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GIAMBATTISTA VICO'S IDEA OF "PROGRESS": THE COLLAPSE OF REASON

by David B. Cholewiak

History is the study of humanity's changing past: how man interacted with others, how external events affected him, how his internal desires changed his life, and how this affects the external world. Behind this is the subtle idea of progress in human history that the great philosophers of the world have debated over the past three thousand years.

Concepts of history, change, and progress in the eighteenth century were combined with two other ideas, reason and providence, in the philosophy of the Italian scholar Giambattista Vico. His theories of human history drew from the intellectual well of the post-Reformation years. While he lived through the Enlightenment, his life's greatest work, The New Science of Giambattista Vico, was fully appreciated only in the Romanticism of the nineteenth century. Vico was a bridge spanning three human epochs. He delivered a theory of human history and progress that could rightly be described as the first modern idea of a social science. He tried to understand change and its relationship to progress in the courses that nations run, only to see "progress" take on a non-traditional definition. Relatively isolated from the main-stream Enlightenment that led Western Europe, Vico worked quietly in Naples, developing a cyclical view of history. While other thinkers were pulling God out of the universe and finding the rights of man, Vico was reconciling reason with God.

The explication of Giambattista Vico's unusual idea of progress, which is better described as cyclical history, and the role of reason in that progress, are the objectives of this essay. By first looking at Vico's life and influences and then briefly at his metaphysical theory of knowledge, the stage will be set for a better understanding of Vico's speculative idea of the collapse of reason. Reason is an integral part of Vico's unusual concept of progress; reason also happens to have contradictory internal elements that cause its collapse. How does society progress in a Vichian manner? What is the role of human reason in progress? Why does reason cause society to collapse? Must society always collapse? And finally, does Vico present a viable view of man's past? These are fundamental questions that have to be addressed if we are to understand Vico's idea of progress.
I. Life

Born in Naples on June 23, 1668, Giambattista Vico lived in relative obscurity. Because of his *Autobiography*, our twentieth century knowledge of his life is more complete than that of any other figure of the period. The fact that he lived in Italy, and not France or England, worked to his disadvantage, for it was a common belief that Italy was “backward” and its only truly international celebrity was the Pope. The differing mentalities of eighteenth century Italy and France can be summed up in the fractionated and rural nature of the former in comparison to the more unified and much more cosmopolitan feeling of the latter. Vico was more a citizen of Italy than a citizen of Naples. There was never a class of Neapolitan thinkers that could be termed “philosophes” or a support network like the Parisian salons that facilitated new ideas. A patron in Italy was a well sought-after commodity that Vico, himself, was constantly trying to secure.

Raised a Catholic, the only religion of the region, and taught by Jesuits, Vico developed a strong sense of God in the universe that pervaded all his works. Very early on, his goal in life was to become an academic, and he struggled the majority of his life to realize that goal. Plagued with a less than excellent ability to speak and write in the eyes of his peers, Vico was constantly fighting to win approval. But in a series of lectures from 1699 to 1707, he was slowly able to prove himself and was eventually elected professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples, a post he was to hold until 1741. His studies centered around civil law and became both the impetus for and the material of his curiosity in philology that led to two of his most famous works: *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* and *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*. In 1723 he was defeated in his bid for the chair of civil law which, though a downfall on one hand, nonetheless presented him with the opportunity to finally work out his own philosophy. At age fifty-five he had read all the works of the classical period, as well as the works of Descartes, Newton, Bacon, and others. He was ready to take up the pen and deliver his ideas to the world.

Vico was diligent about explaining who had influenced his writing; he acknowledged those thinkers that had set his mind into motion. Early on he was introduced to both Aristotle and Plato, and though he found great use in Aristotle’s syllogisms to bridge two ideas, he ultimately found Plato and his Forms more influential in his thinking. Plato, the king of esoteric knowledge and knowledge of universals, became one side of an equation that Vico was building to describe how man could understand his world. The other half was the Roman Tacitus. Tacitus was concerned with the particular, the fact, and the common, which became the dialectical response to Plato. Writing in the third person,
Vico says in his Autobiography, “Vico had admired only above all other learned men: Plato and Tacitus; for with an incomparable metaphysical mind Tacitus contemplates man as he is, Plato as he should be.” Vico continues, “Plato with his universal knowledge explores the parts of nobility which constitute the man of intellectual wisdom, so Tacitus descends into all the counsels of utility.”

The two constituted a full picture, a complete equation. Vico, through Plato and Tacitus, sees the universal participating in the particular, and the particular participating in the universal—an idea that is seminal to the methodology of the New Science.

In 1708 Vico was to give an oration dedicated to the king at the Royal University in Naples. He wished to bring some new and profitable discovery to the world of Italian letters, and he found Sir Francis Bacon. Vico used Bacon as the link between Plato and Tacitus: a concern with present, particular science, but a desire to expand and make corrections in the laws which included the particulars. Bacon’s inductive method pulled practice and theory together in a manner related to the natural sciences, which Vico thought could be transferred to observations on history. Henceforth, Vico used Baconian induction to derive universal tenets from the facts of the past. Bacon’s influence on Vico is seen most obviously in the similarities between the title of Vico’s greatest work, The New Science of Giambattista Vico, and Newton’s New Organ of the Sciences. Where Bacon laid down a new way of looking at the natural world, Vico laid down a “new science” of observing human history. Enrico De Mas goes so far as to suggest that the idea of “historical recurrence” was found in Bacon’s “rerum vicissitudo,” which “presents some common modalities in regards to the concept of ‘reversion.’”

While preparing to write his Autobiography, Vico came upon Hugo Grotius’ On the Law of War and Peace and found his fourth influence. Grotius, an historian, brought Bacon’s scientific methodology to history. Vico summarizes the contributions of his four authors:

For Plato adorns rather than confirms his esoteric wisdom with the common wisdom of Homer. Tacitus intersperses his metaphysics, ethics and politics with the facts, as they have come down to him from the times, scattered and confused and without system. Bacon sees that the sum of human and divine knowledge of his time needs supplementing and amending, but as far as laws are concerned he does not succeed with his canons in compassing the universe of cities and the course of all times, or the extent of all nations. Grotius, however, embraces in a system of universal law the whole of philosophy and philology, includ-
ing both parts of the latter, the history on the one hand of facts and
events, both fabulous and real, and on the other of the three languages,
Hebrew, Greek, and Latin; that is to say, the three learned languages
of antiquity that have been handed down to us by the Christian reli-
gion.4

All four thinkers influenced enough Vico’s method of interpreting the past for him to
mention them prominently. They showed their influence most visibly in his greatest
work, The New Science of Giambattista Vico. Culling from the four authors, Vico at-
ttempted to explain the manner in which the scientific laws of history and humanistic par-
ticul aerials could and should be brought together. The book tried to define history as a so-
cial science in every sense of what defined a natural science of the eighteenth

where is the proof to support the assertion?

By the end of 1724, Vico had composed in Italian the greater part of what he called
“the new science in negative form”: a deconstructive criticism of existing theories. When
he tried to have his work published, his sponsor found the cost too demanding, and when
Vico realized that he was going to have to pay the printing costs himself, he found “that
his ‘negative’ method had been a mistake: that by the employment of a ‘positive’ method
the work could be reduced to a fourth of its compass.”5 The first edition of the New Sci-
ence finally came out in 1725 and immediately fell into obscurity. The unstructured
manner in which Vico combined examples and theories contributed to an incoherent
work. He attempted to revise and make lengthy annotations to clarify the work for a
second edition in 1730. It too was not well received. He spent the next fourteen years
putting together the third edition of the New Science, adding an allegorical frontpiece to
explain the whole of the work as well as a more structured format. The third edition,
though a better organized work than the first two editions, never gained popular accep-
tance during Vico’s lifetime because of a poor number of subscribers and his still difficult
style of writing. He died on January 22, 1744, with his greatest work only to be re-dis-
covered and re-appraised in the nineteenth century.

II. Definitions

It is important at this point to define some key terms. “Progress,” in its most general
understanding, is man moving from a lesser physical and intellectual state to one that is
higher. Robert Nisbet says that the idea of progress “holds that mankind in the past—
from some aboriginal condition of primitiveness, barbarism, or even nullity—is now ad-
vancing, and will continue to advance through the foreseeable future.”6 Benedetto
Croce gives a similar definition by mentioning, in the standard guide to Vico’s philoso-
phy. *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, that progress “implies that each fact and each individual has its own unique function; each makes its own contribution, for which no other can be substituted, to the poem of history; and each responds with a deeper voice to the one that went before.” Human progress can be visualized as a line sloping gradually upwards, with occasional dips where man has fallen back or has briefly lost certain physical and intellectual gains.

Reason is the human capacity to understand this world and make it “better.” Reason was for the Enlightenment thinkers the defining principle in the progress of man. As man’s reasoning and intellectual stature grew, he progressed upwards. Vico differed from his contemporaries on how progress and reason interacted with each other: where others identified them as a continuum pushing each other forward, Vico saw implicit in their interaction a collapse. A society could become too “reasonable.” Reason and progress were defined by Vico in an unusual manner; Croce frankly comments that Vico had “missed the idea of progress.”

III. Metaphysics

Vico’s greatest work set him apart from the general movement of thought that occurred during the eighteenth century Enlightenment. Reason for the English, Scots, and French was the human faculty that gave man self-sufficiency from providence. It made life progressive (in terms of how Nisbet defines progress).

Vico stands apart from the grand thinkers of the Enlightenment, integrating a personal conviction in God with the secular idea of reason and progress. Providence was presupposed in Vico’s philosophy, underlying all his ideas, though at times not explicitly stated. God was an active participant in the universe by natural means or secondary causes, making the laws or the foundations upon which man unconsciously built his world. Reason takes man to a point in understanding his universe, after which faith must take over. Providence and reason were complimentary elements, each having a profound effect on humanity. When taken together as a whole, they allowed man to understand the totality of his world. The majority of Enlightenment thinkers were more willing to dismiss providence as a variable in the workings of the world.

Vico also found conflict with others in his definition of “progress.” Vico held that man is not continually moving forward, that at certain points in man’s development reason collapses and causes man to return to a barbarous state. For philosophers such as Kant and Hegel, reason did not and could not fail; it was a force that bordered on a divinity, pushing man forward. Kant, in his short essay “The Idea of a Universal History From a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” describes reason as an organ in the human body
that is slowly and consciously recognized by man through time, while reason itself, at the same time, pushes man forward to realize it. Vico subscribed to the concept of reason as a force that pushed man forward, causing him to progress. But where he disagreed with others is where Vico saw reason leading man. When man became too “reasonable,” his life became static and disassociated from the reasoning organ. He ceased to move forward, in the normative sense, causing the collapse of society.

Behind his notion of the collapse of reason, Vico set up a metaphysical theory of knowledge that was the foundation upon which he built his science of human history and progress. His epistemology, understanding of the human imagination, and belief in the active role of providence in the workings of the universe all contribute to a more complete understanding of Vico’s philosophy.

In reaction to René Descartes and his deconstructive thinking that claimed that all “true” knowledge was mathematical or related to the natural sciences because they are objectively phenomenological, Vico literally denied the knowability of the natural world. History, art, and other fields of study which are now called humanities were not worthy of discussion in Descartes’ world because, detached from the knower, they did not truly exist. There was a necessary distance between the knower and the known in Descartes’ system: man was not intimately connected to the subject matter that he was investigating. Vico stood in stark contrast to Descartes with the idea that man, to know something, must be passionately connected to it. Man could understand only the outside of any natural event, but because man created human history, and not nature, he had a link to both the inside and outside of any event. According to Vico, God created the natural world and only he could know that world. Man created society and because of that could understand it more exactly than he could understand the natural sciences. To know, one must create.

Vico lays this down in the “Principles” of the New Science: “But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found in the modifications of our own mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil worlds, which since men had made it, men could come to know.” Vico’s “new science” is one that takes human history as its subject matter and gives it the same degree of knowability as Descartes gave mathematics. The historian
can understand human progress and the human past because the historian is human. One can never know what it is like to be a rock nor understand the laws to which it conforms.

Second, Vico approaches the use of human imagination as a passive connection to the past. Man, as historian, is getting “inside” the thoughts of past men and re-living them. The imagination acts as a sympathetic element, creating the link between the present historian and the man of the past. For Vico, the reader in some sense becomes Homer by reading Homer.

Vico goes even further and says that the human imagination is also an active force, crucial for man’s ability to progress. Imagination begins to blend with the idea of creativity, finding new solutions to old problems, much like Toynbee’s challenge and response. It is here that imagination and reason cross paths; both attempt to bring together divergent ideas for the betterment of man, though they do it in different manners. Imagination is rooted in a more primitive, instinctual part of man, existing within him from the beginning, creating the idea of God with the first lightening and thunder. Reason arises in man at a later point, and within the Vichian definition, deals with more esoteric ideas; lightening is electricity. As man progresses he becomes more reasonable and less imaginative, sparking the start of the breakdown. The imagination provides the irrational element that keeps life from becoming just an equation that needs to be constantly solved; it creates the poetry and art of the world that make life enjoyable. With the reign of absolute reason life becomes procedural, and the vitality that makes man want to move forward and find new solutions diminishes. The imagination, to Vico, is a way of knowing and a driving force in man’s desire to know more.

The third important element in Vichian philosophy is the role of providence. God had a very real existence in Vico’s world, both as something that must be believed in and as something that plays an active part in the universe. Without a belief in providence society would collapse: “If religion is lost among the peoples, they have nothing left to enable them to live in society: no shield of defense, nor means of counsel, nor basis of support, nor even a form by which they may exist in the world at all.”

A belief in providence mediated by the imagination, according to Vico, is the first bond between people that leads to a functional society: religion is a binding force. Even Voltaire commented that if atheists were to form a community it would have to be a small group of philosophers, for only they could support such an ideal. Religion, according to Voltaire, was a necessary element for the masses, suggesting an almost Marxian “opiate of the people.”
There is a chain of hierarchy that makes up the activity of providence in the world: pure knowledge comes from providence to metaphysics and then to man, who can receive only a portion of what the divine can offer. To stop at reason and believe that it will provide all the answers is fallacious. The hierarchy is evident in Vico's frontpiece to the New Science: the Christian ray of providence is shown shining down upon a statue of metaphysics, bouncing off her chest, and striking the heart of Homer, allegorically, man. This shows how far man is removed, spatially, from God. It also proves that it is an impossible task to try to understand the divine rationally, yet man must realize that there is something beyond metaphysics that can be reached with the imagination and, hence, some things that man will not know to the degree of enlightened certitude. It was over this theory that Vico would have clashed with other scholars of the Enlightenment. Reason was an end for most, while for Vico it was only a peep-hole into the divine that sparked the imagination.

These three philosophical points create a framework from which Vico's idea of progress develops. Providence provides both the binding force of faith and the necessary natural building blocks from which man can build his society. But Vichian progress is human progress, not providential, because man creates the world in which he lives. History moves forward through a relationship between the primitive human faculty of imagination and the more advanced organ of reason.

IV. "The Courses that Nations Run"

Vichian progress is formally broken down into three stages: poetic man, heroic man, and man or reasonable man described in book four of the New Science. Each successive stage corresponds to the progression of reason in the psyche of man and a decline of the imaginative element. Poetic man is representative of humanity in its most primitive state, existing for a very short period of time, never returned to again. Man in this state lives in a theocratic society where religion defines his total existence. Authority is based on ownership, and man does not "think" in the normative way. He does not reason but takes his life at "face value." His language reflects this: using what "is familiar at hand" to describe the physical world, man describes the world by what he knows best—himself. Vico says, "It is noteworthy that in all languages the greater part of expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions." Vico gives a number of examples that have been carried down into the age of reasonable man: eyes of a potato, beard of wheat, hands of a clock, etc. This demonstrates for Vico the very simple but necessary nature of man. In the most primitive state, the imagination finds delight in uniformity: the human
body is similar to the world in which it lives. He likens poetic man to a child to whom everything seems fabulous and at times terrifying. The poetic man is the “first” man, a state to which humanity can never return. It is a stage of categorization, where man lays down the very fundamentals that quickly move into humanity’s collective unconscious and are never forgotten, even in the collapse of reason.

The transition of poetic man to heroic man is slight, not nearly as dramatic as the step from heroic to reasonable. Human nature develops, man relies less upon the divine for answers to the world and more upon himself. Reason is slowly being recognized as a part of man that is shaping how he views the world. Life becomes more organized; society becomes aristocratic and the law of force rules. Vico suggests that the world of Achilles exemplified this heroic age. The clash of weapons became the language that was understood with most clarity. Man uses his imagination to link himself to God in a meaningful way: man is a product of providence. But with the creation of a society based not on theocracy but on aristocracy, man realizes his right to rule over himself and create his “world,” the world of civilization.

Vico stated that Homer stood at the threshold between the heroic and reasonable age, becoming a “reasonable” source of a less “reasonable” age. With the advent of the reasonable age, man takes on a variety of new characteristics, all the products of reason unfolding within him. Imagination, as a primitive quality of man, begins to be actively suppressed in favor of reason. The world becomes less mystical and more quantifiable, giving man a feeling of control over his environment—society—that he did not feel in the previous two stages. Society becomes ruled by this new found quality—reason—dictating the laws to which all men must adhere. To do this, language must develop in such a fashion that it does not merely describe what is in the physical environment but also those esoteric ideas that could never have a physical manifestation and are necessary for society to become “reasonable.” Humanity gains concepts of “good” and “bad,” as well as descriptions of real, physical “things” that were earlier described by poetic or heroic man by reference to the body. Man ceases to speak heroic phrases like “The blood boils in my heart” and instead states “I am angry.”

The most dramatic change is in the role of providence. Vico sees a decline in the belief in God as an indicator of an impending collapse of reason. The reasonable stage finds man trying, more and more, to understand his world without providence. Society becomes more temporal as man defines the world around him without a reliance on some ambiguous “other.” Man wants to factor God out of his universe.

Reason is the primary influence upon the changing stages. Man moves from sponta-
aneous action, characterized by a language representing that child-like “everything is new” nature, to a use of the mind that allows both retrospection and anticipation of what is to come. The world becomes demystified as man tries to understand his place in it; a tornado no longer is the punishment of an angry God but rather a weather pattern that has a rational explanation for why it occurred. As rationality starts to deconstruct the universe, man cannot imaginatively find a role for God, which, for Vico, causes man to lose his center. Providence plays a vital role in binding society together that allows progress to continue. Reason and providence work together to create a whole, and when man forsakes God, distancing himself from the use of the imagination to bring God into his world, Vico sees the imminent collapse of the reasoning ability.

V. The Collapse

Here lies the crux of the discussion: man at the edge of the collapse. Life becomes divorced from providence and imagination in favor of the reign of reason, the world of Descartes. Vico’s view of the world had reason, providence and imagination all as essential parts, and to remove two parts of the whole is to predict an imminent downfall. It is as if two of the cornerstones of a high-rise building are removed. Reason replaces God and imagination with robot-like procedures, as Donald Verene comments: “Through a process of selection of the most efficient means, technique becomes the medium of contemporary social life. Through technique all economic, political, and individual human activity is ordered into worked-out patterns and step-by-step process, such with every new structuring of a physical means or social relationship there occurs a heightened sense of improvement and a widening sense of the possibilities of application. . . . Technique, as a means of doing things, is present in all periods and types of human society, but contemporary society is distinguished by the fact that it is technological in its form.”

Society continues to have passive change, the product of man’s movement through time, but it loses the active change that is found in man “doing.” There is an intellectual stagnation that Vico comes to term the “barbarism of the intellect”—in the simplest terms, man begins to think too much, destroying the groundwork upon which society is built. It is the Brutuses and Cassiuses, the Foucaults and Derridas, who work insidiously against what is trusted and necessary for nations to run. Reason begins to show its own internal contradictions, not emancipating man from providence but lashing him down, forcing the divinity of God out and replacing it with temporal reason. Reason becomes the secular deity that society continually returns to for the answers of life, and when it cannot answer them all, reason reveals its inherent faults. Man falls. Reason,
because it is seen as a totally human faculty, makes man rely upon himself for every answer; providence allows man to live without having all the world rest upon his shoulders.

Man started out from barbarism in Vico’s first stage, the “barbarism of sense.” This was a state of innocence where the world was new, life was slowly becoming categorized in language, and individuals were coming together in society. Man did not “think” in the normative sense, but acted, much like Rousseau’s savage, out of instinct. With newness came optimism. With the onset of the second barbarism (of the intellect), society had moved well past the state of La Mettrie’s well-tuned pocket-watch. A nation on the edge of collapse realizes that all that reason can prove is that it is a pocket-watch, and nothing more; society begins to lose its cohesion. As the popular state becomes corrupt, so also does its philosophies. They descend into skepticism. Imagination is lost and with it goes providence; man no longer can explain why the watch ticks. The center is lost, and reason is no longer seen as a liberator but as a false guide, leading Dante into the Dark Wood.

With the center lost, Vico posits three degrees to which society and man will descend. Vico’s providence, the God that reasonable man forgets, provides “three great remedies”:

[First:] It [providence] first ordains that there be found among these peoples a man like Augustus to arise and establish himself as a monarch and, by force of arms, take in hand all the institutions and all the laws, which, though sprung from liberty, no longer avails to regulate and hold it within bounds.
[Second:] Then, if providence does not find such a remedy within, it seeks it outside. . . . [P]rovidence decrees that they become slaves by the natural law of the gentes which springs from this nature of nations, and that they become subject to better nations. . . . Herein two great lights of natural order shine forth. First, that he who cannot govern himself must let himself be governed by another who can. Second, that the world is always governed by those who are naturally fittest.
[Third:] But if the peoples are rotting in that ultimate civil disease and cannot agree on a monarch from within, and are not conquered and preserved by better nations from without, then providence for their extreme ill has its extreme remedy at hand. . . . By reason of all this, providence decrees that, through obstinate factions and desperate civil wars, they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of
men. In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of [the intellect] than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense.17

When reason fails, man can thus be "saved" by two providential forces: the rise of a new leader to direct the fallen nation, or the conquering of the nation by an outside force that will prop up the ailing society. These two situations are infinitely better than a fall into the last "remedy," which Vico likens to the condition of the first men.

A nation in the state of the second barbarism holds a storehouse of knowledge that as a society it cannot rationally handle any longer. It is analogous to a student studying all his life for his college senior exam and then going insane, having all the knowledge locked up in his head but unable to organize it or use it in a meaningful way. Society, with the complete collapse of reason, must build once again. This is the new advent of the Vichian cycle.

In "the courses that nations run," Vico postulates a process of birth-life-death-and-rebirth. Poetic man is born, begins to reason and becomes heroic; eventually he masters the reasoning ability to become true man; after the reasoning ability fails, he does not move back to the poetic stage but to the heroic. Poetic man is characterized by the imaginative element and a lack of reason, and it is in the transition to the heroic age that man has his first taste of reason. It must be remembered that to Vico reason is like an organ that man realizes and that comes "alive" of its own accord. The "barbarism of the intellect" causes man to fall back into the heroic age, where reason returns to a seed that takes root and causes man to progress once again. The Vichian cycle has man rising and falling, constantly moving back and forth from heroic to reasonable man.

Vico uses the word "progress" to define the storehouse of knowledge that is constantly being built up and to which man loses his connection when reason fails. This is where Vico differs from the philosophes: his "progress" lies outside of man. Reason fails but "progress" continues, in that the storehouse of knowledge does not disappear like the reasoning ability. This has caused many commentators to stress that what Vico has described is not so much a historical cycle as a historical spiral—with man becoming connected and disconnected to the storehouse knowledge.

Vico in his Practic of the New Science, an addendum to the New Science, explains how society can continue to be connected to that reasonable knowledge through a wise leader who strikingly resembles Plato's philosopher king, making sure that the Gods are respected and man is taught only things that will sustain society, not tear it down. A
"master of wisdom" will teach society to be both pious and reasonable, keeping them in proper proportion in man’s life: “Let the masters of wisdom teach the young how to descend from the world of God and of minds into the world of nature, in order to live a decent and just humanity in the world of nations.”18 This individual can prevent the collapse of reason, for as long he or she is alive to keep society moving in the right direction. With the death of the "philosopher king," the question of collapse is put up once again to Vico’s three options. The problem is that the world has not spawned a man or woman of wisdom to save nations.

VI. An Example

Vico’s historical example, from which he continually cites, is the rise and decline of the Roman empire into the Middle Ages. Using the etymology of the Latin and Italian languages, he reaches back into the obscure and legendary past of Rome to reconstruct the simple, poetic society. His second source is the interpretation of myths and fables that are the “science” of primitive man. Legends hold real truth to Vico; they are expressions of how primitive man understood his world, and it is the role of the historian to coax a realistic picture of the past from the fables. Though tradition can be misused by the historian and become the only source of the past, when used correctly, as part of a whole, it becomes a valuable tool for unearthing the past. Rome, better described as unorganized “peoples,” was no different from any other nation in the poetic stage: a childlike, instinctive, imaginative people who had complete and total faith in providence for all answers to life.

For understanding of the heroic age, Vico calls upon Homer to give a general idea of what life was like. Once again the grand structure of the heroic age is similar for all nations: people coming together to gather the necessities of life. They use the first traces of reason to create a feudal society that provided those necessities, but they still have a very intimate relationship with providence. Romulus and Remus and the hilltop feudal society that they lived in were symbolic of Vico’s heroic age. The feudal lords did not rest on the strength of the people but were kings of a special kind, subject to no one but God, armed with religious terror. They were the physical manifestation of God on earth. Force was law, and the battle by ordeal gave providence the ultimate decision. Man balanced his temporal life with faith, through setting up mechanisms that allowed God to show man in which direction he should be moving.

The rise of the Republic of Rome was characterized by exponential growth in knowledge and social organization. Belief in providence moved from true faith to a matter of convenience. Romans began to have faith in themselves, with little reliance on an
“other” for understanding their daily lives. Vico’s sources for understanding the reasonable stage of Rome are the authors and historians of the period; he makes use of the written document to write the history of this period. As man became more and more consumed with the procedures of his daily life, God and imagination slowly were factored out. The Roman society began to prey upon its own, becoming a static society. Vico’s first two remedies failed: no Augustus came to save the Empire nor was it conquered by a better nation, and so it collapsed. Rome fell because it had lost the faith and the imagination to find creative solutions to the problems that were haunting the Empire. Instead of the “masters of wisdom” using their knowledge to pull Rome out of its quagmire, they sped up the collapse of reason with their misuse of knowledge. Verene, commenting on Vico’s third stage, says, “In this ultimate period of Vico’s third stage, men are like those in the lowest level of Dante’s Inferno, the final pit of treachery, those who violate humanity itself by poisoning the common confidences that are necessary for society. They turn their inge neo into insidia: they ‘plot against the life and fortunes of friends.’”

After the collapse of reason, western Europe fell into the “Dark Ages.” Feudalism reappeared and God was found once again. The product of the reasonable age, knowledge, still existed but could not be accessed by those who had fallen in the “barbarism of the intellect”; progress had not collapsed, only reason. Only a few ecclesiastics could understand what man had lost, and their influence on the masses, in terms of education, was minimal. They were more concerned with reinstating God in man’s heart. God is the base upon which man builds his world, but man forgets this when he reaches the apex of the reasonable stage. Providence provides the necessary re-education of man after the climactic fall. The parallels between Homer and Dante are to Vico a constant reminder of the reappearance of certain elements in history. Between the fall into the “Dark Ages” and the Enlightenment came the re-growth of reason within man; Vico would point at the Italian Renaissance and the growing organization of states and nations across Europe as examples of reason growing once again. Vico strongly hints that the age in which he lives, the Enlightenment, sits close to the “barbarism of the intellect.” The New Science is not only a philosophy of history but also a warning to mankind.

The final question that must be answered, briefly, is whether Vico’s idea of history and progress is viable. His idea of progress reflects aspects of Nisbet’s definition but in a very unusual manner. Collectively man holds a great deal of knowledge that is constantly enlarging or getting “progressively” bigger. This knowledge improves the general stature of man, removing him from a state of “primitiveness” and “barbarism,” but only when he has a reign over the reason that is working like an organ inside of himself.
When he loses control over reason, he finds himself more and more distanced from providence and the imaginative element that gives life vitality. The reasonable element eventually collapses, which signifies a disassociation with the collective knowledge that man has built up over time. After the fall, man must renew that bond with the storehouse of knowledge through the use once again of the reasonable element. Once man has reached the reasonable stage again, knowledge expands until the next fall. Humanity “progresses” through the abstract storehouse of knowledge, while individual societies rise and fall in a cyclical manner. World history then, according to Vico, moves in a spiraling fashion, as man falls away and then rebuilds the connection to the collective knowledge.

Vico, though at times using Tacitean particular examples, is more concerned with Platonic generalities and trends. By examining the whole of the past, we can see how Vico came to the conclusions that he did: reason, as defined above, could conceivably seem to fade in and out of human progress. Society at times is more connected to the knowledge which men of the past have created. It could be argued that today we are in the midst of the “barbarism of the intellect,” as we lose more and more contact with sheer knowledge, imagination, and God, and become more temporized. Viewed with blinders, Vico’s theory answers all the questions of historical progress. It is only when reason becomes a force that man cannot lose, but becomes hidden for short periods of time, that his theory shows its weakness. Vico truly means in the fall that reason is lost. Most scholars of his day and ours would disagree: reason does not really disappear but only becomes misdirected.

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5 *ibid.*, 13.
10 N.S. 426.
11 N.S. 122.
12 N.S. 405
13 N.S. 879.
14 N.S. 935.
16 N.S., 1102.
17 N.S. 1104-1106.
18 N.S., 1407.
19 Verene, 195.