



PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. PART 1: GIAMBATTISTA VICO

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Part 2 and Part 3

Introduction

This is the first of a three part “essay” on three thinkers—Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann and Johann Gottfried Herder—who were pioneers of a more historically sensitive anthropological and dialogical style of philosophy than the philosophies that have done so much to shape and do so much damage in the modern world. Originally what are now three essays were the final part of my book, [*Idolizing the Idea: A Critical History of Modern Philosophy*](#). When I finally found a publisher willing to take on a book that was deeply critical of both major paradigms of contemporary philosophy, which are commonly (if not very accurately) termed analytic and continental philosophy, they nevertheless balked at a 200,000-word manuscript by a writer from the academic boondocks with no reputation. I had no choice but to cut the final section, which, was for me the best part.

I had intended to write a second volume in which I would start with them, but when the *Postil* expressed interest in them, I thought I could spare any potential readers my tendency for prolixity. I only raise this point about their original context as chapters from a book criticising how modern philosophy has repeatedly succumbed to what I call the idolatry of the idea. That is modern philosophies—including ones which insist upon not succumbing to the sweet sirens of abstract ideas by being faithful to history (its spirits or laws) (Hegel and Marx), or the earth (Nietzsche, and the positivists and empiricists), or Being (Heidegger), or anti-totalism (post-structuralists)—constantly set up some unassailable idea, principle or model which it uses to judge us and our world, and what it repeatedly does is try and squeeze us into the idea. I call this position idea-ist—it is not the same as idealism, because materialists are as much idea-ists as idealists.

I, following the German Jewish philosopher [Franz Rosenzweig](#), who made this same point, also call this the know-All position. For it is based upon the belief that what the philosopher knows is the essence of things, or the All that really needs to be known. Religion is by its very nature dogmatic. And that is its strength—for its proscriptions proceed from (a) God, while our powers of reasoning are limited. That our powers of reasoning are very limited indeed is manifestly confirmed by philosophers themselves who do not agree on much at all, especially the larger questions of the nature of truth, or goodness. After more than two thousand years one may have thought if there were a truth it would have been found and appreciated at least by the philosophers who have gone in search of it.

In my book, I argue that what keeps happening in philosophy is that the questions keep shifting, and this has much to do with why the answers differ so much. I think this confirms the value of philosophy, but it is a confirmation that requires philosophers to have better appreciation of what they can and cannot do well. But such appreciation requires not succumbing to the temptation to think we know the All—and to accept that reality is, to use a religious term, “revealed.”

This in turn also means giving up another common philosophical habit—viz., the dismissal of very important contingencies which impact upon us and our world because the model or principle governing a philosophical position has occluded them. But as soon as philosophers think they know the essence of the world or us or history or whatever they think is the key to it All, they set up an optic of occlusion—and subsequently all manner of very important things become dismissed and widely ignored. Thus, for example, Heidegger dismisses mere empirical history as unimportant so he can focus upon the history of metaphysics and its role in shaping our world, but, as I argued in [*Idolizing*](#), this is foolish in that it leads to the belief that the only things that matter are what metaphysics has done, or what Heidegger himself takes as an alternative voicing to metaphysics, viz., poetry can do.

I do not wish to repeat criticisms about modern philosophy that I have made elsewhere, but I will repeat one other point I made in that book: the development of modern philosophy has created a metaphysical dyad of “determinism” (we are determined by laws and/or a system), and “voluntarism” (we can make the world and ourselves the way we want). And both of these one-sided views of life are false—and it does not become true by simply oscillating between them as Marx and Nietzsche or the contemporary progressives, who see capital, or gender, sexuality or race as determining people's behaviour, unless, like them, they can acknowledge it and thus change the world to make it how they want.

Let me be clear, principles and ideas can be very important, and the word idea is a perfectly useful word. Likewise, we have all sorts of ideas about all sorts of things, but in our day-to-day world we can easily distinguish between doing something and having a philosophy about doing something, and we can all see that the doing need not really be subordinate to the philosophy if we want to do it well. I might write on the Philosophy of Education or the Philosophy of Running or the Philosophy of Friendship or the Philosophy of Morals, or the Philosophy of Art and be a terrible educator, runner, friend, person and artist or even connoisseur of the arts. The philosophy is just a means to something—and we and our deeds are the something that we have knowledge for. At its best philosophy can help us organize the information we have—in this sense it can help us think better, but it

is not a stand alone thing. If someone is a terrible “reader” of affairs or people or the world, philosophy will not be that helpful.

The stuff we think with and about generally does not come from philosophy, unless we are thinking of some very specific philosophical thing; but even then, the information and associations we draw upon which can help us think better even about a philosophical claim or formulation is extra-philosophical. Likewise, although sometimes we may notice something with our senses that makes us reflect upon other associations or information we have and also while some kinds of activities and observations are conducted methodically, a great deal of what comes to mind when we think come from the names and words which trigger our feelings and other associations. And the names and words—and the value and weight we ascribe to them—in the overwhelming number of cases have arisen from collective experience and response to events.

Thus, it is when I speak of idea-ism I am talking of the tendency to take our ideas for the world and our actions as if they were all we needed to know, or even the most important thing. Yet it is obviously the case that the world and action are, with the aforementioned exception when a sensation is decisive, mediated in thought as names and words. I strongly recommend the works of [Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy](#) and Franz Rosenzweig who have made exhaustive cases for why names matter, and why ideas, and the philosophical fixation with ideas is a dangerous thing. [Idolizing the Idea](#) was in many ways simply a detailed account of the history of this fixation within modernity, and it was undertaken because this tendency has gone hand in hand with a more ideocratic and ideologically driven kind of politics and sociality that is making us strangers to ourselves and each other and making us spiritually sick.

The final section of my book was intended to make the case for the alternative to philosophical know-all-ism, and idea-ism that had already been undertaken by Vico, [Hamann](#) and [Herder](#). Vico and Herder have widely been hailed as precursors of anthropology, even if their readership is, as with Hamann, almost exclusive to scholars of their works, all three are also important figures in the history of hermeneutics. But their importance has generally been pretty limited in terms of the more dominant currents of philosophy. [Kierkegaard](#) loved Hamann, and Hamann was also appreciated by contemporaries such as Schelling and Hegel—but most Histories of Philosophy do not devote a chapter to him or Herder, or Vico.

Anyone familiar with Isaiah Berlin will have immediately recognized that they are the subject matter of one of his books, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, a work that took a

previously unpublished essay by Berlin on Hamann and added it to the early book *Vico and Herder*. Berlin's discussion of the three is scholarly and judicious, if somewhat uneven. I think he is most comfortable and perceptive with Vico, he genuinely appreciates Herder, but I do not think he conveys just how encyclopaedic and astutely philosophical Herder is, and I do not think he "gets" what Hamann was doing at all.

But my major criticism of Berlin is what I consider to be the simplistic way he sets up two camps, those who are on the side of Enlightenment and reason and science, and those, like Vico, Herder and Hamann who aren't. Clearly, he has some sympathy with their objections to the Enlightenment, but he sees rampant nationalism and Nazism as the political-cultural progeny of the anti-Enlightenment. I just find this a very unhelpful and unconvincing way to think not only about them and their legacy, but philosophy and ideas and movements more generally. I have no intention of giving a developed critique of Berlin, and I do not want to give the impression that Berlin is all wrong or not worth reading, I will just say that what follows is an alternative to his way of thinking about the three and their significance.

As will be evident from the above, my interest in Vico, Hamann and Herder cannot really be separated from a more general view about philosophy which I have developed over almost fifty years, and which is a view that, to put it mildly, is not widely known or shared. Thus, I beg the reader's indulgence for the following introductory lead into the essays on Vico, Hamann and Herder, as a way of better preparing him for what it is I am comparing them with when I discuss their contribution.

Hermeneutical Openings For Philosophical Anthropology

With the Pre-Socratics, philosophy commences with questions that seek to identify the overarching principles that equip philosophy for its own particular modality of inquiry. This initial search is for what is "eternal," what provides an implacable and stable, even static means of orientation. With Plato it leads to a triumvirate of ideas—the good, the true and the beautiful. That we can immediately recognize the three domains of philosophy—moral philosophy, epistemology, and aesthetics—and their underpinning ontology and metaphysics is indicative of the importance of this aspect of the philosophical quest. The "pitch and jag" of questions posed to what are ostensibly answers to these, and subsequently other philosophical questions is, however, responsible for paradigmatic movements within philosophy's unique "seam of speech."

Aristotle's questions ultimately lead him to open up another modality of orientation. This modality focusses upon the "structures" of things. To be sure Plato had brushed against this modality, but he does not delve into it to anywhere near the same degree or extent as Aristotle. While it certainly has multiple implications for morals (and a moral exploration of politics), epistemology, and aesthetics (consider, for example, how Aristotle's *Poetics* attempts to identify not only the nature but also the structure of tragedy), it also affects how one thinks about the ontological and metaphysical terrain. For all the differences that come with this new clustering of questions and the answers that then open out into new questions, the quest is not able to throw off completely the stabilizing factors of philosophy itself—Aristotle too appeals to truth and morality and a kind of beauty.

While the early modern metaphysicians and philosophers of nature are generally identified as anti-Aristotelian, and were so in important respects, this particular aspect of philosophical development and importance is not thrown off in the paradigms that encompasses not only philosophers as epistemologically, metaphysically and ontologically diverse as Descartes, Hobbes, Locke, Leibniz, Malebranche, Berkeley, but even those who branch out far beyond naturalism and veer into more historical and social considerations. In so far as historical and social analyses appeal to some sovereign idea, principle such as equality, or freedom from domination (as with Marx or the post structuralists), or culture (as in Nietzsche), or a cluster of contingencies, they remain susceptible to questions about the truth or moral character (with the kind of aesthetic emphases that have come to dominate from the latter part of the nineteenth century, "the beautiful" has lost its place as the sovereign idea of aesthetics).

To repeat, then, philosophy itself never completely shakes off the opening pitch of its questions, though what is "jagged" out of the answers will change.

But there is also a third line of questioning and orientation, and it is this line of orientation that takes greater account of social symbolization and semiosis, as it delves more deeply into the socio-historical-anthropological conditions, and the degree of impact and plasticity involved in our world-making. It is not the case that it completely abandons the original pitch, though as it evolves, that pitch dims substantially (this is evident, for example, if one compared Herder's numerous concessions to the good, true and the beautiful, with his progeny, Rosenstock-Huessy, who has little good to say about these eternal philosophical beacons). The same is true of its relationship to the Aristotelian innovation.

Nevertheless, its own insights and quarries retrieved from its quests redound upon the "eternal" seam,

as well as the more structural kind of analyses. But it does make historicity as well as culture take on a far greater philosophical significance. Further, it also creates a far more complicated picture of the problems that we confront than are conjured up by those seeking to solve our problems along more voluntarist lines. That is, the more we enter into this third paradigm the less we are likely to believe that our problems will be solved by placing excessive reliance upon either our knowledge of natural or social "laws," or the good will and "faith" of those seeking change.

While this third paradigm, philosophical anthropology, does not completely eliminate the horizon of the eternal with its "stabilizers," it nevertheless also opens this up further. For in entering into a deeper appreciation of the social, history and culture, it must look beyond the strictly philosophical virtues and answers, not only to other narrative modes, but also to the importance of names themselves and thus it inevitably goes back beyond "ideas" For it is by responding to the range and chain of names that have left deep enough impressions on us to see their importance, so that we become conscious of the historical dimension of experience.

We should also mention from the outset, as will be developed throughout these three essays, that this should not be mistaken for "historicism" of the sort in which all meaning may only be found by sinking so deeply into historical detail there is nothing left to do but recount those details, or else appeal to them as if they themselves bore all authority for future orientation. Future and past both beckon us in our present. As we shall see in Vico, who is a pioneer of this third philosophical approach, the "eternal" and the structural are not completely overthrown by this new approach, yet, for all that, it remains another approach, replete with different kinds of questions and hence answers.

Vico's New Science And The Opening Up Of The Idea To Past Ages

A brief comparison of Vico with David Hume is a helpful way to illustrate what is so original about Vico's approach to philosophy.

Hume had argued that the strict divide between understanding and imagination which had been so important to the metaphysical revolution of the new philosophies was ultimately unsustainable: understanding and reason were not to be divorced so sharply from imagination, passion and impression. The importance Hume ascribed to imagination, impression and association in the context of "common life" thus helped draw philosophy back into the world as we live it, as opposed to what world a thinker wants us to (or thinks that we should) live in. Nevertheless, Thomas Reid's critique that Hume

still hung on to philosophical bric-à-brac that came from the “way of ideas” was important. For having invoked “common life,” Hume wipes away the different forms of life that peoples have over the ages by placing too much weight upon the constancy of human nature. As [Leon Pompa recounts](#) of Hume's position:

Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations, and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behaviour.

This was what enabled Hume, in spite of all his scepticism, to have such “certainty” about his own enlightened faith. We may indeed see certain constants across the ages if we focus upon certain human needs and behaviours—and on occasion it might make much sense to take note of such constants as the desire to survive, or the need to eat, or the extraction of resources and the opportunity costs involved, or the use of the imagination. But there is a serious problem that Hume bypasses, which Pompa raises against Hume's position:

...such a conception of the nature of ideas is unacceptable when we consider their operation in the social and historical world. Here we are dealing with social agents, and it is impossible for anybody to be a social agent without understanding the concept of the type of social agent in question. One cannot, for example, be a judge or a school-teacher, unless one's conduct reveals an understanding of what one should do in the legitimate fulfilment of one's role. Indeed, the requirement is somewhat stronger than this. For not merely is it necessary to know what one's role involves, but it is necessary also to know that others know what is involved. One cannot, in other words, act as a judge unless one's conduct both conforms to a shared understanding of the role and to the knowledge that that understanding is shared. For, in the last resort, it is one's success or failure in being able to show that one has acted in accordance with what one knows to be shared that determines the legitimacy of one's actions as a judge. Acting in a social role thus presupposes possession of a social concept which one knows to be shared. This need not be something which one can explicate theoretically, but it must be such that one can use it. It is no objection to this that we use the concept of a natural object in order to can use it, should one be challenged, in defence of one's claim to have acted legitimately in that role.

It follows from this that ideas cannot, in the social world, have only the secondary ontological status which Hume ascribes to them. For an idea to have this secondary status, it is necessary that that of which it is an idea could have existed in the absence of the idea itself. But this is not possible in the case of social agents, for to be a social agent is just to act in accordance with certain conventions and in the knowledge that those conventions are known to be shared. In the social world, therefore, consciousness of such ideas is constitutive: without it there could be no such world.

Unlike Hume, Vico had extricated himself completely from his earlier (Cartesian) mechanistic philosophical influences, and his cognizance of the plasticity of the human imagination and its impact upon sociality ultimately added the dimension of the cadences of lived-time to our self-understanding. While Vico's *New Science* is "therefore a history of human ideas," its novelty consists in the recognition that "ideas" are themselves deeply dependent upon human development. And although, he acknowledges philosophical antecedents in *Jean Bodin* and Francis Bacon's recognition of the importance of myth in aiding human instruction, and, even more pertinently, the importance of "following the method of philosophizing made most certain by Francis Bacon, Lord of Verulam," he transfers the "idea" to "this world of nations," thus "carrying it over from the things of nature... to the civil affairs of mankind."

In general, then, Vico observes that philosophy (including Bacon's) has not hitherto "reflected on and seen" the actual or historical development of human sociality, and hence also it has failed to grasp what we can discover about the growth of the human mind. To understand that development, requires philosophy taking a new methodological step by turning to the signs that humanity over the ages has left behind in its action which provide evidence of "the human will," that is "all histories of the languages, customs and deeds of peoples in war and peace." The *New Science* then proposes that:

...philosophy undertakes to examine philology (that is, the doctrine of everything that depends on the human will; for example, all histories of the languages, customs and deeds of peoples in war and peace), of which, because of the deplorable obscurity of causes and almost infinite variety of effects, philosophy has had almost a horror of treating.

And,

This queen of the sciences, by the axiom [314] that "the sciences must begin where their subject

*matters began," took its start when the first men began to think humanly, and not when the philosophers began to reflect on human ideas (as in an erudite and scholarly little book recently published [by Brucker] under the title *Historia philosophica doctrinae de ideis*, which comes down to the latest controversies between the two foremost minds of our age, Leibniz and Newton).*

The method of the "New Science" thus requires a thorough study of the writings of antiquity, primarily Greek and Roman. Moreover, one of the most conspicuous feature of Vico's astonishing originality in the New Science lay in treating Homer as a key to unlocking not only antiquity, but as an aid for identifying different ages in their decline and emergence—the patriarchal giant age of the gods symbolized by the cyclops, and the heroic, which is the primary content of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—as well as a close philological treatment of other ancient materials, particularly Plato and Roman authors (Tacitus, Varro, Livy, the Twelve Tables, Plautus, Plutarch). But Vico also finds supporting evidence in what he knows of the Egyptians, Germanic tribes, Chaldeans and Scythians in order to detect what kinds of ideas predominated in different ages. Vico also identifies how the ideas and the institutional contexts in which they emerge relate. The following rather lengthy passage provides Vico's summary of the core insights into the three different major formative ages that his New Science has uncovered as providing the basic, and recurrent stages of the development of the gentiles:

(1) The age of the gods, in which the gentiles believed they lived under divine governments, and everything was commanded them by auspices and oracles, which are the oldest things in profane history. (2) The age of the heroes, in which they reigned everywhere in aristocratic commonwealths, on account of a certain superiority of nature which they held themselves to have over the plebs. (3) The age of men, in which all men recognized themselves as equal in human nature, and therefore there were established first the popular commonwealths and then the monarchies, both of which are forms of human government, as we observed a short while ago.

In harmony with these three kinds of nature and government, three kinds of language were spoken which compose the vocabulary of this Science: (1) That of the time of the families when gentile men were newly received into humanity. This, we shall find, was a mute language of signs and physical objects having natural relations to the ideas they wished to express. (2) That spoken by means of heroic emblems, or similitudes, comparisons, images, metaphors, and natural descriptions, which make up the great body of the heroic language which was spoken

at the time the heroes reigned. (3) Human language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and which is proper to the popular commonwealths and monarchical states; a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound. Hence, among all nations, once the laws had been put into the vulgar tongue, the science of laws passed from the control of the nobles...

Hitherto, among all nations, the nobles had kept the laws in a secret language as a sacred thing, for it will be found that everywhere the nobles were also priests. That is the natural reason for the secrecy of the laws among the Roman patricians until popular liberty arose. Now these are the same three languages that the Egyptians claimed had been spoken before in their world, corresponding exactly both in number and in sequence to the three ages that had run their course before them. (1) The hieroglyphic or sacred or secret language, by means of mute acts. This is suited to the uses of religion, which it is more important to attend to than to talk about. (2) The symbolic, by means of similitudes, such as we have just seen the heroic language to have been. (3) The epistolary or vulgar, which served the common uses of life.

One major implication of Vico's work, that would prove enormously fecund for anthropologists as well as historians, is the recognition that reality is never fully encompassed by the social divisions and allotments intrinsic to a specific type of social reproduction. The imagination and institutions, ideas and experience are so closely bound up with each other, that we need to be conscious of the very different "social imaginaries" of different "life-worlds," as they would later be called. This is also commensurate with us taking seriously ideas of a pre-philosophical ordering of reality rather than dismissing what does not conform to our more philosophical deliberations as mere delusions or superstitions.

With the *New Science*, Vico was seeking to become to the social and historical world what Aristotle had been to Logic and Newton to Physics: the discoverer of a great continent of learning, which once entered, forever changes how one sees things. We should also note that while Vico speaks of the will (and thus, as Berlin notes, continues in the Renaissance spirit so eloquently expressed by [Pico della Mirandola](#) in *On the Dignity of Man*), the metaphysic is not one of the subsequent idea-ist and voluntarist offshoots of the "will" which promises to set us free from the burdens specific to an age if we allow it flight (as, say, we find with [Deleuze's](#) de-territorial-ization).

Indeed, the ever-conspicuous metaphysical presence of providence in the *New Science* militates

against this. For its regular invocation in the New Science is in large part to demonstrate a profound truth that voluntarism misses: viz, that what we are doing individually and what we are actually doing collectively, or what we will to achieve, and what we actually leave behind of ourselves are not congruent: *"...for out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage, for the sake of which they would live like wild beasts in the wilderness, it has made the civil orders by which they may live in human society."* In so far as good comes out of our willing this is due to powers beyond our ken, and hence beyond our willing, which Vico identifies as Providence. At the same time, Vico does make the famous claim, repeated by Marx to his own voluntarist end:

...this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind. And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also describes them. Thus, our Science proceeds exactly as does geometry, which, while it constructs out of its elements or contemplates the world of quantity, itself creates it; but with a reality greater in proportion to that of the orders having to do with human affairs, in which there are neither points, lines, surfaces, nor figures. And this very fact is an argument, a reader, that these proofs are of a kind divine, and should give thee a divine pleasure; since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing.

To be sure many of Vico's philological readings have since then proved unsustainable. In part this also rested on his mistake that because man makes his world, this world might be easier to know than the natural one—for if anything is evident today, it is that in so far as we are all enmeshed in stories, it is no less difficult to move outside of our story-telling situation to really listen to story that comes from another set of appeals, contingencies and ways of seeing and making reality, than it is to be inducted into the natural sciences.

The latter requires intellectual ability, but the former requires a willingness (that far too few are willing to make) of self-dissolution, of getting out of one's way and own "identity" so that one can open up to another way of being in and viewing the world. Nevertheless, what still rings true is that 'the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the beginnings of humanity that have been adopted by entire nations and by all the scholars' is that *"whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand."*

For when the former [i.e., 'entire nations'] began to take notice of them [i.e. the beginnings of humanity] and the latter [the scholars] to investigate them, it was on the basis of their own

enlightened, cultivated and magnificent times that they judged the origins of humanity, which must nevertheless by the nature of things have been small, crude and quite obscure.

In the main, and prior to David Hume and Thomas Reid, the mechanistic philosophers believed it their job to rescue "experience" from "common sense," but what Vico has noticed is how human experiences of times long since passed have been taken as confirming or conforming to more contemporaneous philosophical concerns and manners of thinking, something he sees as particularly conspicuous and damaging in the natural law philosophies of [Grotius](#) and [Pufendorf](#). That is, philosophers all too frequently reflect upon other times and ages and find there aught but diminished versions of their own philosophical ideas staring back at them. Vico had also understood the challenges that await the "civilized mind" in exploring the poetic sensitivity, unencumbered by the vast array of accumulated experience that develops with numeracy and literature, the division of labour and urban life. Thus, he urged that the philological philosopher needs to "listen" to the "language" which had helped form the social experience of an age and hence was intrinsic to the understanding and "reasons" of its makers, and which is not to be confused with the "reasons" of philosophers:

...the nature of our civilized minds is so detached from the senses, even in the vulgar, by abstractions corresponding to all the abstract terms our languages abound in, and so refined by the art of writing, and as it were spiritualized by the use of numbers, because even the vulgar know how to count and reckon, that it is naturally beyond our power to form the vast image of this, mistress called "Sympathetic Nature." Men shape the phrase with their lips but, have nothing in their minds; for what they have in mind is falsehood, which is nothing; and their imagination no longer avails to form a vast false image. It is equally beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, 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.

In spite of the magnitude of the task, the worlds of different ages are not completely incommensurable for our understanding, rather we need to expand our ideas and understanding in such a way that we can enter into an appreciation of the making of another age. Above all that means philosophy must take a completely different direction than that required by Descartes and the new metaphysics more generally. Although his reputation would grow long after his death, Vico opened up the importance of method for understanding certain kinds of processes and identifying the patterns that may be

discernible within them. Indeed, more generally, one of the great achievements of philosophy is to sensitize us to patterns, and hence orders heretofore unnoticed; the temptation, though to be avoided, is to focus so much upon the pattern that one ignores the great array of discordances, the processes of unravelling and turbulence, the "white noise" and "fuzzy logic" that produces a new pattern completely outside our ken and range of anticipations and expectations. But thinking itself, and not just philosophy, works with patterns, as well as with unique persons, events, memories and actions.

Vico had drawn attention to the fact that different ages with their different institutions were built upon different social imaginaries, and he required that our understanding of the "history of ideas" find access to the very different underpinnings of how ideas were made in different ages. Moreover, he also recognized how these patterns would repeat themselves. This was in recognition of the cyclical nature of societies and peoples—the "gentiles"—whose ideational and institutional formations were not based on the attempt to break the cycles of nature, and the "tyranny" of those cycles. Thus, although Vico also invokes the providence of the divine mind, he only occasionally deploys biblical examples.

Scholars have been divided over whether Vico's cyclical account of the ages which was limited to the gentile nations was a contrivance for avoiding persecution. But there is a strong argument (developed by Franz Rosenzweig in the *Star of Redemption* without any reference to Vico) that the covenant at the basis of Jewish existence was a unique decision of a unique people with a unique God, whose revelations occurred through time and whose promise was of a time and world to come.

It is true that one can find in Plato's *Laws* the germ cell of the idea of providential gods ("being good with all goodness, possess such care of the whole as is most proper to themselves"), and this is later picked up and developed by [Plotinus](#) and [Proclus](#). And although Vico's conception of God as divine mind is more Greek philosophical than biblical, the fully developed idea of providence—as it is in Judaism and subsequently Christianity—goes hand in hand with the revelation in 'Song of Songs' (again Rosenzweig draws this point out) that *"love is as strong as death."* Daniel will prophesy that the kingdom of gold will give way to inferior kingdoms until finally the earthly kingdom is no more than iron mixed with clay, but *"the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed; and the kingdom shall not be left to other people; it shall break in pieces and consume all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever."* In the Middle Ages this prophecy underpinned the notion of the church as the [translatio imperii](#), the church as God's eternal representation on earth, a testament to the defiance of the birth and extinction of human empires.

Irrespective of Vico's faith, when we turn to Johann Georg Hamann we find, as Berlin rightly saw, a somewhat kindred spirit to Vico in so far as the importance ascribed to language and the imagination serves as a means to waken us to our sociality and historicity. But whereas Vico has tied his project to the "history of ideas" by opening up philosophy to philology, something Hamann is also doing, Hamann poses a far greater challenge in his restoration of the figurative imagination. And whereas Vico retreated to the distant past to show philosophy its shortcomings, Hamann simply had to point to the world around him as it was still being made by people driven by their biblical faith and their figurative imaginations.

Part 2 and Part 3

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The featured images shows, "Der Einzug des Königs Rudolf von Habsburg in Basel 1273 (The Entry of King Rudolf of Habsburg into Basel 1273)," painted by Franz Pforr, ca. 1809-1810.

