

Assignment: History Tutorial Paper 1
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Title: A Steelman of Divine Providence
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The idea of Divine Providence pervades Vico's New Science. Vico, in axiom VII, Vico claims to have proven the existence of divine providence and to have proven that divine providence is a divine legislative mind. I, on first reading, found the proof of divine providence unconvincing and the claim of divine providence being a divine legislative mind nonsensical. Since I am unconvinced, I would like to attempt to steel-man¹ Vico's proof of divine providence and see if that allows for a greater understanding of what Vico may mean when he states that Divine providence is a divine legislative mind.

The attempt at steel manning will begin with the first references to divine providence in our readings. In section II Elements axiom I statement 130, Vico states that Epicureans and Stoics deny the existence of providence. Note that Vico does not yet call providence divine. The same axiom then goes on to assert that Platonists agree with all the lawgivers on three main points, one of which is "that there is divine providence" Vico then goes on to say that "Thus from this axiom are derived the three main principles of this science." It can be understood that the three principles on which the science is founded are the same as the three main points on which Plato is alleged to have agreed with the lawmakers. It is then a principle of Vico's science that divine providence exists.

¹ Steel-manning an argument is the opposite of straw-manning an argument. I will attempt to state Vico's proof as strongly and simply as an act of good faith before proceeding with attempting to understand divine providence as a divine legislative mind.

As for what divine providence is, Vico begins to explain In Axiom VII of Section II

Elements, which reads as follows²:

“132[1] Legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society.
[2] [a] Out of ferocity avarice and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race,
[b] it creates the military, merchant and govern-ing classes, and thus the strength, riches and wisdom of
commonwealths.
[3] [a] Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth,
[b] it makes civil happiness.

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[1] [a] This axiom proves that there is divine providence
[b] and further that it is a divine legislative mind.
[2] [a] For out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage,
[b] for the sake of which they would live like wild beasts in the wilderness,
[c] it has made the civil orders by which they may live in human society.”

I want to call particular attention to [133.1.a] in which Vico claims that the axiom proves that there is divine providence. I find it odd that Vico would claim to offer proof for divine providence, which he before has called a principle of his science. That a proof comes out of a single axiom is also puzzling. An axiom by itself is a statement of fact. An axiom is not proof of anything. This tension between axiom and proof is resolved by realizing that the proof has not been shown, only a principle from which it can be derived has been provided. Since the proof has been left as an exercise to the reader, I will attempt to recreate an argument along the lines Vico may have thought.

A first attempt at providing such an argument in plain English might look something like the following.

1. Vice could Destroy all mankind, or perhaps more charitably civilization by which beast is made man, could be destroyed by man’s vice. [132.3.a]
2. Mankind would forsake civilization for their passions. [133.2.b]
3. Mankind’s vices have not destroyed mankind.[by observation]
4. Men have not forsaken civilization.[by observation]
5. That the above statements are all true appears to be a contradiction.

² Here I have added in brackets numbers to each sentence in the quoted passage for easy reference. Additionally, long sentences have brackets with letters before each clause. When sentences with multiple clauses are referenced without citing a clause the reader is asked to take this as a citation of the whole sentence.

6. Divine Providence resolves this contradiction.
7. Therefore divine providence exists.

This formulation of the proof may or may not be the thought process Vico used to arrive at a proof of divine providence, but the text does support a line of reasoning along these lines. I have next to several of the statements of proof offered in brackets the textual or observational basis for that part of the proof. References though have not been provided for parts 6 & 7 for which support is found in the next axiom VIII, particularly in statement 134 which reads “*Things do not endure or settle of their natural states*” and in statement 135 which can be summarized³ as saying that it is natural for mankind to exist in societies. With these additional statements, it becomes possible to demonstrate the contradiction.

1. It is natural for men to exist in societies [VIII.135]
2. Men are naturally inclined towards vice [132.1]
3. Men’s vice left unchecked will end society [132.3.a], [133.2.b]
4. Unnatural states do not persist.[VIII.134]
5. How is it possible that man should naturally be inclined to actions that would destroy society and, at the same time, naturally be inclined towards living in societies?

It should be clear from the question in step 5 that a contradiction exists. I believe that the illustration of this contradiction is what motivates Vico to assert that the existence of divine providence has been proven. For indeed, two contradictory statements can not be simultaneously true.

Having provided evidence that Vico portrays a contradiction, it is still necessary to demonstrate that Vico offers divine providence as a solution to this contradiction. This will rely on a slight reformulation of the contradiction.⁴

³ I beg the reader to grant me this summary. To justify it would detract from the attempted investigation and I do not believe the summary to be at all controversial.

⁴ I believe that two formulations of the contradiction are constant with each other. I have presented both because the first is perhaps more clear for establishing the existence of a contradiction but that the second is a better capture of Vico’s argument.

1. Vice has been harnessed to produce certain civil goods. [132.2.a]
2. The Natural state of vice is not to produce civil goods. [132.3.a], [133.2.b]
3. Things do not endure or settle of their natural states [VIII.134]
4. How then does the harnessing of vice for civil good persist?

With this reformulation, it is clear that some force must be acting on either legislation or vice to maintain the current state. If it can be shown that Vico offers divine providence as such as force, then the above attempt at providing an argument for the existence of divine providence should be found plausible.

To prove that Vico intends to offer divine providence as just such a force it is required to turn to Axiom VIII statement 136 in which Vico states

“This [...] proves that man has free choice however weak to make virtues of his passions; but that he is aided by God, naturally by divine providence and supernaturally by divine grace”

Here Vico is asserting that there are two powers by which the harnessing of vice for civil good is possible. One natural power which is called divine providence and one supernatural power called divine grace. Calling divine providence a natural power and stating that it makes virtues out of passions clearly frames it as the force capable of resolving the contradictions surrounding man's inclination to vice and man's inclination towards living in societies.

Having provided an argument that is plausibly of the same form as Vico's thought process existence of divine providence, it should be asked if the proof is found sound or convincing. As a necessary step, it should be explicitly stated what the claim of the proof is.

I would assert that what has been proven is that given Vico's statements on man, vice, and natural states, there must exist a force that acts on men's vice such that a civil good is manifested. Vico then proceeds to call this force divine providence with this move; the proof of the existence of divine providence is complete.

Vico, however, seems to claim that something additional has been proven. Vico claims in 133.1.a that “*This axiom proves that there is divine providence and further that it is a divine legislative mind.*” This claim of a divine legislative mind is a puzzling one. In what way could a mind be divine or legislative.

To begin to make sense of this, I am drawn to statement 334 in Section III principles.

Which reads,

“it has been possible to find only four primary religions. The first is that of the Hebrews, whence came that of the Christians, both believing in the divinity of an infinite free mind. The third is that of the gentiles, who believe in the divinity of a plurality of gods, each imagined as composed of body and of free mind. [...] The fourth and last is that of the Mohammedans, who believe in the divinity of one god, an infinite free mind in an infinite body”

This helps establish that Vico, who we may assume to subscribe to the Christian view of the divine, believes in a divine, which is an infinite free mind. Thus a divine legislative mind must be a free and infinite legislative mind.

As for what constitutes a legislative mind, I am inclined to reference [132.1], which states that “*Legislation considers man as he is in order to turn him to good uses in human society.*” This quickly raises the question of what Vico thinks it means to turn man to good use in human society. Axiom V section 129 provides an answer “*To be useful the human race, philosophy must raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rent his nature or abandon him in his corruption.*” It should stand to reason then that Legislation as an act considers man as he is to raise and direct weak and fallen man. From here, it follows that a divine legislative mind is a free and infinite mind which considers man as he is so that it might raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rent his nature or abandon him in his corruption.

Having broken down divine legislative mind into a longer but less dense term, Vico in [133.1] claims to have proven the existence of a free and infinite mind which considers man as

he is so that it might raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption. It was integral, though, to the line of reasoning pursued in providing a proof for divine providence that it be considered as a force. Is it possible to portray divine providence the force as divine providence the free and infinite mind which considers man as he is so that it might raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption.

An attempt will now be made to show how divine providence might be considered as divine legislative mind. The goal for the sake of brevity is only to show a general outline of what the arguments might look like an exhaustive account of just one the aspects (divine, legislative, mind) of divine providence might very well be longer than the general form of all of the aspects.

For divine providence to be legislation requires that divine providence consider man as he is to raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption. Divine providence is clearly functioning in a way that men who pursue vice will produce civil good despite themselves. Vice is transformed into civil good which men find to their private advantage. Man's nature is not changed; men continue to pursue vice. Nevertheless, men enjoy civil goods. That divine providence is legislative can not be contested.

The idea of freedom is similarly simple, nowhere in the argument is it said that some other force constrains the workings of divine providence. Vico does not assert that there is some vice which is so terrible that divine providence can not turn it to good, nor does he state that divine providence exists as the product of some other natural force. If we can conceive of no force which constrains divine providence, then it can be accepted that divine providence is free.

To show that divine providence is both mind and infinite remains, and these ideas may be related to each other. It is said in VIII.136 that God aids man naturally by divine providence.

This might be parsed as:

Infinite free mind aids man naturally through infinite free mind, which considers man as he is so that it might raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rent his nature or abandon him in his corruption.

This on first reading seems absurd but may not actually be so. Since God does not possess body, all of its works must be done through the mind. *That infinite free mind aids man naturally through infinite free mind* is simply an admission that God lacks body. If divine providence is free it can not be constrained by the limitations of the body and must be applied by mind. If the force is applied by mind and God is infinite mind, then the mind which applies the force is encompassed by or is God and is therefore infinite. Perhaps the entirety of the argument that divine providence is an infinite free mind which considers man as he is so that it might raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rent his nature or abandon him in his corruption, could be simplified to the following general structure.

1. Divine providence is a force applied by God
2. God is infinite free mind
3. God does not have body
4. Therefore Divine providence is applied by mind.
5. If divine providence is applied by mind not by body, it lacks any of the constraints of a body
6. Divine providence is, therefore free.
7. Divine providence is part of the mind of God.
8. The mind of God is infinite.
9. Therefore divine providence is infinite

I believe I have presented a plausible outline of the arguments Vico might use to assert that he has proved the existence of Divine Providence qua a divine legislative mind. While no part has been examined exhaustively, I believe that a charitable account of Vico's proof in axiom

VII has been provided. I have doubts as to the similarity of my steelman to Vico's actual thought process, particularly in the idea that God is mind and can, therefore, act only through mind. This may be my Aristotelian projection onto the ideas of Vico or it may be an actual influence on his thought that I have used to reconstruct the proof Vico alludes to.