

**Eric Voegelin and Giambattista Vico:
A Rhetorical Reading**

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Prepared for delivery at the 2007 Annual Meeting of the American Political
Science Association, August 30th-September 2nd, 2007
Eric Voegelin Society

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“It is difficult to tell the truth, because even if there is just one truth, it is alive and so it has a changing face”
(Franz Kafka)*

Introduction

It is not so easy to understand, but indeed very appealing to research, the reasons why in a moment so interested in foundations and language as ours, thinkers as Giambattista Vico and Eric Voegelin, who left such profound and inspiring contributions on these topics, are not at the centre of the attention of scholars in the field of philosophy, and specifically of political philosophy (the discipline that should be most concerned with them). This paper is an attempt to contribute to the (to be sure, already sustained) effort to correct this deficiency, with a reflection on the works of these two great authors aimed to highlight their communalities and the potentiality that springs from such joined reading.

Since the times of Plato and Aristotle, Modernity can be considered not only one of the most interested epoch in the theme of foundations but also, and above all, one of the most confident in its ability to find them¹. In this respect, we can recall what Blumenberg once noticed: it is not very normal that an epoch put in question the legitimacy of its existence, or even more, that it comes to conceive itself as an “epoch” at all². The heart of the question lays in the relationship that Modernity established with tradition, that is with its “prejudgment” against the past. This fact determined one of main feature of our epoch. Even if the postmodern turn represents a rupture in philosophy, it is still absolutely true that Modernity and Postmodernity have in common the primacy attributed to critique over other aspects of philosophy: from the Kant of the “Preface” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, to the Foucault of “What is Enlightenment?”, one of the main impulse that moves the majority of philosophers in their theoretical endeavour is still critique. Under this light, the centrality assumed in the philosophical debate by the question of foundations (either to establish, or to destabilize them, and although often in the background) is indeed quite consequent: after all, one can always asked, as Bernstein did: “criticism in the name of what?”³.

Parallel to the debate about foundations, as we have noticed, there is the theme of language. This proximity is not surprising as well. It is something rather old: it can be found in the ancient debate about the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric, and in the professed unity of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. It is true that with the establishment of Modernity, and the eclipse of rhetoric, the question of language was reduced often to that of an “instrument” for the representation of pure “ideas” (developing a tendency started with the scholastic nominalistic reduction of language in the Middle Age), but

* F. KAFKA, *Lettere a Milena*, Milano, Mondadori, 1966, p. 112, (my translation).

¹ M. MOONEY, *Vico e la tradizione della retorica*, Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991, p. 47.

² H. BLUMENBERG reported in J. HABERMAS, *Il discorso filosofico della Modernità*, Laterza, Roma, 2003, p. 8.

³ R. BERNSTEIN, *The New Constellation: Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 6, 316-317.

from the beginning of XX century it returned once again in all its sophistication at the centre of the attention. Authors such as Wittengstein, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Rorty, Derrida, or the new rethoricians Burke, Grassi, Perelmann, and others, are just an instance of thinkers who have once again explored deeply the question of language.

Finally, it shouldn't be considered strange either, that joined with that for foundations and language, a new interest in political questions emerged in the field of philosophy. This is indeed what happened in the case of many postmodern thinkers: after an earlier phase more concerned with quite abstract philosophic question, they began to extrapolate and develop all the political consequences intrinsic to their theoretical accounts⁴.

Since the times of Plato and the Sophists, the proximity of foundations and language, philosophy and rhetoric, and their intrinsic political significance was a quite evident fact, although also a cause of dispute. Classical thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Quintillian, and later on the humanist Vico, from the union between *logos*, *pathos* and *ethos*, explored naturally the problem of the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric, form and content, language and thought, with a comprehensive vision. They were in particular conscious of the political significance of this question.

Today this cluster of topics is once again debated conjointly. Nevertheless it is quite difficult to find the comprehensiveness of ancient thinkers. One of the reason is, in our opinion, the forgetting in a great part of contemporary philosophy and in particular of political philosophy, of certain rhetorical motifs - such as the union of form and content, the role of common sense in founding science, the importance of imagination, the relevance of figurative language in philosophy, and so on – and, in a general, to a certain “emptying” of the idea philosophy⁵. In turn this process is also one of the reason why, in such good conditions, Giambattista Vico and Eric Voegelin have not still attracted the attention of other canonical modern authors. In this paper, we will try to sketch a parallel reading of these two authors from this rhetorical sensibility we are reclaiming.

Rhetoric and philosophy: a very, very, short history of their relationship

The problem of *archai*, the normative foundations for human living, and that of language have been historically the domains (although not exclusive) respectively of philosophy and rhetoric. Although the relationship between these two disciplines has been at the least complicated since the beginning - if we take as beginning the diatribe between Plato and the Sophists - the strict proximity, or even more the mutual interdependence, of these two realms and their respective disciplines, was considered a matter of facts. This was true not only in the unity of rhetoric and philosophy professed

⁴ Ibid., Introduction. See also on this theme: S. CRITCHLEY, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1992.

⁵ Actually in the last decades a certain return of rhetoric had happened, thanks also to the anti-fundational and linguistic turn. But in our opinion rhetorics is still far from having the necessary attention it deserves. On this topics, see for example: M. BERNARD-DONALS, y R. GLEJZER (eds.), *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World: Language, Culture, and Pedagogy*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998. J. L. LUCAITES, C. M. CONDIT, S. CAUDILL, (eds.), *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory: A Reader*, The Guilford Press, New York and London, 1999. W. JOST and M. J. HYDE (eds.), *Rhetoric and Hermeneutics in Our Time: A Reader*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1997

in different ways by Isocrates, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian, or in the same Plato's critique of the privatization and instrumentality of rhetoric, but also in the immediate and urgent meaning that the art of the persuasion had in the community. Indeed, in the context of the Greek polis, the diatribe between Plato and the Sophists reflected such a crucial question as: Is ethics something assuming different forms in speech according to contingency, or, on the contrary, is it something universal, objectively communicable?⁶ This was a subject central for political philosophy, that is, for a discipline interested not only in Truth, but also in action, in *praxis*. Since then, however, the issue was extrapolated from its social context, and emptied of its philosophical connotation. Rhetoric was reduced to a mere technique, independent from ethics, and separated from its counterpart, dialectic, with the result that such political and philosophical question as the relationship between form and content confined exclusively to the domain of aesthetics⁷. Plato's attack against the Sophists, for example, has been generally taken as the definitive dispute between the noble search for eternal truth of philosophy, on the one hand, and the manipulation of the surface for double ends of rhetoric; between the epistemic value of philosophy based on the universality of reason, and the inconsistency, if not dangerousness, of rhetoric based on *doxai* and feelings; between the actuality of content and the falseness of form. This means that between the two disciplines, philosophy and rhetoric, and their domain, content and form, have been created an almost irreducible gap, which have obscured the real meaning of their interdependence⁸.

One fundamental moment in the crystallization of this narrative is represented by Modernity with the advent of rationalism. If we listen the voices of emblematic modern thinkers such as Descartes Locke, Kant, and Hegel, we would discover just scornful opinions about rhetoric, and the exaltation of the value of "content" compared to that of its representation, of its "form"⁹. But besides these instances, one other character is to be considered in our account of this history: Peter Ramus.

Ramus (1515-1572) was professor and Dean of Eloquence and Philosophy at the *Collège de Prestes* of University of Paris. During his career he promoted important reforms in the field of education, which included a fundamental reformulation of rhetoric as a discipline, whose repercussions in Europe were enormous. The core of this reformulation was the simplification of the art of speech, and above all the separation between dialectic and rhetoric, which ratified the predominance of the first on the second. Very succinctly Ramus: 1) tried to promote an uniqueness of method, based on logic, to all the field of knowledge; 2) deprived rhetoric of the fundamental component of *inventio* (the art of finding creatively topics about a determinate issue) and *dispositio* (the art of disposing them in a speech), and moved them to dialectics; 3) tried to promote dialectic as the only art of discourse, reducing rhetoric to mere *ornatus*¹⁰. In this way

⁶ T. EAGLTON, "A Short History of Rhetoric", in M. BERNARD-DONALS, y R. GLEJZER (eds.), *Rhetoric in an Antifoundational World*, p. 87.

⁷ Ibid., p. 88.

⁸ E. GRASSI, *Rhetorica come filosofia: La tradizione umanistica*, La città del sole, Napoli, 1999, ch. 2.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 131-133.

¹⁰ W. ONG, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Massachussets), 1958, pp. 270-271. This book is a classical study about Peter Ramus and his intellectual legacy. His author sustained that Ramus represents a watershed in the history of western thought toward the predominance of technique and rationalism.

rhetoric remained the devitalized technique of simple *ornatus*, while all the creative energy, that of *inventio*, was attributed to the dialectic part, the effort to prove the truthfulness of propositions testing their logical coherence. Two main consequences can be deduced by this revolution in the conception of the relationship between rhetoric and dialectic: first, thought was privatized and divorced from public speech and its contingency, which implies that truth started to be perceived not as something related to the public sphere but to the anonymous and ahistoric processes of logic. Second, the production of speech was stripped from rhetorical figures and transformed in an exclusively logic operation, which implied the oblivion of the inventive capacities required by rhetoric to the orator (those to find new arguments, discover suggestive connections, touch the sensibility of the auditorium, for example)¹¹.

On the other side of this emptied conception of rhetoric there is of course that of other authors, who fully understood its value. Let's try to specify now some of these themes central in rhetorical tradition and that we want to recover¹².

First of all, we could say that the necessity for a rhetorical approach to the world originates from the sensitivity to two conditions characterizing human condition, which D. P. Gaonkar synthesizes as: the condition of "plurality", in Hannah Arendt's sense, and that of the symbolic facet of communication, in Peter Burke's sense. From these conditions we can derive two strictly related functions of rhetoric: rhetoric as persuasion, and rhetoric as *tropoi*¹³. In this paper we will be concerned with this second condition, although it is important to keep in mind their strong interrelation. The tropological dimension of language derives from the fact, known to classical rhetorical authors such as Aristotle, Cicero, Quintilian, or later on Vico, according to the infinitude of human experience can not fit perfectly in the finitude of our vocabulary. This implies that language is inevitably tropological, or if we want metaphorical: which means, it works always transferring a meaning of something known to something obscure, through the creative discovery of connections between them¹⁴. In turn, this dimension of language is related to persuasion, the other facet of rhetoric. The condition of plurality implies the necessity of persuasion, because of the freedom of deliberation and the impossibility to predict behaviours. In this sense, common life is characterized

¹¹ J. D. SCHAEFFER, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 1990, pp. 31-32. After these reflections, Schaeffer concludes in a slightly enigmatic way: "The full impact of Ramism on Western culture may never be understood".

¹² Of course we are well aware of the intrinsic difficulty in the same operation of defining and individuating in the history of thought what a "tradition" of rhetoric is. But in this paper, we are not much interested in this operation, but in recovering some theoretical insights, which resound in some authors interested in rhetoric. On this issue see for example the review - *Philosophy and Rhetoric* (2003), no. 2, vol. 36 - completely dedicated to it. In this way, we also try to escape the perils pointed by Gaonkar in the construction of a "myth" of the hidden tradition of rhetoric. D. P. GAONKAR, "Rhetoric and Its Double: Reflections of the Rhetorical Turn in the Human Sciences", in J. L. LUCAITES, C. M. CONDIT, S. CAUDILL, (eds.), *Contemporary Rhetorical Theory*.

¹³ D. P. GAONKAR, "Rhetoric and Its Double", p. 352.

Andrea Battistini establishes the same distinction developing the labels of "persuasive rhetoric" and "dionisiac rhetoric". A. BATTISTINI, "Introduzione", in M. MOONEY, *Vico e la tradizione della retorica*, p. 7.

¹⁴ G. VICO, "Retórica (Instituciones de Oratoria)", in F. J. NAVARRO GÓMEZ (ed.), *Obras: Retórica (Instituciones de Oratoria)*, Vol. II, Anthropos, Barcelona, 2004, p. 35. M. MOONEY, *Vico e la tradizione della retorica*, p. 115.

by “contingency”, its continuous mutability, and “transcendence”, the impossibility to grasp its ultimate meanings. Hence, “likelihood” and not “truthfulness” is the most appropriate dimension for it, and, hence, common sense, that kind of practical and shared knowledge, is a fundamental component in the polis¹⁵.

In this sense, we can understand the importance of rhetoric as the art of finding in each situation all the means available for persuasion, in the classic definition of Aristotle¹⁶. But for this art to work, every good orator must consider the pathetic components of the listeners, which change in each situation, and therefore the necessity to resort to rhetorical figures, *tropoi*, to touch those parts according to the contingent moment¹⁷. In turn this requires to the orator an extraordinary sensibility and, as Quintilian maintained, the capacity to be inspired¹⁸. And, finally, it is fundamental the morality of the orator, either to conquer the legitimacy in his public, or, fundamentally, because on his decisions depends the welfare of the polis¹⁹. Rhetoric, in substance, it is concerned with those things that can be in a way or in another, in what is just or not, because it depends on human freedom²⁰. It is a theoretical account of language that through the unity of *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*, is capable to understand the deep value of language in society and to drive human action²¹.

In order to conclude this section on rhetoric, we want to recover another fundamental distinction this tradition drew: that between *ars topica* and *ars critica*. According to rhetoric tradition, at least since Cicero, *ars topica* was the art to find arguments on a particular subject moving through all its *loci*, all the points of view on it. It is moved by the faculty of *ingenium*, that is, the capacity to “connect separate and diverse elements” and find their common nature²². *Ars critica*, on the other hand, was the art to establish the truthfulness or the falseness of those arguments, checking the logical coherence with their axiomatic principles²³. These two arts were maintained to be complementary and both necessary for the production of a good speech. Anyway, first came *topica*, which is the “first operation of mind” in that it shows all the aspects of an issue, and then *critica*, which judges their truthfulness²⁴. Finally, because of their nature, it was evident that *topica* was considered more important in civil life and *critica* in science. Through the first is indeed possible to find the verisimilar *medium* between distant things, to recover to all believable arguments for the persuasion of an auditorium.

¹⁵ G. VICO, “L’ordine degli studi del nostro tempo”, in N. ABBAGNANO (ed.), *Giambattista Vico: Opere*, Utet, Torino, 1976, p. 140.

¹⁶ ARISTÓTELES, *Retórica*, Editorial Gredos, Madrid, 1990, 1355b.

¹⁷ Ibid., 1378a22-24, 1379a10-12.

¹⁸ M. T. QUINTILIANO, *Sobre la formación del orador (Instituciones Oratorias)*, Publicaciones Universidad Pontificia, Salamanca, 1999, book II.XI.10.

¹⁹ ARISTÓTELES, *Retórica*, 1356a, 1378a. M. T. QUINTILIANO, *Sobre la formación del orador (Instituciones Oratorias)*, Book II.15.11. G. VICO, “Retórica (Instituciones de Oratoria)”, p. 2.

²⁰ ARISTÓTELES, *Retórica*, 1359 a 30 ff.

²¹ M. T. QUINTILIANO, *Sobre la formación del orador*, Book II.13, 17, 18.

²² G. VICO, “On the ancient wisdom of the Italians”, in L. POMPA (ed.), *Vico: Selected Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982, p. 70.

²³ For Vico’s position on *topica* and *critica* see for instance, G. VICO, “L’antichissima sapienza degli italiani”, in N. ABBAGNANO (ed.), *Giambattista Vico: Opere*, pp. 236-242.

²⁴ G. VICO, “Principi di Scienza Nuova (1744)”, in A. BATTISTINI (ed.), *Giambattista Vico: Opere*, Vol. I, Mondadori, Milano, 1990, par. 497.

Through *critica* is, instead, possible to reach the undisputable truth, which is often unfitting to the political world²⁵.

These are some of the main themes recurring in the rhetorical tradition and that nowadays are difficult to find in political philosophy. In this paper, our intention is to show how, from a rhetorical point of view, would be easier to grasp some fundamental theoretical insights, which resonate in Giambattista Vico and Eric Voegelin.

Vico and Voegelin: the recovery of a science of humanity

The number of works intended to analyze the theoretical relationship between Vico and Voegelin is quite small²⁶. This is, in our opinion, a lacuna to be corrected, because, although Voegelin didn't devote many pages of his writings to Vico, the links between the two authors are in general important and deep. Except some quick remarks in *Order and History* and *Anamnesis*, Voegelin dedicated a whole chapter to Vico in his project *History of Political Ideas*²⁷. The importance in the development of Voegelin's theoretical major corpus of this early work, although its unfinished character, has been showed with great efficacy by Barry Cooper²⁸. The chapter that Voegelin dedicated to the Neapolitan thinker corroborates this fact. In Vico, Voegelin discovered one of the founders of modern political philosophy and one of the most lucid critic of the spiritual disorder of Modernity, which he saw from a privileged position:

“Vico found himself in opposition to the Age of Enlightenment and Reason when it had barely started on its course. This was perhaps an advantage because the causes of an intellectual disaster can be discerned more clearly before they are obscured by the rank growth of the effects. The enemy was still clearly recognizable, and Vico's attack has a massive simplicity”²⁹

If the reaction against the modern crisis was one of the first and strongest motif and impulse in Voegelin's work, then it was inevitable that he found in Vico a persuasive companion. In this light and against the interpretations “secular and progressist” of Croce and Gentile, Voegelin declared Vico to be the thinker who achieved “the insight

²⁵ M. T. CICERÓN, *La invención retórica*, Gredos, Madrid, 1997, Book I, 6.

²⁶ Between them, see for example: R. CAPORALI, “Vico in Voegelin”, *Bollettino del Centro di Studi Vichiani*, Vol. XX, (1990). B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 1999. P. J. BADILLO O'FARELL, “Una lectura complementaria en torno a la incidencia del pensamiento viquiano en la obra de Voegelin”, *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, Vol. 9-10, (1998), pp. 309-31.

²⁷ E. VOEGELIN, “Revolution and the New Science”, in B. COOPER (ed.), *History of Political Ideas*, Vol. 6 of, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia, 1998.

²⁸ B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*.

²⁹ E. VOEGELIN, “Revolution and the New Science”, p. 102. As a factor contributing to the lucidity of Vico's diagnosis of the disease of Modernity, a part from his position “in time”, it is necessary to add his “geographic” location. Vico, indeed, spent almost all his life in the city of Naples, one of the culturally richest and lively, although in decadence, city in Europe, where the passage to Modernity was lived with a particular intensity. This is because of the clash between two conflicting trends, which occurred there: on the one hand, the classic humanist tradition which found in Naples a stronghold; on the other, the new cultural movements coming from the north, first of all Cartesianism. Vico, who was professor of rhetoric for several years, lived and interpreted this clash in all its creative and theoretical force. On this subject, see J. D., SCHAEFFER, *Sensus Communis*, ch. 1 and 2.

into, and reversal of, the Western apostatic movement”³⁰, avoiding the gnostic derailment typical of modern philosophies.

Some of the most important aspects of Vico’s thought emerged with great clarity in Voegelin’s account. The defence of a science of the substance against the hegemony of natural science; the recovery of the historicity of philosophy and its roots in common sense and myth against the Cartesian rationalism; the denial of progressist philosophies of history and their exaltation of *amor sui* and self-reliance. But what most interested Voegelin was the relationship between sacred and civil history in Vico’s theory of “*corsi e ricorsi*”. This is an important aspect of his philosophy of history, strongly connected with the problem of meaning in history, which exercised a deep influence in Voegelin’s work³¹.

In the chapter on Vico, therefore, Voegelin discovered and analyzed some of the main threads in the thought of the Neapolitan thinker. They also represent some of the most important points of contact between the two authors.

First of all, we could start noting what it is most evident: Vico and Voegelin both wrote two major works whose titles declaim explicitly a brave (and indeed quite modern) intention: that of refunding a “new science”. The *Scienza Nuova* and *The New Science of Politics* were conceived, indeed, also as a reaction against rationalism, scientism, and positivism, and their attempt to reduce science to the study of the surface of phenomena. Against this movement both recalled the example of the classics, in order to restore a science of substance, which was under attack.

In Vico this operation had already started in earlier works, which constituted the so-called “first phase” of his thought, in works such as *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, *De mente heroica*, or the other *disertiones* encharged to Vico for the openings of the academic years at the *Università Regia di Napoli* (where he worked as professor of rhetoric). Although often neglected by Vico’s scholars, these works represented a fundamental component of his thought. In them we can find a lucid criticism against the new Cartesian method and the defence of a humanistic education. These are key elements for the comprehension of his masterpiece, the *Scienza Nuova*³². From the perspective of the rhetorical and humanist tradition, Vico claimed the importance to cultivate those civil disciplines of the “verisimilar” such as jurisprudence, history, rhetoric, politics, ethics, etc., which are the more suitable to the tortuous world of human affairs. The biggest mistake of Descartes was to forget the Aristotelian lesson, according to each subject corresponds a method of study³³:

“Men’s deeds cannot therefore be judged in accordance with an abstract and inflexible rule of moral conduct. Rather should they be assessed in accordance with that flexible rule of the Lesbians, which does not force bodies to conform it, but bends itself to conform them. Knowledge differs from practical wisdom in this respect: those who excel in knowledge seek a single cause to explain many

³⁰ E. VOEGELIN, quoted in B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, p. 353.

³¹ B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, p. 374.

³² The scholars who more remarked the importance of rhetoric in Vico’s thought are: A. BATTISTINI, *La dignità della retorica. Studi su G. B. Vico*, Pacini, Pisa, 1975; M. MOONEY, *Vico e la tradizione della retorica*; E. GRASSI, *Vico e l’Umanesimo*, Guerini e Associati, Milano, 1990; A. BATTISTINI, *La sapienza retorica di Giambattista Vico*, Guerini e Associati, Milano, 1995; J. D., SCHAEFFER, *Sensus Communis*.

³³ G. VICO, “*Principi di Scienza Nuova* (1744)”, par. 314.

natural effects, but those who excel in practical wisdom seek as many causes as possible for a single deed”³⁴

The rigidity of the Cartesian method, with its pretension to produce eternal truths and the linearity of its deductive process, was unable to fit the contingency of the polis, and the transcendence of the human soul³⁵. The followers of this method, denounced Vico, were only interested in the study of nature, the domain of truth and falsehood, leaving the human soul, the domain of occasion and freedom, simulation and dissimulation, unexplored³⁶. From a pedagogic point of view, this method was dangerous because its insistence with mathematic, geometry, and logic, didn't allow to engender the “*copiosità*” (copiousness) of *topica*, and its product, common sense, and didn't cultivate the faculties necessary for them: *ingenium* and *fantasia*. For these reasons, the new method was very dangerous for public life³⁷.

The criticism against Descartes represents a fundamental aspect of Vico's thought, because it is emblematic of his position on the modern rupture. The crucial element in our view is that, far from being a sign of his inability to understand the novelty of his epoch, Vico's reaction against Modernity has a strong political and spiritual value. It was a reaction, which found its climax in the *Scienza Nuova*, aimed to refund the new epoch, to construct another kind of Modernity, without the contempt of many moderns in relation to ancient wisdom, but with their same sense of novelty³⁸. The new philosophy professed by the Cartesians represented a peril for the polis. Its arrogance against the traditional humanistic disciplines, and the simplicity of its method, risked to destroy fundamental political virtues such as prudence and imagination³⁹. Fully aware of Cicero's teaching about the fundamental role of language, common sense and republican virtues, in the government of the polis, Vico denounced how the destruction of rhetoric and humanistic education implied the disintegration of the substance that maintains society united, and the triumph of *amor sui* and spiritual isolation⁴⁰. Rhetoric and its ideal of wisdom is fundamental to cure not only the wounds of society, but also that of the spirit, that is, it was seen as the indispensable instrument toward the knowledge of everything, human and divine. Rhetoric was the way to develop to its fuller capacity our humanity⁴¹.

Finally, the new philosophy of nature promoted by the Cartesians had the great fault of denying the transcendence of the ultimate meanings, which only God knows:

³⁴ G. VICO, “On the method in contemporary fields of study”, in L. POMPA (ed.), *Vico: Selected Writings*, p. 42.

³⁵ G. VICO, “L'ordine degli studi del nostro tempo”, p. 140.

³⁶ Ibid., p 191.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ G. MAZZOTTA, *La nuova mappa del mondo: la filosofia politica di Giambattista Vico*, Einaudi, Torino, 1999, pp. 216-218.

³⁹ M. MOONEY, *Vico e la tradizione della retorica*, pp. 142-144.

⁴⁰ “Thus at the height of their fame and the peak of their numbers they lived hideous and beastly in the deepest solitude of spirit and will, where scarcely two can agree, since each is bent on his own personal pleasure or whim” Vico declared with emphasis in his *Scienza Nuova*. G. VICO, “The Third New Science”, in L. POMPA (ed.), *Vico: Selected Writings*, par. 1106. Confront with what Cicero declared in his *De Oratore*: M. T. CICERÓN, *Sobre el orador*, Gredos, Madrid, 2002, Book I, 8.

⁴¹ G. VICO, “Oración VI”, in F. J. NAVARRO GÓMEZ (ed.), *Obras: Oraciones Inaugurales – La antiquísima sabiduría de los italianos*, Vol. I, Anthropos, Rubí, Barcelona, 2002. pp. 63-64.

they confused the *certum*, the certainty of the *cogito ergo sum*, with the *verum*, what it is true, which only God owns because it is the producer of reality. In promoting the human mind to the standard of truth, they reduced the infinitude of the existent into the finitude of the human mind, showing a perilous intellectual and spiritual arrogance⁴².

So, Vico's position respect Modernity can be described as a strong response against philosophic movements, whose momentum became successively overwhelming, to ignore the limitedness and complexity of the human condition, promote the introspection and estrangement of the intellectual from the polis and the wisdom of common sense, and to cause an aridness of the spirit. This was the "*barbarie della riflessione*", that is the last phase of the cycle, the corruption of the age of the Reason, in his theory of the "*corsi e ricorsi*"⁴³.

So if that of Vico was a reaction against what he considered a profound spiritual and cultural crisis of his times (exactly in the same way as other great thinkers who influenced Voegelin: Agustin, and Bodin), so also the intellectual effort of Voegelin received a fundamental impulse from the observation of the level of degradation of the culture of his epoch⁴⁴. Included in this revolt against the decline of the west, was the attempt to recover a broader conception of science according to the example of the ancients, after the destruction caused by scientism and positivism. As in the case of Vico, therefore, the work of restoration undertook by Voegelin implied the recovery of some teachings of the past, in particular of authors such as Plato, Aristotle, and Agustin. A recovery of what he called a science of substance interested in "human existence in society and history, as well as of the principles of order in general", that is, in the conditions of human existence in accordance with the order of the cosmos⁴⁵. And a recovery which was not a simple return to the past, but an actualization of perennial principles to the current conditions⁴⁶. The awareness of the historicity of humanity and a capacity to look back to the past not in an antiquarian manner are therefore another important similarities between Voegelin and the Neapolitan thinker.

The critique of Voegelin was addressed to that philosophical misunderstanding, "phenomenalism", according to the substance of things corresponds with their phenomenical surface, that is: "the misapprehension that the structure of the external world as it is constituted in the system of mathematized physics is the ontologically real

⁴² For a good synthesis of the main topics of Vico's criticism to Descartes, see: Y. BELAVAL, "Vico and Anti-Cartesianism", in G. TAGLIACCOZZO and H. V. WHITE (eds.), *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1969.

⁴³ It is interesting to note how Hannah Arendt, another author so closed to a rhetoric sensibility, but who never made explicit reference to this tradition, sustained that one of the most dangerous consequence of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* was the introspection of the philosopher and his estrangement from the world of common sense. H. ARENDT, *La condición humana*, Paidós, Barcelona, pp. 281-282.

⁴⁴ In this sense, therefore, Vico can be placed side by side with other two figures who deeply influenced Voegelin: Agustin and Bodin. See, B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, p. ix.

⁴⁵ E. VOEGELIN, "The New Science of Politics", in M. HENNINGSSEN (ed.), *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions, The New Science of Politics, and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, Vol. 5 de *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 2000, p. 89.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

structure of the world”⁴⁷. This belief was strongly connected with the supremacy of the method of natural sciences established by positivism. Such basic teaching as the necessity to choose the method according to the subject of inquiry was completely forgotten, with the consequence that theory became slave of the method. As a consequence, all those aspects of existence that the positivist method can not grasp were relegated and banished into the black box of metaphysics. Instead of this, for Voegelin “science is a search for truth concerning the nature of the various realms of being”, which implies the necessity to go far beyond their surface⁴⁸. The theoretical relevance of a question can not be established depending on its possibilities to be analyzed by a particular method, but by its relationship with the realm of being and the problem of order. The submission of theory to the positivist method means the loss of its fundamental task: to lead humanity in its search for order:

“If the adequacy of a method is not measured by its usefulness to the purpose of science, if on the contrary the use of a method is made the criterion of science, then the meaning of science as a truthful account of the structure of reality, as the theoretical orientation of man in his world, and as the great instrument for man’s understanding of his own position in the universe is lost. Science starts from the prescientific existence of man, from his participation in the world with his body, soul, intellect, and spirit, from his primary grip on all the realms of being that is assured to him because his own nature is their epitome. And from this primary cognitive participation, turgid with passion, rises the arduous way, the *methodos* [italic in the original], toward the dispassionate gaze on the order of being in the theoretical attitude.”⁴⁹

This quotation underline another point of contact between our two authors regarding their conception of science, in particular the relationship between *episteme* and *doxai*, between science and common sense. Voegelin always underlined the rooting of science into prescientific knowledge: between these two realms there is indeed not an interruption but a contiguity. For him, as for Aristotle, the method of science was essentially the systematization and critical elaboration of the general opinion⁵⁰. The experience of communities and individuals and the symbolizations through which they express themselves, in all their manifestations, is the “rough material” of theory. This is because, as Voegelin said in his later years, “the reality of experience is self-interpretative”, that is, the existence of human beings in the various realms of being is a search for meaning which leaves behind various signs of its presence, such as myth, poetry, philosophy, and so on⁵¹:

“Human society is not merely a fact, or an event, in the external world to be studied by an observer like a natural phenomenon... it is as a whole a little world, a cosmion, illuminated with meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization. It is illuminated through an elaborate symbolism, in various degrees of compactness

⁴⁷ E. VOEGELIN, quoted in B. COOPER, *Eric Voegelin and the Foundations of Modern Political Science*, p. 99.

⁴⁸ E. VOEGELIN, “The New Science of Politics”, pp. 90-91.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

⁵⁰ E. VOEGELIN, “Science, Politics and Gnosticism”, in M. HENNINGSEN (ed.), *Modernity Without Restraint*, p. 258

⁵¹ E. VOEGELIN, “Autobiographical Reflections”, in E. SANDOZ (ed.), *Autobiographical Reflections: Revised Edition, with a Voegelin Glossary and Cumulative Index*, Vol. 34 de, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2006, pp. 90, 104-106.

and differentiation – from rite, through myth, to theory - and this symbolism illuminates it with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmos, the relation between its members and groups of members, as well as its existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human existence. The self-illumination of society through symbols is an integral part of social reality, and one may even say its essential part, for through such symbolization the members of a society experience it as more than an accident or a convenience; they experience it as their human essence. And, inversely, the symbols express the experience that man is fully man by virtue of his participation in a whole which transcends his particular existence..⁵²

The theoretical effort belongs to this context of meaning and at the same time modify it in its effort to clarify this symbolism⁵³. Philosophy is not the only possible way to knowledge, but just one together with other kinds with different symbolization, such as poetry, religion, myth, and so on. Moreover before philosophy was created from a less systematized and abstracted kind of wisdom, which would have continued also after its birth⁵⁴. So, if the task of science is to interpret, clarify, the significance of symbols and to denounce and correct the state of disorder of society, common sense remains fundamental. It is a kind of compact knowledge, which partakes with theoretical knowledge the condition of *episteme* being the product of the fact that the human being is, in Cicero's sense, *rationis particeps*. Common sense is *ratio* applied to direct experience that engender an habit of rational judgment and conduct⁵⁵. For its character of practical knowledge, common sense is a bastion against totalitarian and ideological drifts, against the construction of second realities with pseudo-knowledge where thought have lost any relation with reality⁵⁶. In this respect, Voegelin underlined the necessity for political science to be an "empirical science", a science close to the concrete experience and problems of human existence⁵⁷. The echoing of these motifs with the denunciation of the "*barbarie della riflessione*" and the critique to the Cartesian doctrine by Vico is all too evident.

According to what we have said, the intention to refund a science of human existence, as a reaction to the arid abstraction of Modern science, was motivated by similar preoccupations. Behind these attempts lays indeed a common diagnosis: that modern science was losing contact with the concrete problems that mankind faces in history and, at the same time, that it was drying human life of its spiritual vein, reducing it to its phenomenal surface. Hence, the intention to restore a classic and Christian

⁵² E. VOEGELIN, "The New Science of Politics", p. 109.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 109-111.

⁵⁴ "When Aristotle wrote his Ethics and Politics, when he constructed his concepts of the polis, of constitution, the citizen, the various forms of government, of justice, of happiness, etc., he did not invent these terms and endow them with arbitrary meanings; he took rather the symbols which he found in his social environment, surveyed with care the variety of meanings which they had in common parlance, and ordered and clarified these meanings by the criteria of his theory". E. VOEGELIN, "The New Science of Politics", Ibid., p. 110.

⁵⁵ E. VOEGELIN, "What Is Political Reality?", in D. WALSH (ed.), *Anamnesis: On the Theory of History and Politics*, Vol. 6 of, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2002, p. 410.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 410-412.

⁵⁷ "A philosophy of politics is empirical – in the precise sense of an inquiry into the experiences which penetrate with their order the whole area of reality that we express by the symbol 'man'" E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, Vol. 4 of, *Order and History*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1974, p. 305.

science able to inquire into the whole range of human experiences. History became the great field of inquiry of our two authors. But this research into the ruins of the past was not moved by an archaeological spirit, rather by the interest for the human world: an immersion into the past meant for them an immersion into the psyche of mankind. History is indeed, for Vico and Voegelin, the field where human mind develops. In a very famous passage Vico declared:

“But in this dense night of darkness, which enshrouds earliest antiquity so distant from us, appears the eternal light, which never sets, of this truth which is beyond any possible doubt: that the civil world itself has certainly been made by men, and that its principles therefore can, because they must, be rediscovered within the modifications of our own mind”⁵⁸

And Voegelin:

“The field of history is the soul of the man”⁵⁹

“The occupation with works of art, poetry, philosophy, mythical imagination, and so forth, makes sense only if it is conducted as an inquiry into the nature of man. That sentence, while it excludes historicism, does not exclude history, for it is peculiar to the nature of man that it unfolds its potentialities historically”⁶⁰

The resulting philosophies of history are ones that leave the conclusion open. Humans can obtain knowledge about their existence, first of all that about the frontier between what can be known and what can not, but not about the ultimate mystery. In Voegelin the awareness of the capacity to know is accompanied by that about the fundamental limit the transcendence of the divine pole posits to it⁶¹. Hence, the ascertainment that, although mankind can reach increasing levels of differentiation, history will always remain “a mystery in process of revelation”: that is a mystery never fully revealed⁶².

In Vico (as Voegelin rightly observed), his famous epistemological aphorism of the *verum esse ipsum factum*, according to only the doer can be also the knower of something, must be read joined with the distinction between *gentium*, what is given, and *factum*, what it is created. This distinction maintains the irreducible epistemological gap between God, who only can know the essence of the cosmos, and human being, who can know the meaning of his action, history, but not its ultimate meaning⁶³. Connected with this topic, there is Vico’s theory of “*corsi e ricorsi*”, which denies the modern and linear theories of progress, and foresees the possibility of cyclical spiritual phases of decline and a new start, in the evolution of humanity. Decline that is exactly the condition of his epoch: the “*barbarie della riflessione*”, the decadence of the age of Reason⁶⁴.

⁵⁸ G. VICO, “The Third New Science”, par. 331.

⁵⁹ Voegelin quoted in G. WEISS, “Between Gnosis and Anamnesis: European Perspectives on Eric Voegelin”, *Review of Politics*, Vol. 62, No. 4, (2000), pp. 753-776.

⁶⁰ Voegelin quoted in D. WALSH, “Editor’s Introduction”, in D. WALSH (ed.), *Anamnesis*, p. 15.

⁶¹ E. VOEGELIN, *Israel and Revelation*, Vol. 1 of, *Order and History*, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1956, p. 2.

⁶² E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 6.

⁶³ G. VICO, “L’antichissima sapienza degli italici”, Ch. I. 2, pp. 196-200. E. VOEGELIN, “Revolution and the New Science”, pp. 96-102.

⁶⁴ G. VICO, “Principi di Scienza Nuova (1744)”, par. 1106. The theory “*corsi e ricorsi*”, which is a cyclical theory of history but original compared to other classical cyclical accounts of history, is

Against these linear and progressive theories of historical development Voegelin as well wrote several pages. Spiritual disorder is always possible, because the ultimate mysterious character of existence. Therefore, it constituted a totalitarian violation of the its structure to conceive fixed laws of historical development. Moreover, human position into this structure is one of participation: a perspective, which allows to throw some light on the structure, but not to get a comprehensive vision on it⁶⁵. Those modern thinkers who have imagined such fixed laws, who have declared the end of history imagining it as a necessary process of evolution whose final point coincides with their present, have created “iron cages”, “second realities”, or “egophanic deformations of history”, product of an omnipotent reaction to the incapacity to stand their existential anxiety⁶⁶.

In both authors, to the dependence of history to the divine sphere corresponds a political theory which denies omnipotence for humans: the awareness about the finitude of reason becomes the best antidote we have against totalitarian nightmare⁶⁷. These philosophies of history, in turn, rest on not essentialist but dense anthropological philosophies: which is to say, what in ultimate instance determines the openness of history in their accounts is their recognition about the transcendence of the human condition. The modern solutions which try to deny the first ended violating the second. In synthesis their critique against Modernity can be interpreted through the light of their common project to recover a real science of man. A science more concerned with the human experience. The whole range of human experience.

Vico and Voegelin: foundations and symbolic language

As we have already seen, in the approximations of Vico and Voegelin to the human condition there is a particular interest for the origins of humanity. This pushed them to explore the human soul in all its extension, deepness, that is not only in the conscious and rational part, but also in those zones of frontiers between unconsciousness and conscious, where thought is engendered. At the same time this exploration led them to reflect about the symbolic, or tropological, aspect of language. In Vico these two theoretical threads joined into his theory of the poetic beginnings of humanity, which is a theory about the role of poetry in common life; in Voegelin, on the other hand, in his meditations about the symbolic representations of the searches of order, and in particular his thoughts about the role of myth in relation to philosophy. This section of the paper will be dedicated to confront these topics and to show the proximity and the difference between the two authors.

developed in the fifth book of *Scienza Nuova*. The fundamental point of distinction is that in Vico the “*ricorso*” is an historical fact and not a natural one, as for example in Aristotle. This breaks the necessity of the law. G. MAZZOTTA, *La nuova mappa del mondo*, p. 227.

⁶⁵ E. VOEGELIN, *Israel and Revelation*, p. 1. E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 314. This aspect of Voegelin’s theory of history is strongly connected to his theory of consciousness.

⁶⁶ E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 260-300, 331. E. VOEGELIN, “On Hegel: A Study in Sorcery”, in E. SANDOZ (ed.), *Published Essays: 1966-1985*, Vol. 12 of, *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1990.

⁶⁷ On this point, see in particular Vico’s critic to the naturalistic philosophies of history of Stoicism and Spinozism, in his third *New Science*, par. 335. G. MAZZOTTA, *La nuova mappa del mondo*, pp. 221-223.

Vico's theory of the poetic beginnings of humanity, and his philosophy of myth, have produced interesting but still not abundant literature⁶⁸. In this topic we will follow one of most able scholars in developing all the philosophical potential of Vico's theory: Ernesto Grassi.

In the work of Ernesto Grassi there is a constant endeavour to recompose that scission between pathos and logos, pathetic and rational discourse, rhetoric and philosophy, which is present in a great deal of the western philosophical tradition. Italian Humanism (in particular Giambattista Vico) represents for him one of those moments where this distinction was overcome and the essential relevance of the problem of language understood. From this it derives its great philosophical value⁶⁹.

In order to introduce his thesis about the unity of rhetoric and philosophy, which he extrapolated from an interpretation of Vico, we must follow Grassi's distinction between rational and pathetic discourse. His intention is to show how a rhetorical discourse, that is, one not depurated from emotional components and not neutral toward the question of form, is the only possible. Rhetorical discourse is of kind that, being concerned with persuasion, must always be concerned with its particular auditorium, the contingency of every situation, and recur to stylistic figures in order to touch the feelings of the listeners, which change in every moment. Rational discourse, on the other hand, aims at creation of truth propositions through a deductive process starting from general and axiomatic premises and ending in conclusions logically coherent with them. This means that the rational discourse is a closed system, because it doesn't allow to follow different paths and leaves in silence and mystery what doesn't fit in its logic⁷⁰. Moreover, it engenders an anonymous kind of knowledge, because its process can be reproduced infinite times by anyone, and a-historic, because its conclusions don't depend on time and location, but are always true. This is, therefore, a kind of discourse concerned only with the truthfulness or falsity of propositions, and unable to grasp the field of the verisimilitude. On the other hand, rhetorical discourse is subjective, pathetic, and contingent, and is concerned with what is probable.

Actually, these two different kinds of discourse are never found in such 'pure' forms, because in reality they are always mixed together (with the exception of strict mathematical propositions). But this dichotomy is used by Grassi, in order to show the philosophical relevance of rhetorical discourse. In ancient philosophy, Grassi notes, philosophy was a synthesis of *pathos* and *logos* under the unifying power of *archai* (the

⁶⁸ See in particular: E. GRASSI, *Vico e l'Umanesimo*, Guerini e Associati, Milano, 1992.

D. P., VERENE, *Vico's Science of Imagination*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1981. J. MALI, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's New Science*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992.

⁶⁹ Italian Humanism is one of those cultural movements, which received little attention in the canonic history of philosophy. The main reason for it is its predominant literary character and its predilection for the whole range of humanistic disciplines, instead that for philosophy alone. Its philosophical rehabilitation is intended by Grassi also as a critique Heidegger's reading (with whom he worked together for several years), who misunderstood Humanism accusing it to belong to the metaphysical tradition, in particular in the form of Neoplatonism. In his interpretation of Humanism Grassi, instead, tried to show its fundamental contribution in questions, such as the role of poetic language in the disclosure of Being, and the historicity of language, which are very closed to Heidegger's philosophy: E. GRASSI, *Heidegger and the Question of Renaissance Humanism: Four Studies*, Centre for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, Binghamton, New York, 1983.

⁷⁰ E. GRASSI, *Retorica come filosofia*, p. 35.

first principles)⁷¹. Philosophy, therefore, was a kind of discourse not depurated by emotional components. In order to understand the meaning of this union, we should linger over on the characteristics of rational discourse. This establishes the truth of a proposition through a logical inference from first principles, the *archai*, whose validity can not be demonstrate but only given, axiomatically. Being the fundamentals that support the whole logical process, the *archai* lay outside it: they can not be rationally proved⁷². They have a indicative and not demonstrable nature:

“Evidently the use of these expressions, which belong to the origins, the not deducible, can not be apodictic and demonstrable, but only indicative. It is only this indicative character of the *archai* that makes really possible demonstration... This discourse [that regarding the *archai*] is immediately an “exposition”, therefore it is “figurative”, “fantastic”. It is metaphorical... and this means that this discourse transfer (*metapherein*) a meaning to the figure to whom it is directed... If the image and the metaphor belong to rhetoric discourse (and therefore they have a pathetic nature), we are compelled to recognize that every originating, primitive, archaic, discourse... can not have a rational nature, but only a rhetorical one. In this way, rhetoric assumes an basically new meaning; “rhetoric” is not, and it can not be, the art, or technique, of an extrinsic kind of persuasion; it is, instead, the discourse that constituted the fundament of rational thought”⁷³

This means that rhetoric, or poetic, discourse is indispensable for the rational one, and that philosophy can exist without it, since its principles can not be proved rationally, but only sensed, undergone, imagined, through a metaphorical process of transferring meanings from the known to the unknown. Poetic language, therefore, has an originating, archaic, significance. It is an answer through the word to the mysterious appellation of the cosmos, or in Voegelin’s vocabulary to the transcendent, which is felt, not thought⁷⁴. The poetic word is what indicate, in indirect manner, those silent and mysterious areas laying at the frontier between the known and the unknown, where rational discourse can not arrive. It engenders those *archai*, which are the first act of signification of the cosmos. And this signification is done through a metaphorical activity: establishing connections, which are felt through the senses and elaborated through imagination, between different and distant things. This metaphorical process, fundamentally connected with feelings and imagination, is therefore for Grassi at the origin of our world⁷⁵.

“Metaphors represent a simply imaginative beginning of thought under the form of signals that are groundless and impossible to be grounded, into a darkness that man cannot penetrate”⁷⁶

In the light of this insight, therefore, the habitual supremacy of the rational must be clearly reconsidered.

⁷¹ Ibid., ch. 2, and E. GRASSI, *Vico e l’Umanesimo*, ch. 1 and 4.

⁷² See for example, ARISTÓTELES, *Ética a Nicomaco*, Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, Madrid, 2002, 1139 b 19.

⁷³ E. GRASSI, *Vico e L’Umanesimo*, p. 97 (my translation).

⁷⁴ E. GRASSI, *La metafora inaudita*, Aesthetica, Palermo, 1990, p. 26.

⁷⁵ E. GRASSI, *Retorica come filosofia*, pp. 67, 74. See the treatment of *phantasia* in ARISTÓTELES, *Acerca del alma*, Gredos, Madrid, 1978, 403 a 6 and ff. See also ARISTÓTELES, *Metafísica*, Gredos, Madrid, 1987, 1010 b 1 – 1011 a 17, 1008 b 12 – 1009 a 6.

⁷⁶ E. GRASSI, *Retorica come filosofia*, p. 148.

Grassi develops these theoretical insights to explain Vico's fundamental theory of the poetic origins of society. According to it, for the first peoples, in the age of the "brutes" when reason was not still systematized, the meaningless and mysterious nature of the cosmos was a vital and urgent question. The necessity to make it intelligible was pressing, in the sense that was a question of life or death. Nevertheless, because of the poverty of a "clear and well defined" language (according to Locke's definition), these peoples were speechless, "*muti*", unable to articulate in a definite way their experiences⁷⁷. Their only way to articulate what their senses feel was through a poetic language. Imagination found instantaneously the common nature of phenomena through the faculty of *ingenium* and *fantasia*, and through this metaphorical activity gave name to them⁷⁸. In this way the cosmos began to be signified through the creation of universal categories – the "*universali fantastici*" – which catalogued similar phenomena under emblematic figures⁷⁹. The "*universali fantastici*" were a kind of universals different from the kind that we find in the Aristotelian logic, where the universal is formed abstracting from the particulars their common characteristics. In the "*universali fantastici*", instead, the universal is constituted in an analogical and not synthetic manner, through the creation of an emblematic image that includes the common nature of different objects. This image, although it possesses an universal value, is still a concrete object⁸⁰. The wisdom contained in these universals is a poetic wisdom, different from the rational one, but not barbarian or naïve at all. It contains the first and basic notions about the necessities of community, which crystallized historically in institutions and moralities⁸¹.

At the end of his philological and historical excursion into the origin of society Vico found a poetic wisdom as the foundation of the human world⁸². And, if Vico's idea about history as the field where human mind develops is recalled, to say that its beginning is poetical, is to say that the creation of knowledge, in the depth of the soul, has much to do with a symbolic language and with emotions. The "abyssal call" of the world, which is felt by our senses, is responded firstly and fundamentally through a poetic and historical (that is contingent) word, which is successively institutionalized, and solidified. This Vico's deep insight has been inspired, in our view, by his awareness of the linguistic nature of society, together with his open and not depurated anthropological philosophy, which he inherited from the rhetorical tradition and developed thanks to his visionary genius. As we have seen, indeed, a rhetorical conception of human being is one which recognizes the fundamental role of emotions, and their indissolubly union with rationality. Consequently, a rhetorical understanding of language is one where its tropological and pathetic aspects are posited in their centrality

⁷⁷ G. VICO, "Principi di una Scienza Nuova (1725)", in A. BATTISTINI (ed.), *Giambattista Vico: Opere*, vol. II, par. 251.

⁷⁸ G. VICO, "Dell'antichissima sapienza italica", pp. 294-295.

⁷⁹ G. VICO, "Principi di Scienza Nuova (1744)", par. 34. E. GRASSI, *Vico e l'Umanesimo*, pp. 88-91.

⁸⁰ For a very comprehensive and interesting treatment of this topic, see: D. P. VERENE, *Vico's Science of Imagination*, in particular ch. 3. See also, J. M. SEVILLA, "Universales poéticos, fantasía y racionalidad", *Cuadernos sobre Vico*, Vol. 3 (1993), pp. 67-113.

⁸¹ E. GRASSI, *Vico e l'Umanesimo*, p. 54. D. P. VERENE, *Vico's Science of Imagination*, p. 74. The theme of the "poetic wisdom" and the "logic of fantasy" is dealt above all in the second book of his *Scienza Nuova*.

⁸² G. VICO, "Principi di Scienza Nuova (1744)", par. 34. Vico announced his discovery with great emphasis at the beginning of the book, underlining that it represented the key to understand the whole work.

for communication. Whatever political theory attentive to the contingency of the moment, that is to the historicity of mankind, and to the richness of human experience, should be, in this sense, a rhetorical one.

These theoretical insights, central in Vico's thought, find a suggestive echo in Voegelin.

First of all, we could note the great sensibility that he showed in all his writings for the theme of language, and in particular for its symbolic nature. His account of language is remote from a nominalistic point of view, and totally conscious of its existential value⁸³. In different occasions indeed he alerted against the peril of reducing the symbols in his philosophy, like "metaxy", "nous", "transcendence", and so on, to concrete and defined objects, instead of representations of real and in some measure indefinite experiences. This, declared Voegelin, would empty their meaning, obscuring their existential value. It would reduce existence to its epiphenomenon. In order to avoid this, he also forged an expression – "linguistic index" – to reduce the risk of "hypostatizing" his vocabulary in frozen definitions⁸⁴. The "hypostatization" of the symbols is exactly the falsification of their real meaning for the surface value, the objectification of the real engendering experiences. Its consequences can be really serious, because it can produce, firstly the oblivion of the real significance of fundamental experiences behind "opaque" surfaces, and, secondly, to produce a sceptic reaction against those same symbols.

Of course, the concern for the vitality of language is a fundamental concern in rhetorical tradition. A tradition which individuated in the unity of *res* and *verba*, that is, in the correspondence between form and content in language, an issue of public relevance and practical nature.

In the same way the attention Voegelin devoted to the issue of language and symbols was moved not by an abstract concern, but by his awareness of the role of language in the concrete and basic question of the search of order⁸⁵. In this sense, we could recall what Eugene Webb observed about Voegelin's attention to language: as other authors, such as Heidegger, or Jaspers, his attempt to recover a more fundamental conception of experience was accompanied by the understanding that a minimal conception of experience (such as a positivist one, which reduce it to the mere sensible data) goes hand by hand with a nominalistic definition of language. In order to fight against the first is therefore necessary to undertake what he called an "experiential reactivation of language", that is, a constant attempt to reactivate its living origins⁸⁶.

These reflections assumed a particular value in the case of the fundamental experience: the search of meaning and the event of transcendence.

Firstly, we need to briefly recall one of the main thesis elaborated by Voegelin: the equivalence of experiences and symbolizations in history⁸⁷. According to this, the ultimately mysterious character of the structure of existence have engendered in history a variety of symbolizations of the experience of its search. Nevertheless, behind the

⁸³ E. WEBB, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 1981, pp. 57-58.

⁸⁴ E. VOEGELIN, "What Is Political Reality?", pp. 375-380.

⁸⁵ Vide supra note 63.

⁸⁶ Voegelin quoted in E. WEBB, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History*, p. 58.

⁸⁷ T. W. HEILKE, *Eric Voegelin: In Quest of Reality*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York, 1999, p. 13.

differences of these representations and of the clarity reached by each of them, they share a substantial communality, which is the structure of the search itself, the tension toward the ground⁸⁸. As we can see there is therefore in Voegelin a clear and indisputable recognition about the value of different expressions of the search of order, apart philosophy, which is not very common⁸⁹.

With this premise, it is thus possible to introduce the theme of the relationship between philosophy and myth in his thought. As we have said, philosophy is not the only way humanity have found to articulate its search, and surely not the only important. But the complexity of the matter can be quickly intuited, if one thinks that the basic feature of these foundations is to be transcendent, that is, unreachable, mysterious, and only to be lived as an erotic tension. Noetic analysis, that is philosophy, have brought the highest clarity about this transcendent structure ever reached⁹⁰. It was an epochal achievement in history, a “leap in being”, which overcame once for all the mythical age⁹¹. It was a triumph of noetical activity, but at the same time, it also revealed in the most astonishing manner its finitude.

In Voegelin, the field of experience is compared to a circumference with at its centre a source – consciousness - irradiating light toward the outside into an area which wanes into the unarticulated obscurity of unconsciousness⁹². The noetic analysis of classic philosophers have differentiated this structure: it has discovered consciousness to be the site of an erotic and knowing tension toward the mysterious ground, the beyond, which lays into obscurity. Then, it have discovered that the process of the increasing clearness of the structure, it is consciousness itself. And finally, it have revealed that this process occurs in time, i.e., that consciousness develops historically: from a mythological to a philosophical style of truth⁹³. The differentiation of consciousness of philosophy represents surely a step forward: the compactness of mythological society is overcome and the differentiation of consciousness reached. Nevertheless, the relationship between myth and philosophy is much more complicated. Why?

In an important passage of his “What Is Political Reality?” Voegelin declared that: “our knowledge of order remains primarily mythical, even after the noetic experience has differentiated the realm of the consciousness and after the noetic exegesis has made explicit its logos”. This is because noetic and pneumatic differentiations funded itself on a premise which can be grasped only through the primary experience of

⁸⁸ See for example, E. VOEGELIN, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History”; E. VOEGELIN, “Immortality: Experience and Symbol”, pp.: 76-80. E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, pp. 246, 251.

⁸⁹ E. VOEGELIN, “Reason: The Classic Experience”, pp. 268-269.

⁹⁰ Here it would be necessary but not possible to deepen the topic about the relationship between pneumatic and noetic differentiation. In particular it could be debated if for Voegelin the advent of the Christian pneumatic differentiation made the noetic one useless, as Leo Strauss thought. Voegelin replied to this accusation maintaining that Christian differentiation represented only another pass forward the search of order, but didn’t downplay the results reached by classical philosophers. The subject, anyway, is indeed very important and intricate. On this, see in particular: P. EMBERLEY and B. COOPER, (eds.), *Faith and Political Philosophy: The Correspondence Between Leo Strauss and Eric Voegelin, 1934-1964*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1993.

⁹¹ E. VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 156.

⁹² E. WEBB, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 59. E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 8.

⁹³ E. VOEGELIN, “What Is Political Reality?”, p. 352. E. VOEGELIN, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History”, p. 125. E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 177.

the cosmos, and under a mythological style of truth, “where things are what they really are”. This premise is the essential equality of all human beings⁹⁴.

“Without this premise, the noetic experiences would remain a biographic curiosity; only with the premise as their background do they attain their ordering function in society and history”⁹⁵

This premise, or foundation, was so important, continued Voegelin, that the philosophers were compelled to develop specific symbols to refer to it. So, he added, the presence of myth into philosophy was not a “methodological derailment”, but the necessary “background and foundations”, for philosophy⁹⁶. Noetic differentiation, indeed, did clarify the structure of reality but it didn’t dissolve its mysterious frontiers. And it couldn’t ever do it, for the fundamental reason that consciousness it is itself a part of this mystery⁹⁷.

At this point we would like to recall a passage from an earlier book, the third volume of *Order and History* dedicated to Plato and Aristotle, where the theme of the relationship between philosophy and myth was clearly very important. Commenting the Platonic dialogue *Gorgias*, which is dedicated to the theme of rhetoric, Voegelin focuses on the apex of the diatribe between Socrates and Callicles, the moment of rupture when each kind of communication seems to be interrupted. “The issue at stake is the communication and intelligibility in a decadent society” declared Voegelin. The communication at the political, moral or existential is impossible, but “the bridge is not broken... The level of communication... lies deeper”. This level is “*pathos*”⁹⁸.

“Pathos is what men have in common... it what happens to man, what he suffers, what befalls him fatefully and what touches him in his existential core... The community of pathos is the basis of communication... Behind the hardened, intellectually supported attitudes which separate men, lie the *pathemata* which bind them together... If one can penetrate to this core and reawaken in a man the awareness of his *conditio humana*, communication in existential sense becomes possible”⁹⁹

Once again Voegelin is clear in declaring that the condition for communication and unity for mankind, it is “the faith in the transcendental community of man”, that is, something which is suffered from the outside and which is beyond rationalization¹⁰⁰. The theoretical contribution to the search of order made by a philosopher, Plato, through the symbolic instrument of the dialogue derives, in ultimate instance, from the premise of a “faith” in human community.

The same kind of faith, of “pathetic” stratum, is indeed found at the same bottom of philosophy. “Philosophy”, “*nous*”, and all the rest of the symbols left by classic philosophers, were the representation of an intense and transforming experience: the discernment of a deeper structure of order constituted by an erotic tension toward a divine ground transcending the mundane sphere. In this sense, “philosophy” didn’t

⁹⁴ E. VOEGELIN, “What Is Political Reality?”, pp. 349, 358.

⁹⁵ Ibidem.

⁹⁶ Ibidem.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 350.

⁹⁸ E. VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, Vol. 1 of, *Order and History*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge and London, 1957, p. 29.

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 30.

represent a discipline or a branch of wisdom, but this existential attitude of responsiveness to the call of the divine ground¹⁰¹. Voegelin was primarily concerned to recover the fullness of this experience, and to overcome the strictness of the “rationalist” modern conceptions of knowledge. Classical philosophy evoked the richness of life, it was moved not only by the abstractness of rationality, by the living impulse of faith and trust (*pistis*) in the intelligibility of the order of cosmos and in the love (*eros, philia*) toward the divine ground¹⁰². “The love of being through the love of the divine Being as the source of its order” is an impulse toward the conscious response beyond rational explanation, which moves the philosopher into an act of resistance against the false representations of truth in society, toward the order of existence¹⁰³. In this sense, it is quite true to declare, as Javier Roiz did, that for Voegelin philosophy is quite more *philia* than *sophia*¹⁰⁴. These emotional components resting at the base of fundamental experiences, such as that of the common nature of humanity or the tension toward transcendence, requires an analogical language to be defined, because they are beyond rational definitions.

Philosophy and myth stand in a strange relation of closeness and estrangement, familiar to that between common sense and *episteme*. Both are generated by the sense of wonder caused by the mystery of existence and the necessity to respond to it¹⁰⁵. But their responses are different, although not that much. This strange relation is displayed maybe in the most intriguing way, exactly in those philosophers who found themselves in the frontier between the age of myth and that of philosophy: Plato and Aristotle. Both took a strong critical position against the “untruth” of the older myths. The major clarity reached through noetical analysis couldn’t tolerate the opaqueness of the older myths, because at stake there was the order of the soul¹⁰⁶. But, on the other hand, the differentiation of consciousness revealed that “behind the historical variety of interpretations lies the unity of the quest for the ground”¹⁰⁷, that is, revealed the equivalence of the experiences of the search as the constant in history. This equivalence was then discovered to be found at a deeper level, in those field of the human mind symbolized as the “depth” of the *psyche*. From the immersion into the night of this profundity consciousness emerges with new clarifying symbols, new truths. But this depth is nothing more than a symbol created by a noetic analysis of consciousness to represent what it grasps to be beyond itself, which would be replaced by others. This is because the depth of the psyche is in reality that of the cosmos: it is the mystery of

¹⁰¹ E. VOEGELIN, “Reason: The Classic Experience”, p. 272.

¹⁰² Ibid., pp. 272-274.

¹⁰³ E. VOEGELIN, *Israel and Revelation*, p. xiv. “The Question is not just any question but the quest concerning the mysterious ground of all Being. The hierarchical fabric of all things in the cosmos is taken for granted, but the knowledge of this order as symbolized through myth will not assuage the unrest of the questioner. The Question urges on, beyond the reality covered by the myth, toward the border where the realm of symbols is exhausted and the questioner’s head is threatened to fall, if he persists”. E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 320. The erotic impulse that moves the philosopher is so strong that he can put at risk his life.

¹⁰⁴ J. ROIZ, *La recuperación del buen juicio*, p. 95.

¹⁰⁵ E. VOEGELIN, “What Is Political Reality?”, p. 355.

¹⁰⁶ E. VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 101.

¹⁰⁷ E. VOEGELIN, “What Is Political Reality?”, p. 346.

existence¹⁰⁸. Hence, the fundamental assumption we have to make about our finite capacities, and in particular our finite vocabulary, according to:

“Only in the mirror of language we ever really know ourselves, and then only in the manner that Voegelin frequently refers to as *cognitio fidei*, knowledge in the manner of faith, through trust in the language that opens up the heights and depths of existence through analogies”¹⁰⁹

Knowledge in ultimate instance rests on the trust we have about our possibility to signify the cosmos through language: “the faith that, by engaging in it, man participates representatively in the divine drama of truth becoming luminous”¹¹⁰.

In this sense the reliance on myth by a philosopher such Plato becomes clearly comprehensible: language is limited and has an intrinsic tendency toward objectification, above all in its more rational configuration. On the other hand, through it we are compelled to signify the richness of our experiences. In particular, their increasing elusiveness, as we approach those zones in the frontiers of the mind symbolized with the expression “depth” where lay the most fundamental experience, such as the kinship with god. So, it is inevitable to resort to all the evocative power of language, for example to myth, to indicate what can not be precisely grasped and defined¹¹¹.

The awareness of the importance of myth breached firstly in Plato, who at the end of one of his dialogue made, in a ironic twist, pronounce to his Timaeus “the most intimate truth of reality, the truth about the meaning of the cosmic play in which man must act his role with his life as stake, is a mythopoetic play linking the psyche man in trust with the depth of the Cosmos”¹¹². And then in the same Aristotle, the logician, who, although without recognizing the truth of myth, discovered the equivalence of its engendering experience and maybe intuited something more, if, in his last days, he declared: “The more I am by myself and alone, the more I have come to love myths”¹¹³.

But there is something more. To talk about the relevance of the tropological aspect of language doesn’t mean only to underline to the role of myth in philosophy, but to keep in mind that in the end, also philosophy occurs through the medium of language; it is itself language. Hence, it can not escape the tension deriving from the necessity to fit an infinite field, that of experience, in a finite structure, that of language: from here derives the fundamental fact that philosophy itself, in ultimate instance, is just “the symbolic form in which a Dionisiac soul express its ascent to God”¹¹⁴. Hence that, how Ernesto Grassi strived to show, every philosophy is in an a certain sense rhetorical and every real rhetoric is in a sense a philosophy¹¹⁵.

¹⁰⁸ E. VOEGELIN, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History”, pp. 123-129.

¹⁰⁹ E. WEBB, *Eric Voegelin*, p. 62.

¹¹⁰ E. VOEGELIN, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History”, p. 133.

¹¹¹ Some fundamental examples are the myth of the Judgement of the city in the *Gorgias*, which represents the nature of the authority judging on the deeds of the city; or that of the Death in the *Republic*, about the kinship of mankind with the divine; or the myth of *Timaeus*, where the order of the soul is projected from the soul to the scenario of the cosmos. E. VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 39, 107, 183-184.

¹¹² E. VOEGELIN, “Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History”, p. 128.

¹¹³ E. VOEGELIN, *The Ecumenic Age*, p. 192.

¹¹⁴ E. VOEGELIN, *Plato and Aristotle*, p. 70.

¹¹⁵ E. GRASSI, *Vico e l’Umanesimo*, ch. 4.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude now with just some brief remarks to underline the aims, which have moved this writing. What we have proposed here can be called a “rhetorical reading” of Giambattista Vico and Eric Voegelin, in the sense that it is an interpretation, with a rhetorical sensibility, of their works.

Vico and Voegelin are thinkers with, together with other canonic authors, have created impressive theoretical insights on society resting on a deep and open conception of the “human”. They were perfectly aware, that, what rhetoric tradition called the *foro interno* of a citizen, is a vast area with obscure and unexplored areas, but whose relevance for the political life is enormous. It is therefore indispensable to have the better instruments to listen and comprehend them, in order to proportionate diagnosis and therapies, so that their internal diseases would not corrupt the public life. In this respect, Voegelin declared:

“spiritual disease is not a man’s private affair, but has a public consequences”¹¹⁶

Their complex understandings of the “human” drove both authors to react against the same movement in Modernity, which have received several labels and diagnosis, but between whose consequences it is certainly possible to individuate an impoverishment in the conception of human condition¹¹⁷. Vico saw this process starting and Voegelin triumphing. Their reaction was anyway similar, at the same time humble and courageous. Courageous in the intention, which is typical modern, to reconstruct, refund, a new science¹¹⁸. Humble in their denial to do it without the wisdom of the past, and in their sense of finitude (which are not very modern). In turn, this meant to recover a science more concerned with the “empirical”, with the concrete occurrences of mankind in history, aware of its rooting in common sense and *doxai*, and, at the same time, able to portray the whole range of human experiences, including the more spiritual ones. That is, a science where the parallel aspects of contingency and transcendence are not ignored but central.

Vico and Voegelin shared also a common interest for the theme of foundations. Their deepening into the obscurity of the origins of history was, as we have seen, a deepening into the human mind, into those areas laying in the frontier between the conscious and the unconscious, where thought is engendered. Their theoretical reflections about to the question of myth and of the symbolic, or tropological, significance of language was a just a consequence of this unrestricted exploration of the human mind.

From this weave of motifs and this common sensibility derive the value of Vico and Voegelin for contemporary political philosophy. As we have noticed in the

¹¹⁶ E. VOEGELIN, “On Hegel”, p. 237.

¹¹⁷ In this regard it is interesting to note how in their critiques of the modern crisis Vico and Voegelin devoted their attention in particular toward, respectively, Descartes and Weber, who can be considered emblematic thinkers of the modern “disenchantment”.

¹¹⁸ Edward Said interpreted Vico’s interest for origins and re-foundations as a sign of his modernity. E. SAID, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, Basic Books, New York, 1975, pp. 345-350.

introduction, one of the main interests in this discipline today is the theme of foundations. In this field anyway, there is an evident tendency toward the reification of the dichotomy: foundationalism against anti-foundationalism¹¹⁹. Our two authors, on the contrary, have showed an admirable capacity to talk about principles with courage and without falling in foundationalism. This is due essentially to their understanding of the relationship between the transcendence of our *archai* and the necessity to refer to them through a symbolic or metaphoric language, that is in an indirect way. As the editors of the volume *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns* declared, this is probably the only way to talk about foundations respecting human freedom¹²⁰. A political theory like those produced by Vico and Voegelin, indeed, is a discipline indifferent to the temptations of omnipotence, because constructed on the knowledge of the impossibility to grasp completely and definitely the ground of existence. From here, its great value.

Finally, we would like to underline how the rhetorical perspective we have reclaimed has been central in our interpretation. In very few words, we hope to have shown why the question of form is inextricably united with that of content, and why emotions and rationality are both fundamental in philosophy. Equally, how a recovery of what rhetoric tradition called *ars topica* is important to enrich the panorama of political philosophy and philosophy in general. As we have seen, this art was devoted to the discovery of arguments in a particular theme under debate, through the creative capacities of *ingenium* and *fantasia*. To resort to Vico and Voegelin in the debate about foundations in political philosophy can be considered an exercise in this art in itself, since their marginality and originality. But, still more fundamentally, following *ars topica* would imply to reconsider the same theme under different points of view, including myths, poetry, prophecies, art, and so on. We think that this would enrich contemporary debates in political philosophy, and maybe allow to exit some of their impasses, because it would help to find new persuasive arguments, instead of devoting all the attention to the moment of critique. To accomplish this task, anyway, it is absolutely necessary to have, apart the intellectual humbleness showed by Vico and Voegelin, also their same imagination, a faculty that rhetoric tradition always recommended to cultivate.

¹¹⁹ R. BERNSTEIN, *The New Constellation*, p. 310.

¹²⁰ P. A. PETRAKIS and C. L. EUBANKS, "Introduction", in P. A. PETRAKIS and C. L. EUBANKS (eds.), *Eric Voegelin's Dialogue with the Postmoderns*, University of Missouri Press, Columbia y Londres, 2004, p. 21.