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Vico's Critique of Certainty as Criterion of Science

One of the most well-known characteristics of the 18th c. philosopher of history Giambattista Vico is his deserved reputation for being one of the earliest Enlightenment (or counter-Enlightenment, depending on your definition of Enlightenment) philosophers to have critiqued the validity of Descartes's foundation of the certitude of knowledge on his *cogito*, and the defeat of skepticism that this supposedly entailed. Vico went on to build up his own complex theory of history and culture in response to Descartes's dismissal of the humanities, which was a result of the uncertainty of the propositions produced in any field whose subject matter was involved with questions of human choice and agency.

This paper aims to explore how Vico critiqued certainty as the criterion of any science that purports to study the significance of human actions. It also aims to show how his theory of a different criterion for science – that of the ascertainment and study of causal relationships and the valorization of probabilistic logic – was achieved by following the exact methods that he believed to be the special contributions of the humanities to the greater pursuit of knowledge: a historicizing hermeneutics augmented by an intellectual openness to the continuing relevance of what the past had to say, coupled with a willingness to confront or reject authorities of the past if what they said seemed false in the last analysis.

Vico was a great author of pedagogical texts, and he expounded a theory whereby the past could be the perspective for a critical stance on the present, as well as the other way around. The result is an education and a scholarship based not on a mania for utilitarian certain knowledge, but a developed sense of critique taking into account the unavoidable element of uncertainty in human perspectives.