to the process of identification discussed in the previous section. The ability to establish sameness, identity relations is essential to the Vichian understanding of the primordial human mind. Verene describes the formation of the primary identity, which is essential *meaning* creation, as fixing a sensation in a continuous flux of sensory experience:

Meaning can be achieved only if a sensation can become a particular that is not cancelled by the presence of the next sensation. The mind can have something before it through its power to produce an identity. A sensation is apprehended as the being of the other sensations in the motion of the flux./.../ Through this fixed point of sensation, or particular, the meaning of the flux can be repeatedly grasped. (Verene 1991, p. 82)

Verene also states that this ‘stability of meaning within the immediate flux of sensations’ is possible only because of the primordial imagination – *fantasia* (1991, p. 82). In Vico’s conception, the archaic mind uses imagination and invention to create the

primordial level of conceptual organisation – to form the first particulars. Here, the Vichian understanding of the workings of *fantasia*, *ingegno* and *memoria* bears a significant resemblance to Barnouw's interpretation of Hobbes: 'Sensation thus involves, on the one hand, intrinsic reference to memory or 'a perpetual variety of phantasms' which enable discrimination and correlation' (1980, p. 123).

In Vico's view, this primary categorisation produces a specific kind of class concepts which are characteristic to archaic thought, and could be understood by the modern mind as something similar to metaphors or tropes in general. The creation of these class concepts, called imaginative or fantastic universals, is dependent on the faculty of invention or *ingegno*. This particular aspect of imagination, invention, is the one which, as I will argue below, displays the most significant difference between the concepts of Vico and Hobbes.

## **Invention – imagination as a creative faculty**

Vico's imaginative universal is a primordial class concept, but it is not merely an underlying principle of the archaic or poetic logic as Vico terms it – it has relevance for human knowledge as such (Verene 1991, p. 77–78). The creation of imaginative universals or poetic characters as Vico also calls them is tied to the human ability of



invention. Discussing the main principles underlying ‘the poetic characters that constitute the essence of the fables’, Vico counts as the first principle ‘the natural inclination of the vulgar to invent them’; and as the second, the fact that ‘the first men, the children as it were of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class-concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters, that is, imaginative class-concepts or universals’ (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 209).

In Vico’s understanding the imaginative universals *are* in fact the fables or myths – as he explicitly states: ‘fables being imaginative class-concepts’ (1984 [1744], para. 403). Whereas, ‘Every metaphor [...] is a fable in brief’ (1984 [1744], para. 404). A fable, a mythological narrative that consists of the essentially meaningful images, is a drawn-out mode of the metaphor, the sensory-identity-based unit of mental correlation.

‘Vico’s discovery of the imaginative universal is the discovery of a principle of identity that is linked with the notion of metaphor as the fundamental epistemological element. The metaphor is that by which identity is originally achieved in perception’ (Verene 1991, p. 79).

The capacity of invention underlying the imaginative universal is a facet of the unity of *fantasia*, *ingegno* and *memoria* as a primordial imagination. Imagination is expressed in mental activity as invention ‘when it gives them [things – T.P.] a new turn or puts them

into proper arrangement and relationship' (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 819). *Ingegno* is therefore responsible for the ability to form correlations between images, and as such it also enables a kind of mental dynamic:

‘*Ingegno* is the power of the subject to move from one act of formation of sense to others, to create further acts of formation and to have past acts combine and influence present ones’ (Verene 1991, p. 105).

Danesi similarly explains the creativity of the Vichian imagination as the ability to not only form images, or signs as he terms them, but to use them freely, regardless of their initial context: ‘These signs also allow humans to think about their referents away from their context of occurrence. The *fantasia* can thus ‘create’ new realities totally within the confines of mental space’ (Danesi 1995a, p. 70). The creative and combinatory aspect of imagination has a decisively constructive and thus positive role in the Vichian conception.

The discussion in the previous sections of this article has demonstrated a significant level of compatibility in the Vichian and Hobbesian understandings of the identification and differentiation that takes place at the primary level of sense and imagination. In the light of that, the difference between their respective conceptions concerning the creativity of imagination is rather dramatic. To begin with, to Hobbes the combination

of images seems to be much more dependent on the senses. Hobbes claims that ‘as we have no imagination, whereof we have not formerly had sense, in whole, or in parts; so we have no transition from one imagination to another, whereof we never had the like before in our senses’ (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 15–16). He seems to reason that the human mind is only able to connect images that have at some time appeared to it in succession. This linearity seems at first glance to be the only possible form of mental association:

All fancies are motions within us, relics of those made in the sense: and those motions that immediately succeeded one another in the sense, continue also together after sense: insomuch as the former coming again to take place, and be predominant, the latter followeth, by coherence of the matter moved, in such manner, as water upon a plane table is drawn which way any one part of it is guided by the finger./.../ there is no certainty what we shall imagine next; only this is certain, it shall be something that succeeded the same before, at one time or another. (Hobbes 2008 [1651], p. 16)

Despite this concept of linear and primarily sense-based mental association, Hobbes also discusses the capacity of the imagination to combine or compound images somewhat more creatively. He discriminates between ‘simple imagination’ and ‘compounded imagination’. ‘Simple imagination’ is the ability to imagine a single object in the way it has previously been sensed, to recall a sensory experience without

modifications. (2008 [1651], p. 12) The latter, ‘compounded imagination’, refers to the capability of combining images or their parts. For example: the combination of the images of a man and a horse results in the imaginative creature called a centaur:

The other is *compounded*; as when from the sight of a man at one time, and of a horse at another, we conceive in our mind a Centaur. So when a man compoundeth the image of his own person, with the image of the actions of another man; as when a man imagines himself a Hercules or an Alexander, (which happeneth often to them that are much taken with reading of romances) it is a compound imagination, and properly but a fiction of the mind. (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 12)

Compound imagination has some properties in common with the Vichian concept of imagination as *ingegno*. Both rely on sensory experience as their basis, both enable creating new mental entities by creating connections between images. For Vico, however, these creations of the mind were the very same imaginative universals, not just fictions that do not seem to have any part in making sense of the human experience:<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Hobbes’s ‘compound imagination’ can be compared the respective account of picture theorists of the associationist tradition, who according to Thomas Nagel ‘had an account of how we might imagine things never seen: through the separation and recombination of parts of pictorial images drawn from memory. Matthews (1969) disparagingly calls this ‘mental carpentry’. We can, so the story goes, imagine a sphinx, for example, by taking the head from some memory image of a woman and sticking it onto the body from

Poetic monsters and metamorphoses arose from a necessity of this first human nature, its inability /.../ to abstract forms or properties from subjects. By their logic they had to put subjects together in order to put their forms together, or to destroy a subject in order to separate its primary form from the contrary form which had been imposed upon it. (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 410)

According to Vico, mythological creatures were a necessary means for making sense of the world: in their inability to abstract features from the objects and create class-concepts based of the comparison of features, the first men used invention to integrate the various parts of the objects themselves. This process produced imaginative universals, and among those also fantastic creatures or monsters. The two authors give almost diametrically different value to this mechanism of combination. In Hobbes's view, taking compound images seriously is a sign of ignorance. For him, belief in creations of the human mind means inadequacy, since a human being must be able to discriminate between sense and creative imagination:

From this ignorance of how to distinguish dreams, and other strong fancies, from vision and sense, did arise the greatest part of the religion of the Gentiles in time past, that worshipped satyrs, fawns, nymphs, and the like; and now-a-days the opinion that rude [common] people have of fairies, ghosts, and

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an image of a lion. /.../ However, this is hardly plausible as the fundamental basis of artistic and scientific creativity. (Thomas 1999: 232)

goblins, and of the power of witches./.../ But evil men under pretext that God can do any thing, are so bold as to say any thing when it serves their turn, though they think it untrue; it is the part of a wise man, to believe them no further, than right reason makes that which they say, appear credible. (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 14-15)

For Vico, on the other hand, the Gentiles' ability to create imaginative universals is an expression of the primordial human categorisation capability. In the Vichian understanding, the fruits of invention, mythological creatures, metaphors and tropes in general, are an integral part of the imaginative mode of the human mind. Whereas for Hobbes, using imagination to create tropes is a manifestation of elaborate thought. He seems to interpret the term 'poetic' in the conventional way: it is an accessory of learned expression:

*/.../ man delighteth himself either with finding unexpected similitude in things, otherwise much unlike, in which men place the excellency of FANCY: and from thence proceed those grateful similies, metaphors, and other tropes, by which both poets and orators have it in their power to make things please or displease, and shew well or ill to others, as they like themselves; or else in discerning suddenly dissimilitude in things that otherwise appear the same.* (Hobbes 2013 [1640], p. 50)

Franco Ratto (2000, p. 102) seems to elicit from this passage that Hobbes's ideas of fancy and invention are close to the Vichian *fantasia* and *ingegno*. However, Ratto does not seem to take into consideration how those capacities described by the respective authors have rather different functions in relation to human thought and ultimately, culture. Even if both Vico and Hobbes describe how the power of imagination or fancy enables us to form unexpected similes, the capacity of these similes is essentially different. For Vico, tropes are deeply rooted in the build-up of human consciousness. And however strong Hobbes may have claimed the persuasive power of tropes to be, he never sees them as crucial for human consciousness.

According to Hobbes, creative imagination is not instrumental in making sense of the world; indeed, it is more likely to lead the human mind astray: 'without steadiness, and direction to some end, a great fancy is one kind of madness/.../ Fancy has no place, but only in adorning the style. In orations of praise, and in invectives, the fancy is predominant; because the design is not truth' (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 46). Verene comments this account as follows:

'Hobbes's view is very close to that of common sense. /.../ Fancy, fantasy, and imagination are often associated in ordinary speech. Such powers, if allowed to follow their own route from their basis in sense, are thought to produce

appearance, not reality. /.../In ordinary discourse, terms such as myth and fable, which are structures of imagination and memory, function as opposites for truth, as synonyms for error. A myth is something that is not true' (Verene 1991, p. 102-103)

In contrast, truth is exactly what Vico believes the imaginative universals, the 'fables in brief' (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 404) that the first humans invented out of necessity, to be all about:

These fables are ideal truths suited to the merit of those of whom the vulgar tell them; and such falseness to fact as they contain consists simply in failure to give their subjects their due. So that, if we consider the matter well, poetic truth is metaphysical truth, and physical truth which is not in conformity with it should be considered false. (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 205)

Thus, Vico sees poetic thought to be always striving towards the truth<sup>5</sup>. In a way, myth, as Vico sees it, is true by definition: '*Mythos* came to be defined for us as *vera narratio* or "true speech"' (1984 [1744], para. 401). In the effort to make sense of the human world for the first time, Vico seems to have maintained, the first men could do nothing else and nothing better than to invent the imaginative universals. Hobbes sees invention

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<sup>5</sup> See also the discussion on truth and imagination in Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 102–103.



when it is subordinated and guided by the rational search for cause and effect. The unguided train of thoughts has little value for the mankind, and the same goes for fictions created by the compound imagination. To bring the comparison of the Vichian and Hobbesian concepts of imagination to a close, I will discuss this contrast in more detail below.

## **The value of creative imagination**

Vico not only sees imagination as the driving force behind the development of archaic culture, he also states that it is a power that the human mind, no matter how refined, has to return to every time it needs to express something that is difficult to convey:

such as the faculties of the human mind, the passions, virtues, vices, sciences and arts./.../ For when we wish to give utterance to our understanding of spiritual things, we must seek aid from our imagination to explain them and, like painters, form human images of them (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 402).

In Vico's conception, civilised people also turn to imagination when they need to convey something that is beyond their already established means of linguistic

expression. At the dawn of the human consciousness and language, creating metaphors/imaginative universals was surely a matter of necessity: 'Through the tropes and other rhetorical and poetic devices the imaginative universal is expanded into the language of mythological consciousness' (Verene 1991, p. 78). If modern people need to reach back to imaginative forms of thought only occasionally, for the first men, poetic characters were the primary expression of their image-based mode of thought. Imagination as a creative capacity and the specific kind of thinking it enables is an inextricable part of human thought and culture from the dawn of human consciousness till today:

Vico warns us throughout the NS (*New Science* -T. R.) that we must never forget how our dominant abstract mode of conceptual thinking originated, and that we should not ignore that we continue to rely on our imagination when our abstract mind fails us.' (Danesi 2000, p. 108)

Hobbes favours rational conceptual thinking over creatively imaginative one when he explains the creations of the gentile cultures as superstition that only served in barbarous times as a tool enabling the first leaders to keep their subjects obedient. It seems that he would gladly have seen all human thought and behaviour guided by

rationality from the very beginning<sup>6</sup> (2008 [1651], p. 14–15, 75–76; see also Abrams 1971, p. 265-266). Franco Ratto, in his article ‘Vico ed Hobbes: storia di un confronto’, tries to show how Hobbes considered pagan religion crucial to the political development of the society (2000, p. 86). But reading the *Leviathan* gives still the impression that for Hobbes, the properties intrinsic to archaic societies were themselves not exactly the driving force of the development but rather a by-product of dubious value. Hobbes states that ‘there was nothing, which a poet could introduce as a person in his poem, which they did not make either a *god*, or a *devil*’ (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 75). He clearly condemns the abundance of imaginative phenomena in the gentile cultures. It seems he considers using imagination creatively as a lapse of human thought. The human being, driven by ‘the endeavour of the heart’ has a need to understand its environment – to differentiate and correlate the stimuli. At this level, imagination is within its rights to act; but further on, in forming new relations between the images so formed, the human mind needs to be guided by rationality. To my mind, in the Hobbesian ideal human thought would have proceeded as directly as possible from sensory experience to rational philosophical thought.

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<sup>6</sup> ‘If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it, prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which, crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience.’ (Hobbes 2008 [1651], 15)

Vico's most explicit statements concerning Hobbes in the *New Science* relate to the very same question – the relation between mythological or religious and philosophical thought:

This [providential] principle of institutions<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hobbes failed to see among his own 'fierce and violent men,' because he went afield in search of principles and fell into error with the 'chance' of his Epicurus. He thought to enrich Greek philosophy by adding a great part which it certainly had lacked/.../: the study of man in the whole society of the human race. But the result was as unhappy as the effort was noble. Nor would Hobbes have conceived this project if the Christian religion had not given him the inspiration for it. For it demands of all mankind not merely justice but charity. From this point begins the refutation of the false dictum of Polybius that if there were philosophers in the world there would be no need of religions. For without religions no commonwealths can be born, and if there were no commonwealths in the world there would be no philosophers in it. (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 179)

Vico condemns Hobbes's treatment of the Gentiles, the first men: Hobbes fails to find the principles of rational thought, the aim to seek out relations of cause and effect in the

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<sup>7</sup> Vico refers to his principle that 'the world of peoples began everywhere with religion' (1984 [1744], 176). It is the first among his three principles, see Vico 1984 [1744], 333.

Gentile religions/civilisations/culture. He makes the error of all learned men, treating his own refined mind as the measure of all human knowledge and effort. Vico terms this *the conceit of the scholars*, ‘who will have it that what they know is as old as the world’ (1984 [1744], para. 127).

I see the value assigned to products of imagination in Vico’s and Hobbes’s works as fundamentally different. Vico acknowledges the kind of imaginative power the gentiles had as something that we can barely envision. It is something that civilised/modern people have become distanced from in the process of developing abstract thought:

It is /.../ beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualised, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body. That is why we said above [338] that we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentile humanity. (Vico 1984 [1744], para. 378)

In Hobbes’s eyes, human imagination creates an abundance of phenomena that the human kind cannot possibly be rid of too soon. There is no special kind of useful fruitfulness in archaic thought. Using imagination out of its assigned function of retaining sensory images seems for Hobbes to be nothing but a deviation from

rationality. Imagination does not have an independent value; its faults and virtues can be exhaustively assessed by applying rationality.

## **Conclusion**

There seems to be a deep-rooted compatibility in the way Vico and Hobbes approach image formation at its most basic level. The Hobbesian notion of conatus as interpreted by Barnouw is the cornerstone of this compatibility. The role of feeling in the formation of images, in perceiving something as existing and as being in relation to something, is pivotal for both Hobbes and Vico. This parallel is all the more valuable since it leads to the notion of significance. A further study into the connection of emotion and significance in the works of Vico and Hobbes may yield insights for understanding the relation of these phenomena in general.

The Hobbesian unity of sense and memory which enables the differentiation and correlation of primary images provides an important counterpart to the Vichian concept of primary sensory identity. As Vico hardly discusses this mechanism explicitly in his works, tracing a deep conceptual parallel is valuable for developing a more detailed understanding of it.

However, the creations of imagination observable at the level of culture and language, myths, metaphors, fantastic creatures, leave Vico and Hobbes at odds. Vico sees them as expressions of a specific mode of thought so different from ours that it has its own logic, its own universals. Hobbes, approaching the creations of imagination entirely from the point of view of philosophical reasoning, seems to be left with no other choice than to discard them as useless. Vico's is open to acknowledge a form of making sense of the human experience that is created on a completely different basis from the logic we are used to. This openness enables him to see the function of imagination as something more than primary image function and retention; even something more than the first correlations formed between the images. Hobbes might have subscribed to all of the functions above, but not to the Vichian invention that creates imaginative universals. The latter, as the cornerstone of primordial mentality, language and ultimately culture, remains solely Vico's domain.

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