

Chapter 2

The Providence of Associated Minds: Agency in the Thought of Giambattista Vico and the Origins of Social and Cultural Psychology

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I would like to tackle the concept of agency in psychology from the particular perspective of the seventeenth-to-eighteenth-century scholar Giambattista Vico. Vico (1668–1744) was indeed a philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist from the Kingdom of Naples, South Italy (Fig. 2.1), whose influence has been fundamental, though sometimes neglected, for the development of some ideas that became part of the legacy of social and cultural psychology. His *opus magnum* was *The New Science* (Vico 1948), subtitled in its third and final edition originally published in 1744: “about the common nature of nations”. This work was the final leg of an intellectual journey, during which Vico tried to build an innovative project of “a rational civil theology of divine providence” (Vico 1948, p. 4). At that time, it was commonly understood that studying nature in order to admire and praise the work of God through its creation was a legitimate task of science. This natural theology argument enabled the full deployment of natural sciences, but also created a divide between studying nature and human beings. Natural laws were indeed subject only to the will of God, and these manifestations were readable because they were written in the language of mathematics, like Galilei stated (Galilei 1960). But the laws governing human actions were a different matter. Between human beings and God, there were two relevant open issues: the original sin and the free will.

As Smith (Chap. 1, this volume) argues, accounting for the reasons of human behavior was a realm of metaphysics. Human beings are not mechanically obeying to the laws of nature, they are rather likely to violate them, for the good or for the bad, and the need for accounting for the violation was the reason for the birth of psychology, as part of the metaphysics, precisely.

Giambattista Vico aimed at developing an original and all-embracing solution to the problem of explaining the relationship between human mind, civilization, and divine design. His answer was to develop a whole philosophical system that has been one of the grounds for the development of social and cultural psychology, as I will argue in the following sections. The reason for Vico’s new way of understand-

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Fig. 2.1 The statue of Vico in the center of Naples



ing the relationship between mind and culture being extremely innovative at that time is that he conceptualized the complex process of co-development of mankind as historically situated, language based, and activity based. The originality of Vico was that of making the products of human activity based on language—such as art, law, myths, religion, etc.—an acceptable object of science (Burke 1985). All human products of social and practical life in general that could be referred to the domain of language were expelled from scientific discourse by Cartesianism (Berlin 1974), to the extent that they could not be understood and represented in mathematical terms. Cartesianism indeed rejected all the forms of knowledge related to the use of language, such as rhetoric, as mere forms of presentation and orientation of beliefs. Vico instead “hoped to find almost a compendium of that inductive method which he attempted to ‘transfer from natural things to human and civil things’” (de Mas and Houck 1971, p. 90). The general principles of his view are

- (a) that human nature and society are not fixed or stationary, but rather are in a state of continuous change; (b) that the changes occur in evolutionary cycles influenced by human events; (c) that despite epistemological limitations, it is scientifically possible to investigate social behavior across eras in order to reveal events that influence the recursive evolution of society, as well as the genesis of theories of human behavior and society. (Rosnow 1978, p. 1322)

2.1 The New Science

The intellectual project that Vico pursued all his life was that of accounting for the whole history of human development of civilization as well as to the full range of human products, arts, law, customs, language, institutions, etc. This scientific

enterprise was possible because the object of the “new science” is made by the humans themselves. “Now, as geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does our Science, but with a reality greater by just so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines, surfaces, and figures are” (Vico 1948, pp. 104–105). From the metaphysical point of view, instead, Vico aimed at reconciling the immanent role of divine providence with the historical development of civilization and the richness of human psychology. Therefore, he developed an anthropological metaphysics, whose units of analysis were the complex products of human *ingegno* rather than the atomistic and self-referential concept of Descartes. “Vico’s active epistemology presupposes an internal relationship between creators (that is, God and man), creation, and knowledge. He who has created something can know what he has created. God created the ‘world of nature’ and therefore He alone can truly know this world; man, on the other hand, created and knows the two ‘worlds’ of ‘quantity’ and of ‘nations’” (Tristram 1983, p. 148). Thus, a central role is played by human agency, whose distinctive characteristics are will and intellect. Will is “the property of human nature which not even God can take from man without destroying him” (Vico 1948, p. 109)—that is the foundation for his active production of his own world:

This authority is the free use of the will, the intellect on the other hand being a passive power subject to truth. For from this first point of all human things, men began to exercise the freedom of the human will to hold in check the motions of the body, either to subdue them entirely or to give them better direction (this being the impulse proper to free agents, as we have said above in the Method). (Vico 1948, p. 109)

Vico introduces a fundamental difference in philosophical anthropology. In fact, he conceptualizes the history of civilization as progressive development of the relationship between will and intellect, with the latter taking over the former. Almost in a Vygotskian way, Vico argues that the distinctive feature of human nature has been the capability of creating products of civilization—namely divinity worship, marriage, and burials—as self-regulatory systems that were able to act “on the bestial passions” of primitive men and “transformed them into human passions” (Vico 1948, p. 90). The study of this historical and psychological collective process forms a specific object, for which “this Science must therefore be a rational civil theology of divine providence” (Vico 1948, p. 90). The role of divine providence is in fact that of guiding, setting the conditions for the survival of the human race. Beyond that, civilization follows its own multiple pathways, generating the “world of nations in all the extent of its places, times and varieties” (Vico 1948, p. 92). Through this innovative conceptual operation, Vico carved out a specific space for a science of human activity that became autonomous with respect to both theology and natural philosophy:

Our Science is therefore a history of human ideas, on which it seems the metaphysics of the human mind must proceed. This queen of the sciences, by the axiom 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. (Vico 1948, p. 92)

2.2 Homo Faber

The metaphysical view about human agency that Vico outlines constitutes the framework for his anthropological and psychological concept of agency. “Vico finds the underlying basis of this pattern in a metaphysics of the human mind” (Pompa 2002, p. xxvi). The principles of this view of agency are (a) that human beings are essentially imaginative and poietic creatures, (b) the interdependence of empirical and rational, (c) the historical and collective dimension of human behavior, and (d) the central role of language in creating human reality. I argue that these principles will be elaborated by several scholars in the eighteenth century, leading to the development of social and cultural psychology.

2.2.1 *Imaginative Function*

The first point concerns Vico’s theory of human psyche. In fact, he found the distinctive characteristic of human psyche in its capability of imagination. With a hazardous anachronism, I would say that imagination in Vico is what we call today symbolic capability. In his own words, indeed, imagination “is nothing but the springing up again of reminiscences, and ingenuity or invention is nothing but the working over of what is remembered” (Vico 1948, p. 236). It is a progressive distancing from the senses through the creation of images that allows the construction of abstract concepts. Imaginative capability is based on three fundamental functions of the mind: *fantasia*, the capability to imitate and change; *ingegno*, the capability to create correspondence between things; and *memoria*, the capability to remember. Nevertheless, there is a fundamental anthropological difference between primitive men, who own these capabilities as a result of the divine providence farsightedness, and contemporary human beings. In fact, in the course of historical civilization, humans also develop the function of rational thinking:

Now, since the human mind at the time we are considering had not been refined by any art of writing nor spiritualized by any practice of reckoning or reasoning, and had not developed its powers of abstraction by the many abstract terms in which languages now abound, as we said above in the Method, it exercised all its force in these three excellent faculties which came to it from the body. All three appertain to the primary operation of the mind whose regulating art is topics, just as the regulating art of the second operation of the mind is criticism; and as the latter is the art of judging, so the former is the art of inventing, as has been said above in the last Corollaries of the Poetic Logic. And since naturally the discovery or invention of things comes before criticism of them, it was fitting that the infancy of the world should concern itself with the first operation of the human mind, for the world then had need of all inventions for the necessities and utilities of life, all of which had been provided before the philosophers appeared (Vico 1948, p. 236).

In this sense, primitive and modern minds are incommensurable, thought the imaginative capability has not disappeared but became a legacy of mankind that has been educated, but also weakened, by the development of rational thinking in the history of civilization. Thus, we cannot have full access to the mind of primitive peoples, but indirectly through the study of the products of their mind, mainly language, myths, and art.

2.2.2 *Empirical and Rational*

Following Francis Bacon, Giambattista Vico always considers the theoretical and practical dimensions of knowledge in relationship. Knowledge is made of understanding things as they came to be as they are at present. As human cognition is limited in his capability to know the real world, only God has the full understanding of phenomena and their causes, as He made them and knows the whole history. “But this contrast also implies a parallel. God knows (*cognoscit*) because he creates and disposes; man knows (*novit*) because he makes and composes. The active component of human knowing is the key to man’s participation in the divine form of cognition, *intelligere*” (Barnouw 1980, p. 616). Since the origins of civilization, indeed, knowledge has been related to action, or making, to the extent that the primary requirement of any form of knowledge was the survival of the individuals and their kin in the wild nature. Vico calls this dawning of civilization the poetic age, understanding poetic in the twofold sense of its Greek etymology “Poïesis” (Ancient Greek: ποιησις), deriving from the verb ποιέω, which means “to make,” and of the imaginative work of poetry, which was the first form of structured linguistic knowledge of ancient civilizations.

Vico’s theory of knowledge was first formulated in his 1710 work *The Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* (Vico 1988), and fully developed in *The New Science*. In the former, he stated that, in ancient Latin, the words *verum* (the true) and *factum* (the created) were interchangeable. The two words had similar meanings which Vico understands as “to know” and “to make.” Thus, the knowledge has its object in the products of human activity, at least the form of knowledge that can be attained by human beings. As “science consists in a knowledge of the genesis of things” (Vico 1988, p. 248), the only object whose origins are knowable is the product of human activity itself. There are indeed different kinds of truth: (a) the “truth” (*verum*), which only pertains to God; (b) the “common sense” (*verum certum*) which is the practical knowledge and belief achieved through practices and consent; and (c) the “truth through making” (*verum factum*), which is the scientific knowledge about all the products of human activity.

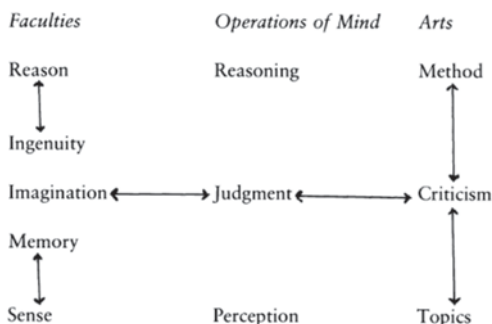
We are now know all the elements of the complex theory of knowledge elaborated by Vico (Fig. 2.2).

Knowledge originates from the faculty of sense, which at psychological level corresponds to the elaboration of perception. This first material, which is elaborated at the pragmatic level of language, constitutes the experiential fuel for the mind’s faculties of *fantasia*, *ingegno*, and *memoria*:

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. This axiom gives us the universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to express the things of the mind and spirit. (Vico 1948, p. 70)

The mental activity of connecting, recollecting, and elaborating experiences is progressively crystallized in language. Primarily, it takes the form of metaphor, which, according to Vico, is an elliptical and condensate mythical image. Metaphor is also

Fig. 2.2 Elements in the production and assessment of knowledge in Vico. (Tristram 1988, p. 360)



the primary form in which knowledge circulates among collectivities. It does not require analytical skills, as its linguistic and iconic form allows an immediate and total apprehension of its meaning. For instance, when we say “motherland,” there is no need for exploding the full sense of the word because the affective, historical, and experiential meaning of the metaphor is immediately graspable by anyone, producing a quite predictable effect in any listener, no matter which nation he/she belongs to:

Men at first feel without observing, then they observe with a troubled and agitated spirit, finally they reflect with a clear mind. This axiom is the principle of the poetic sentences, which are formed with senses of passions and affections, in contrast with philosophic sentences, which are formed by reflection and reasoning. The more the latter rise toward universals, the closer they approach the truth; the more the former take hold of particulars, the more certain they become. (Vico 1948, pp. 67–68)

But this elaboration is made possible by the framing of the culture that provides not only a repertoire of metaphoric images but also the guide for the anticipation of judgment about new experiences: this is the fundamental idea of common sense:

Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two origins of the natural law of nations. (...). Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the whole human race. (Vico 1948, p. 57)

It is only through this complex process of elaboration and progressive abstraction that human beings can attain a level of rational reflection. Nevertheless, Vico is very clear in stating that logical reasoning, even though is the highest form of mental activity, is firmly grounded on the other faculties:

That is, the human mind does not understand anything of which it has had no previous impression (which our modern metaphysicians call ‘occasion’) from the senses. 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*. (Vico 1948, p. 98)

2.2.3 *Historical and Collective Dimensions*

The theory of agency elaborated by Vico is based on the idea that primitive human nature was moved by a survival instinct for the preservation of the kin. Progressively, during the conglomeration of primitive families, “must have sprung the impulse (*conato*) proper to the human will, to hold in check the motions impressed on the mind by the body, so as either to quiet them altogether, as becomes the sage, or at least to direct them to better use, as becomes the civil man” (Vico 1948, p. 90). Thus, Vico identifies a third type of agency beside divine providence and individual agency. There is a form of collective agency, whose expression is common sense, that is oriented toward the construction of social organizations that crystalize around the three primordial poetic institutions: worship, marriage, and burials. These forms of collective organization are directly based on the mind’s psychological functions, that is why they are common to all the historical forms of civilization. But at the same time, they produced a wide variety of historically and geographically situated variations, according to the concrete conditions in which they developed. “Whenever the time and fashion is thus and so, such and not otherwise are the things that come into being” (Vico 1948, p. 58).

The impulse (*conato*) to form collective organizations is the link between the will of individual agents and the formation of collective bodies. According to Vico, these organizations followed general laws of historical development and modes of thought. The first stage, called the age of gods, was characterized by the poetic logic, in which an undifferentiated fear of natural phenomena led to the creation of anthropomorphic divinities as explanation. The first universal poetic character was Jupiter, as a personification of the thunder. Once this image is created as a form of explanation, it becomes a shared category on which primitive collective nomad groups self-regulate their mutual behavior. The second stage, the age of heroes, is characterized by the stabilization of collective groups in a given territory, in which some prominent families take control in the form of oligarchies. They aggregate larger groups of people to whom they offer protection and safety as rulers in change of subjection. The cultural forms that characterize this period are those of semi-divine heroes that emerge as intermediate figures between the divinity and the laymen. At this stage, the typical poetic universal character is that of Hercules. Finally, in a third stage, the people that were formerly subjugated take the initiative of demanding for the political power and the equal rights over the oligarchy. This is the stage in which the poetic forms of culture are overcome by a more prosaic and vulgar form of language, which is typical of the democracies. In this process, the collective agency is progressively moving from an external and hyperuranic agent to collectives of people. At the same time, the role of imaginative and poetic thinking is decreasing while the reasoning mode of thought is emerging.

This account of the development of collective agency, directly related to the development of different modes of thought and different linguistic forms, will constitute one of the theoretical grounds for the social and cultural psychology that will be born a century later.

2.2.4 Language

Another fundamental topic of Vico's new science is the relationship between language, culture, and mind. Language, thought, and civilization are strictly related. Even though Vico does not overlap language with alphabetic languages, he understands language as a wider symbolic capability that originates from mute and bodily communication. Thus, language includes images, hieroglyphics—that is iconic writing—and finally, alphabetic writing. Vico states that psychosocial processes are crystallized in language, which is the vehicle of cultural continuity. It is also the primary object of investigation for an historical and developmental science of civilization:

Vulgar traditions must have had public grounds of truth, by virtue of which they came into being and were preserved by entire peoples over long periods of time. It will be another great labor of this Science to recover these grounds of truth which, in the passage of years and the changes in languages and customs, has come down to us enveloped in falsehood. (Vico 1948, p. 58)

Thus, language study, or philology, is the only scientific tool we have to investigate the mind of ancients. The study of metaphors is, for instance, an example of how we can reconstruct the psychological processes that led to the creation of common sense concepts (Danesi 1995).

Language has also fundamental cognitive, ethical, and social functions in the development of civilizations. As a professor of eloquence at the University of Naples, Vico was perfectly aware of the pragmatic and creative role of language. Following again Bacon, Vico develops the idea that language is important not only as an analytical tool but also as a heuristic tool for “the invention of arguments designed to investigate the matter at hand” (Perkinson 1962, p. 35). The cognitive function of language is then to operate as a tool of *critica*—that is, after Descartes, the function of rigorous analysis of knowledge in order to seek the truth but also as a tool for *topica*—that is the development of arguments that “function to uncover new knowledge pertinent to the question in hand” (Perkinson 1962, p. 35). For Vico, language has then an inherent abductive power, as in the case of metaphor, which is fundamental for the advancement of knowledge. “Today, *critica* exclusively is cultivated: *topica*, far from being placed first in order, is completely forced out. And this is wrong, since, as the invention of arguments precedes by nature the evaluation of truth, so *topica* should precede *critica*” (Vico 1965, p. 178).

The ethical and social function is related to the agency of the individual operating in the collectivity. In his work, “De nostri temporibus studiorum ratione” (On the methods of study of our times; Vico 1965), originally published in 1708, Vico outlines his theory of the specificity of human sciences, polemizing with Cartesianism-based mainstream approach. Vico claims that human thought is based on several dimensions, not just on logical and rational thought, the *critica*. This implies that an education, which is only aimed at developing this function, will grow students that are not able to play an active and constructive role and lead in civil society. “Those who have been taught only *critica* are unable to share with or to teach to the

rest of the community whatever new truths they might obtain. This is because those who are not exercised in *topica* ‘never have the experience of immediately seeing whatever persuasive is implicit in every cause’” (Perkinson 1962, p. 37).

Vico’s conception of language as a fundamental object of study, to the extent that it embodies the system of knowledge, beliefs, ethics, and history of each civilization, was a fundamental turn in the history of human sciences. Indeed, it opens the possibility of considering the products of art, mythology, and folklore as relevant topics for understanding the modes of thought of a specific culture. This had a direct influence on the development of folklore studies in Romanticism and later on the development of anthropology and folk psychology (Berlin 1976; Danesi 1995; Leach 1976; Diamond 1977). The principles of Vico’s human science, using again with an educated anachronism, can be summarized in the idea that mind and civilization are co-constitutive. Human beings are active agents creating their own world. The modes of thought are framed within the forms of civilization that they have contributed to create through collective action under specific historical conditions. The modes of thought and the forms of civilization are connected by language and products of art, who register the development of both. Finally, both modes of thought and forms of civilization follow general laws of historical development that can be studied with a specific method.

2.3 Cattaneo, Wundt, and the Origins of Social Psychology

It is not worth here trying to reconstruct historically and philologically the direct influence of Vico’s ideas on psychological sciences. This should be the object of a specific work that I eagerly look forward to see. Such influence is often under track or even neglected and it deserves an appreciation. I would instead try to discuss how the visionary ideas of Vico at that time anticipated the thought of social and cultural psychology a century later. In particular, I will focus on two scholars: Carlo Cattaneo and Wilhelm Wundt. The former is important for being the one creating the term “social psychology” as we today understand it (Tateo and Iannaccone 2011), the latter for being conventionally acknowledged as the founder of scientific psychology.

Carlo Cattaneo was a nineteenth-century Italian philosopher and politician who explicitly draw inspiration from Vico in discussing the development of culture in relation to psychological processes. He focused on the dynamics of continuity and change in society, in that he identified in both endogenous social interactions within a culture and the exogenous interaction between different cultures that assure the creation of new ideas through the contribution of *associated minds* (Cattaneo 2000). Discussing the development of civilization, similar to the one that will be later presented by Wundt (1952), Cattaneo argued that primitive men could only develop individual and limited experience of his world. The spring of civilization and culture activated a process of social construction of knowledge that led to more articu-

lated understandings of the reality, even those that were not directly accessible to the individual experience. Like Vico, Cattaneo understood the mutual evolution of individual mind and culture as a progressive expansion of the sphere of knowledge through the artifacts that were collectively constructed, accumulated, and transmitted in everyday human activity. The construction of new knowledge occurs by the process of “*antithesis*” (Cattaneo 2000, p. 77). Collective life is indeed the context into which individuals confront their points of view and their opposite ideas. Such confrontation generates a positive conflict allowing the improvement of knowledge and by the development of the cultural and material tools—language, technology, means of transport, weapons, memory supports, etc.—allowing to widen the horizons of experience triggering the development of new modes of thought and new activities. Cattaneo claimed that the study of the relationship between mind and culture should be the object of a specific science, that he first called *psicologia sociale* (social psychology; Cattaneo 1964).

According to Cattaneo, the developmental process of culture can be generated by two different mechanisms. The first is the appearance of the “genius,” in Vico’s sense: individuals capable to turn the experience of the world into discovery. The new ideas are elaborated within the society and become collective. The second mechanism is the collective praxis of “the common people, unaware of academic debates but confident in their capacities and aspirations for better life prospects (...) posing anew, and agitating to resolve, fundamental issues in organized existence” (Sabetti 2006, p. 10). Cattaneo defines these everyday actors of the cultural development as “obscure Socrates” (1960, p. 281). Cattaneo draws on Vico’s anthropological philosophy of human agency based on the relationship between “being, becoming and acting” (Sabetti 2006, p. 15). The relationship between individuals and society is again co-constitutive: “society not only *sees* thing, but also *makes* things” (Cattaneo 2000, p. 84, original bold).

Cattaneo also stresses the relationship between individual and collective memory, that already Vico discussed as a fundamental tie between individual development and history of civilization. The work of associated minds allows the creation of trans-generational ties and feelings of common belonging which constitutes the cultural unity. “Society is in possession of all the aids of the artificial memory” (Cattaneo 2000, p. 111)—texts, monuments, images, national symbols, etc.—enabling to overcome the limits of the individual memory and to create a continuity between generations and a cumulative knowledge through the “collective memory, which is the contribution of all the individual memories” (Cattaneo 2000, p. 113). A similar idea is developed by Wundt who considers the collective representations “mental products which are created by a community of human life and are, therefore, inexplicable in terms merely of individual consciousness, since they presuppose the reciprocal action of many” (Wundt 1916, p. 3). In the middle of the nineteenth century, a new way of understanding the relationship between mind and culture: “Vico and later Wundt’s demands to turn to culture (myths, language and traditions) and history if fact put modern, nomothetic psychology into a quandary, which Boesch (1971) formulated nicely when he said ‘It is the dilemma of psychology that it deals with an object that creates history’ (p. 9)” (Eckenseberger 2011, p. 416).

Constraints of Agency

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