Vico and Plato
Nancy du Bois Marcus

Vico and Plato
O Plato, the soul and pupil of the eye of all the wise.

—Vico, *Oration II*

...a metaphysics compatible with human frailty, which neither allows all truths to men, nor yet denies him all, but only some.

—Vico, *Ancient Wisdom*
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Preface

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) holds as an axiom of his *New Science* that “the nature of things is nothing but their coming into being at certain times and in certain guises.” Like all human things, this study of the kinship of Vico and Plato has specific origins. The importance I attach to Vico's references to Plato and Platonism arises from my conviction that philosophy must begin with Plato. The impetus to read Plato with a modern philosopher arose from my persistent sense of the incompleteness of focusing on Plato alone. My interest in Plato raised the following fundamental question: how can Plato be brought to life in philosophical conversation today?

Before discovering Vico, I immersed myself the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. I thought MacIntyre had found a way to revive the themes of ancient philosophy, especially moral philosophy, while acknowledging the history of ideas between Plato's time and our own. I defended MacIntyre from charges of historicism, but ultimately that defense unravelled. I had to accept that MacIntyre was conceding too much on the nature of truth to the modern epistemological skeptics. At this juncture, I was introduced to Vico. Providentially, MacIntyre and the Vico scholar Donald Phillip Verene had a published debate that clarified for me that Vico's project was exactly what I had sought and could not find in MacIntyre's work. I saw that Vico was the way back to the high road of Platonism for which I had been searching, and the fruit of that discovery is this work on Vico and Plato.

Investigating who Plato is for Vico both illuminates what wisdom is for Vico and provides a context for today's reader of Plato. I discovered the centrality of moderation in metaphysics as well as in moral life by studying Vico in light of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Augustine, and Plato. My approach is grounded in the history of Western philosophy, yet the
philosophical insights which emerged could have been discovered in other guises, as they are timeless human and moral truths. That human beings can find the ideal and eternal in the particulars of history is one of Vico's greatest insights, and his most Platonic.

The references which Vico makes to Plato and Platonism dispel the illusion that Vico is an historicist and reveal a metaphysician and a moral philosopher in the Platonic tradition. In axiom 5, Vico says “to be useful to the human race, philosophy must raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption.” Two conclusions immediately follow; first, he “dismisses from the school of our Science” the Stoics and Epicureans, and second, he “admits to our school the political philosophers, and first of all the Platonists, who agree with all the lawgivers on these three main points: that there is divine providence, that human passions should be moderated and made into human virtues, and that human souls are immortal. Thus from this axiom are derived the three principles of this Science.”

The more familiar form of these three principles is the “certain” form, as religion, marriage, and burial, but each of these is also proven “true” by the philosophers. Philosophical wisdom grows out of poetic wisdom, metaphysics from poetry, and Vico is telling us that the philosophers he chooses for this task are the Platonists. My claim is that insofar as the Vichian scientist is a philosopher, that philosophy is Platonic, as opposed to Stoic or Epicurean. As Plato's Republic excluded untruthful poets from the ideal city, so Vico excludes immoderate philosophers from his Science. Vico makes this judgment on the same moral grounds as did Plato. For Vico as for Plato, philosophy is meant to be the guide of life.

If humility is endless, so is gratitude. No remarks here will adequately reflect the cooperation behind this work, but an attempt is necessary. I am grateful to my parents, Jere Edward and Joyann du Bois, to my brother David Michael du Bois, and to my grandparents, Robert L. and Mary E. Krabbe, for your endless love and your support of this mysterious endeavor called philosophy. To all my professors at Sewanee and Emory for your direction and encouragement. To James R. Peters, who introduced me to Plato and philosophy. To Donald Phillip Verene, who has been my primary guide, as will be evident to anyone familiar with his work, for showing me the Vico road and allowing me to be a fellow traveler. To Ann Hartle, for her insight into the human condition, and for her example, embodying the life to which I aspire. To all my friends, past and present, especially to Cameron W. Swallow, Susan E. Engelhardt, and James R. Goetsch who have accompanied me on my philosophical journey from its
origin. And, most fundamentally of all, I am grateful to my husband, Frederick R. Marcus, who is a true philosophical friend and a constant source of insight and inspiration.

I am indebted to Phi Beta Kappa, whose motto “philosophia biou kubernetes” I have taken as my own, for the Mary Isabel Sibley fellowship in 1995-96 which enabled me to complete this work.

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Introduction

Vico's First Author and the Family of Plato

Iris Murdoch seeks to make Plato more accessible by comparing him to Immanuel Kant. She writes that “Plato temperamentally resembles Kant in combining a great sense of human possibility with a great sense of human worthlessness. Kant is concerned both with setting limits to reason, and with increasing our confidence in reason within those limits.” ¹ This Platonic understanding of the duality of human nature, and the consequences of this self-knowledge for drawing the limits of philosophy, finds a better analogy in the thought of Giambattista Vico.

The analogy between Vico and Plato is suggested by Vico himself. Plato is the first of the four “authors” Vico had “ever before him in meditation and writing.” ² The degree to which Vico's kinship to Plato and the family of thinkers identified with Platonism can shed light on the philosophical significance of Vico's *New Science* has not been explored in detail. Many scholars acknowledge Vico's references to Plato and the Platonists in passing or even to some extent, but there is no book-length study devoted to the complexity of the relationship between the two thinkers. ³

Several scholars acknowledge that relative to other topics Vico's first author has been passed over in silence. G. L. C. Bedani, for instance, writes that “one of the real lacunae in Vico studies is a convincing account of the true meaning of his declared indebtedness to Plato.” ⁴ This neglect is surprising since reading Vico with Plato directly illuminates the heart of his philosophical thought. Other routes to understanding Vico either through important themes or other authors reveal significant dimensions of Vico's thought as well, and have been more well-travelled by scholars. But the crucial question of his integrity as a metaphysician and a moral philosopher in the Platonic tradition remains for the most part unasked.

If the connection between Vico and Plato is the key to discovering Vico's philosophical significance, as I am arguing, why has this been neglected
even among Vico scholars? It may be that a philosopher acknowledging a debt to Plato seems a matter of course, so readers of the Autobiography move on to the more unusual authors: Tacitus, Bacon, and Grotius. Another explanation may be found in the mutually reinforcing misreadings of both Plato and Vico. The prevalent caricature of Vico as an historicist epistemologist may be the most important factor. From the other side, the reading of Plato as a rationalist more like René Descartes contributes to the paradoxical ring of the claim that there is a significant kinship between Vico and Plato. If Vico is an historicist, how could he be significantly related to Plato, who is an idealist metaphysician and a realist concerning truth? If Plato banishes the poets and thinks rhetoric is the opposite of philosophy, how could he have anything in common with a professor of rhetoric whose great discovery is that poetic wisdom is the genesis of thought? The initial implausibility of a kinship of Vico with Plato arises from misinterpretations of both thinkers, which are reflected in such dismissive questions, and can be overcome by carefully reading their texts together. The strongest connections are often at first unapparent; as Heraclitus teaches: “an unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent one.”

Vico himself provides clues about how to think about the way scholars have interpreted his thought. The obvious way to think about most of the errors in Vico scholarship is to define them as a species of making the unfamiliar familiar. Instead of the less helpful critique that much scholarship on Vico commits this basic error, I will review the landscape of Vico scholarship in terms of the more specific philosophical errors which Vico delineates. Vico distinguishes two sets of distortions of the ideal, one for metaphysics and moral philosophy and the other for epistemology. In both cases Vico locates his own thought as a moderate position between the two extremes which he rejects. Just as Aristotle locates for every virtue a vice of defect and a vice of excess, so Vico articulates his philosophical ideal in contrast to deficiency and excess. The location of the ideal for human wisdom and the distortions at either extreme are invaluable to understanding Vico’s own philosophical perspective. These claims orient a study of Vico’s metaphysics, moral philosophy, and epistemology by providing a standard internal to Vico’s thought instead of imposing a foreign standard. Errors occur when Vico’s thought is brought too close to one or the other of these distortions, and away from the balance of the midpoint. Inadvertently, many scholars distort Vico’s thought toward the extremes which he explicitly rejects, and in so doing they miss the balanced philosophy Vico presents.
Vico establishes a metaphysics which acknowledges the limits of human knowledge in the early work *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*. Vico concludes this work by telling his friend Paolo Mattia Doria, to whom it is dedicated, that it is “a metaphysics compatible with human frailty, which neither allows all truths to men, nor yet denies him all, but only some” (*metaphysicam humana imbecillitate dignam, quae homini neque omnia vera permittat, neque omnia negat, sed aliqua*). This work of metaphysics is ironically most often cited as the basis of the historicist readings, for it is here that Vico discovers in the Latin language that “the true is the same as the made” (*verum esse ipsum factum*) (AW 46). But the context reveals that human making and knowing are modeled on the perfect knowing and making of God. In conclusion, Vico reaffirms that his work is one of metaphysics, and “it is a metaphysics consonant with Christian piety because it distinguishes divine from human truth and does not set up human knowledge as the rule for divine knowledge, but divine science as the rule for human knowledge” (AW 109). By drawing such limits Vico’s metaphysics steers the middle way between the knowledge claims of dogmatism and skepticism. He states plainly that “the dogmatics do not know everything nor the skeptics nothing” (ibid.).

An interpretation of Vico must fall within these extremes of skepticism and dogmatism which Vico rejects in favor of “a metaphysics compatible with human frailty” (ibid.). A reader of Vichian secondary literature will find that this is not always the case. Skepticism in the twentieth century has often taken the form of historicism, and considering Vico an historicist is the most common distortion. I am using skepticism in the sense that Vico does: as denying to human beings all truths, drawing the limits of human reason such that human beings cannot know truth at all, and cannot even grasp the idea of transcendent truth or wisdom in any timeless sense. This kind of historical relativism is a species of skepticism that has nothing in common with Vico’s philosophical study of history.

Alasdair MacIntyre makes the claim that Vico is “Plato historicized.” This partial truth reveals more about the contemporary philosophical interpretation of Vico as an historicist than it does about Vico’s relationship to Plato. It expresses the common assumption that if Vico has a relationship to Plato it is one of inversion. Vico’s interest in history does not betray philosophy as MacIntyre’s charge of historicism suggests. The relationship of philosophy to its past, including its birth from poetic wisdom, is not genetic in any reductive sense. MacIntyre does qualify the portrait of Vico as an historicist by reformulating his epithet as more appropriately

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“Plato philologized.” He is closest to the truth in his third version, when he says Vico is “philology Platonized.” “Philology Platonized” is more accurate because Vico's “new critical art” (la nuova arte critica) requires philosophy to “undertake to examine philology” (qui la filosofia si pone ad esaminare la filologia), and this implies that philosophy is the governing art (NS 7). For Vico, philosophy and philology are related as strophe and antistrophe, as Aristotle observes about dialectic and rhetoric (Rh. 1354a). Whatever MacIntyre intended by associating Vico with historicism, his epithet “Plato historicized” is emblematic of many contemporary interpretations of Vico which Peter Burke associates with the powerful “myth of the forerunner, the John the Baptist.” On this view, Vico anticipates, for instance, Hegel or Herder. This error illustrates both the general one of the conceit of scholars and the specific one of making Vico too much of a skeptic.

On the other hand, one finds in the Vico literature those who read Vico as a dogmatic theologian. Some who see Vico this way are themselves theologians in the sense Vico would call dogmatic. Those who read Vico as a theologian like themselves often read more into Vico's claims about Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, than is in fact there, and as a result they miss the complex relationship of philosophy and religion in Vico. Such interpreters make Vico too much of a dogmatist. For instance, John Milbank writes that he aims “to disclose how Vico's apparently modern, 'scientific' concern with the history of religion, is, in reality, still subsumed within the framework of an Augustinian theology.” I show how Vico is not a dogmatic theologian, but a philosopher who gives “a rational civil theology of divine providence” that relies not on revelation but on the study of human nature and history (NS 2, 342). Only by a distortion of Vico's own claims can one read him as a dogmatic theologian.

Other commentators, who have a secular not a theological metaphysical orientation, make Vico more like themselves by reading his philosophy as secular. The translators of the New Science, Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, show an affinity for this way of reading Vico, when they write that “it is not possible to trace with any assurance the precise steps by which Vico moved toward a resolution of the conflict between his Catholic piety and his eminentely secular if not heretical philosophy.” Accepting the Kantian revolution that metaphysics in the traditional sense is no longer possible, contemporary philosophers tend to assume that a thinker writing about God and providence must be a theologian (and dogmatic is the only type of theologian in this view) not a philosopher. To save Vico from this unphilosophical categorization, sympa
thetic commentators emphasize the secular and unorthodox aspects of Vico’s thought. Such commentators, who deny there is a place in philosophy for any reference to the divine, extend their skepticism over Vico like a cloak, hiding his genuine, non-dogmatic, philosophical piety.

That Vico’s philosophical ideal, his mean between extremes, is Platonic is made explicit in the *New Science*, where he criticizes the Stoics and Epicureans repeatedly and includes in his Science instead “the political philosophers, and first of all the Platonists” (*NS* 130). Vico identifies the Stoics with a metaphysics of fate and a moral philosophy which mortifies the senses, and the Epicureans with a metaphysics of chance and a moral philosophy which makes pleasure the criterion (ibid.). Vico offers a mean between these extremes. In Vichian metaphysics, human beings are not completely determined, but events are not entirely the product of chance; instead divine providence governs free human beings, turning the evil they do into good. Likewise, in moral philosophy Vico takes the middle stance on the passions, holding that moderation is what is required. Vico says that on these grounds the political philosophers, not the solitaries, are admitted to the Science, and he names as first among these the Platonists (ibid.).

Despite this clear statement of his judgments of the relative merits of these three schools of philosophy, there are interpreters who read Vico not as Platonist, as the *New Science* suggests most closely resembles his view, but as an Epicurean or a Stoic. In both cases they must posit an esoteric teaching beneath the exoteric, which they acknowledge has religious content incompatible with their readings. Those who read him as an Epicurean emphasize his early Lucretian poem. They suggest that it was only because Vico’s friends were imprisoned by the Inquisition for heresy that he feigned any theological or religious dimension to his thought. For an example of this reasoning, consider *The Political Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* by Frederick Vaughn. Vaughn applies Leo Strauss's thesis about writing and persecution to Vico. Vaughn writes that “it is our conviction that the *New Science* is exoteric book which means that it contains two levels of meaning: one which conveys a popular and orthodox message, and another which conveys a philosophical message to philosophers.” As I noted above, the presumption is that philosophers do not take religious ideas seriously at a literal level.

Leon Pompa exemplifies an interpretation which makes Vico’s ideal eternal history resemble Stoic fate. On this view, human beings cannot act in the face of the barbarism which Vico describes. Pompa’s comments on Vico’s description of the barbarism of reflection are the most revealing.
Pompa writes that “both the tone of the passage, and the inconsistencies which it involves, give the impression that Vico is trying either to avoid or to conceal the deterministic character which his view of history derives from the emphasis which it places upon social conditioning. But if the Scienza nuova were truly deterministic, of course, even were it to enable us to diagnose our state of health as a nation, it would be unable to offer any serious practical suggestions as to how to avoid our ultimate fate. Certainly, nothing that Vico has so far offered can be thought of as a serious practical suggestion, since none seem to be in our power to control.” 25 In this way Pompa moves Vico toward this metaphysical extreme of fate and the moral incapacity it entails. Pompa further claims that “the reason for Vico's failure to publish the Practica is almost certainly to be found in his realisation that its more optimistic prescriptions are incompatible with the basically deterministic character of the rest of the Scienza Nuova.” 26

Even though, unlike Pompa, Isaiah Berlin sees that Vico's providence is not deterministic, he also misses the ethical dimension of Vico's thought. 27 Berlin compares Vico to Spinoza, and he denies that Vico's philosophy has an integral moral dimension. Berlin writes that “Vico is not primarily concerned with morality, or value judgments. Like Spinoza—the adversary often in his thoughts—he seems content to understand. He does, of course, in fact make moral judgments, and in them unhesitatingly takes for granted the validity of the values embodied in his own faith and civilization; but this is quite consistent with his 'historicist', conservative thesis.” 28

In this study, I will interpret the New Science as expressing Vico's own stated position: that he opposes Stoicism and Epicureanism and favors social or political philosophers like the Platonists. I will also maintain the relevance of Vico's claims at the end of the Ancient Wisdom for understanding what he means by metaphysics in the New Science. When the Ancient Wisdom and the New Science are taken together, the main question is: in what way can Vico's New Science be understood as “a metaphysics compatible with human frailty”? If the Platonists are the example of the kind of metaphysics Vico accepts, then the question becomes what does Platonism mean to Vico, and are the connections as significant as these passages suggest?

It is not as easy to say who Plato is for Vico as it is for his other authors because there are many generations of Platonists between Plato's dialogues and Vico. Fausto Nicolini suggests a kinship metaphor for their relationship when he writes, “we must begin with a consideration of Vico as the greatest spiritual son . . . [of the] philosophical father (Plato)” (il Vico quale grandissimo figlio spirituale . . . [del] padre filosofico (Platone)). 29 My study
affirms the kinship Nicolini asserts. Vico himself calls Socrates “the father of all philosophers,” so perhaps it would be better to consider Plato as his brother. However the details of the metaphor are understood, there is a deep spiritual kinship among the members of “the family of Plato.”

The way to understand who Plato is for Vico is not to regard the mediations of intervening Platonists as irrelevant. Paul O. Kristeller comments that much of contemporary Plato scholarship commits what Vico calls “the conceit of scholars,” when it exaggerates the differences between Plato and the later Platonists because of its own anti-religious and scientific prejudices. Kristeller is right that Platonic philosophers have combined the insights of the dialogues “with notions of diverse origin, and these accretions, like tributaries of a broadening river, became integral parts of the continuing tradition.” He warns modern interpreters who want “to cleanse the genuine thought of Plato from the mire of the Platonic tradition” that the “archaeologist who tries to remove the crust of later centuries from a Greek statue must be careful not to damage its incomparably subtle surface.” Whereas earlier interpreters erred on the side of too closely identifying Plato and the Neoplatonists, the temptation now is “to overlook certain genuine features in Plato's thought that may be alien to modern science and philosophy but served as a starting point for his earlier interpreters.”

Vico does sometimes blur the identity of Plato with that of Neoplatonists, and these references will be identified. What Vico most shares with the other “earlier interpreters,” from Plotinus to Pico, is the commitment to self-knowledge and the love of wisdom that goes beyond the logical and the historical or philological interpretations of Plato that dominate recent Plato scholarship. As an historian, Kristeller does not explore the sense in which a full reading of Plato involves moving from historical to philosophical questions, much less moving from contemplation to action within the philosophical domain. Vico illuminates Plato by serving as a basis for correcting rationalistic interpretations of Plato and for reopening the poetic and the paideutic nature of the dialogues. Plato also illumines Vico; Vico was still feeling the force of the river of Platonism that is drying up in our time.

Given the complexities of Platonism, what is the best method for uncovering the layers of Vico's Platonism? How can one read Vico with Plato across so many centuries? The answer lies in Vico's own method of discovering the truth in history. Vico's account of the relationship between philosophy and history dictates that I must end, rather than begin, by reading Plato's dialogues with Vico's New Science. I have already mentioned Vico's method, which is summed up in the claim that “philosophy must undertake...
to examine philology” (NS 7). Using this method to answer the question of who Plato is for Vico involves seeing how Vico discovers the true (il vero) in the certain (il certo) for the family of thinkers that has its birth with Socrates, the hero of Plato's philosophical poetry. Such a method views Platonism as a human thing (cosa umana) that is born, lives its life, declines, and dies. And yet the human soul is immortal, so there is an analogous transcendent teaching of Platonism in its many embodiments which is its soul.

My study considers the kinship of Vico and Plato by focusing on the major mediating influences on Vico's view of Platonism as well as on the dialogues themselves. I will consider the major texts which influenced Vico's understanding of Plato and Socrates: Pico's Oration on the Dignity of Man, Augustine's City of God, and Plato's dialogues, in particular, the Republic, the Timaeus, the Critias, the Statesman, the Laws, and the Symposium. Mediation of earlier philosophers' views of shared predecessors is not in any way an exact science, nor do I pretend it is. It is impossible to know for certain whether Vico knew a particular line of a dialogue from having read that dialogue or from a later Platonic commentary. Delineating these ideas cannot result in the sort of exactitude the genre of source criticism desires, nor does this study engage in such historical research for its own sake. I do argue that seeing Vico in the context of such predecessors makes visible elements in his thought that do not stand out when reading him alongside Hegel or Herder, to choose two notable examples. Above all my subject is a family of thinkers who as such will have more in common than not. This does not mean that they are without significant disagreement among themselves over the nature of humanity, philosophy, divinity, and other central shared questions. Through exploring such differences, the unique nature of Vico's Platonism will emerge.

The best way to think about this study's descent through the history of Platonism is Vico's la storia ideale eterna; the best way to imagine this study's descent is to turn to the poet W. B. Yeats's image of history as a “widening gyre.” 33 River metaphors for history, such as Kristeller's, are too simplistic to account for the complexities of cyclical history. Yeats himself made the connection between his philosophy of history and Vico's, so it is not surprising that his images for history can be helpful in understanding Vico's central insight about the cycles of history. 34 Drawing on one of Yeats's most famous images, we can imagine Platonism as a gyre or spiral that has Socrates as its origin and center. As in Vico's New Science history is divided into corso and ricorso, so in Yeats's philosophy of history there is an ancient cycle and a Christian cycle. 35 In the ricorso Socrates is mediated through
Christianity as the new age of gods and heroes precedes the new age of humans and with it the *ricorso* of philosophy. The farther from the origin of philosophy in the figure of Socrates the more complex the genealogy of the Platonist. Augustine can still be seen as connected to the circles of Socrates and Plato, but Augustine considers two origins, that of philosophy and of Christian theology. Pico encompasses the circles of Augustine, Plato, and the origin of Socrates. Vico, the furthest circle I will consider in the history of Platonism, sees Plato through the mediation of Pico and Augustine, and continues to see Socrates through the mediation of Plato. By tracing the spiral backwards to Socrates, the reader can reconnect the disconnected references to Platonism in Vico as well as gain insight into a fundamental conversation of kindred souls across centuries.

My search for the true nature of Vico's kinship with Plato and Platonism is a Vichian project, but not one Vico himself undertook. Vico gives us many clues about the importance of Plato for his thought, but he does not as clearly separate the true Plato from confused memories as he does in his discovery of the true Homer. As Vico found with Homer, so with Plato, the errors are as instructive as the truth, both about human knowing and human nature. In the end, finding out who Plato is for Vico goes a long way toward discovering who Vico is as a philosopher.

Plato is especially important for any philosophical study of Vico because part of the answer to who Plato is for Vico is that he identifies Plato with philosophy itself. Philosophy and Plato consider human beings as they “ought to be.” \[36\] In this way, Plato plays a role in Vico's *New Science* more analogous to Homer than to his other authors. Alfred North Whitehead is famous for claiming that Western philosophy is “a series of footnotes to Plato,” and Ken Wilber has made the insightful addition that these are “fractured footnotes.” \[37\] Platonism has been fractured almost to complete destruction since the Renaissance, and Vico can be seen as extending to another generation the family of Plato. Plato is the intellect of the Greek people as Homer was the sense; his is the rational metaphysics that builds on the poetic. Vico's *New Science* gives renewed life to this Platonic metaphysics.

I am aware that, stated in this way, my study may seem to be another instance of taking a part of Vico for the whole. The proof that my study is not merely another act of interpretive alchemy will lie in the reader's assessment of the correctness of the textual exegesis. \[38\] The strength of my approach is that it avoids the extremes Vico himself criticized: skepticism and dogmatism in epistemology, and Stoicism and Epicureanism in metaphysics and moral philosophy. Vico himself invites the Platonists into the
school of the New Science, and calls Plato his first author. Vico may not have noticed some of the links between his thought and the details of the family of Plato that I locate in this study, but he does point the reader in this direction.

Further, this study is conducted with Vico's own method rather than imposing an external one. There is no way for me to defend against those who insist upon an esoteric reading in which Vico's direct claims become useless, other than to ask them to consider the coherence of his thought without the hypothesis of an esoteric meaning. While I acknowledge that the study of Vico's other three authors as well as specific studies of his original ideas illumine his thought, my inquiry begins to remedy the neglect of Vico's relationship to his first author which has distorted his philosophical significance. To ignore Vico's Platonic roots is to miss the heart of Vico. If this attention to Plato is interpretive alchemy, then at least it converts lesser metals into gold.

This study requires the reader to follow the subtle interplay of Vico's ideas with previous generations of the family of Plato, whose father, Socrates, lived over two thousand years before Vico, so a description of the topics of each of the book's three parts may help to orient the reader.

The first part of my study, “The Dignity of Pico,” focuses on Pico's Oration on the Dignity of Man in order to provide a concise introduction to a humanist reading of Vico's New Science. Its order follows the three aspects of the Renaissance which Vico admires: history (chapter 1), poetry (chapter 2), and eloquence (chapter 3). Vico's answer to the question of the relationship between history, poetry, and wisdom is only intelligible against the background of Renaissance poetic theology. His rejection of this tradition is the source of his doctrine of poetic wisdom. Although Vico criticizes the Renaissance understanding of poetic theology, he shares the idea that poetry is definitive of human nature. Reading Vico's inaugural orations with Pico's Oration reveals that both philosophers emphasize the dignity of human beings as makers of themselves and the necessity of moral education or paideia. In chapter 3, I introduce Pico's correspondence on eloquence in order to dispel the misconception that eloquence and wisdom are incompatible, and to remove this obstacle to seeing Vico's kinship to Plato. Finally, I consider the eloquence of the writings of Pico and Vico. I show that, instead of criticizing both thinkers for random eclecticism, one should praise them for embodying “wisdom speaking copiously,” which Vico calls “the flower of wisdom.”

The second part, “The Piety of Augustine,” shows that Vico balances the sense of human dignity which he shares with Pico with a humility