

©1996 The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
 The Journal of Mind and Behavior
 Winter 1996, Volume 17, Number 1
 Pages 75-78
 ISSN 0271-0137

Vico, Metaphor, and the Origin of Language. Marcel Danesi. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993, 190 pages, \$49.00 hard.

Giambattista Vico and the Cognitive Science Enterprise. Marcel Danesi. (Emory Vico Studies edited series, Volume 4). New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1995, 184 pages, \$29.95 paper.

Reviewed by Robert E. Haskell, University of New England

In the last decade or so there has been a rediscovery of Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) work and its importance to both philosophy and psychology. The publication of these two books by Marcel Danesi, Professor of Semiotics and Italian at the University of Toronto, and Director of the Program in Semiotics, represents that re-entering of Giambattista Vico's works into the social and behavioral sciences and into cognitive science proper. These two books constitute no less than a Vichian cognitive science project.

There have been a number of books and comparative papers either describing Vico as a precursor, or as having anticipated, not only many modern philosophers but social and behavioral scientists as well. None, however, has attempted to systematically apply an array of modern scientific findings to Vico with the dual aim of demonstrating empirical support for Vico and gaining insight from his work to apply to modern science (e.g., Haskell, 1987, 1994). This is what Danesi has done. With these two books, he has systematically applied linguistic and cognitive science findings to the Vichian corpus.

Moreover, he has done so in a manner that has moved Vico studies into a completely new realm: the realm of an empirical and cognitive science. Unlike many scholars in the humanities, however, who attempt to utilize psychological and cognitive science findings, Professor Danesi has applied a wide spectrum of data with the insight, breadth, expertise, and understanding of an insider.

To understand what Danesi has accomplished, it is first necessary to briefly outline the work of Giambattista Vico (1725/1948). In 1725 Vico published the first edition of his *New Science*. It is a strange text for modern eyes. The translators of Vico's abridged *New Science* call it "one of the few works of original genius" (p. xiii). Unlike much of philosophy, Vico's is grounded in an empirical data base. His data were the ancient fables, myths, and Homeric epic poetry of early history; his method was the linguistic and cognitive analysis of that vast body of knowledge. The developmental

Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert E. Haskell, Ph.D., Professor of Psychology, Department of Social and Behavioral Science, University of New England, Biddeford, Maine 04005; or by e-mail to haskellr@biddeford.com

changes he observed in the surface linguistic processes of ancient fables and myths he saw as indices of cognitive, structural, and linguistic transformations extending through time. Moreover, he saw these ancient fables and myths not as metaphorical stories but as true historical accounts by "primitive" minds whose language and reality were constituted by what we would now call metaphorical or figurative perception.

The entire edifice of the *New Science* is made possible by Vico's cognitive theory of metaphor found in Book Two, that Vico entitles *Poetic Wisdom*. Vico's theory of the poetic/figurative basis of cognition is the foundation for his *New Science*. To develop this theory of metaphoric cognition, Vico had to perform a virtual autopsy on an entire epistemological body. As Danesi notes, "The idea that rationality is sustained by, and embedded in, a more elemental mode of mentality, specifically in the imagination, was first introduced into philosophy and science by Giambattista Vico" (1995, p. xi). A Vichian epistemology maintains that logic and rationality are end products of a developmental process; figurative language and thought are primary and give rise to Cartesian "clear and distinct ideas." In Vichian epistemology, what we now call metaphor is foundational to cognition. But it is not the Aristotelian, rationalized figure-of-speech metaphor which is reduced to mere rhetorical trope; rather it is a primary psycho-somato-sensory process of cognition generating the entire edifice of language and thought. This is the problematic that Danesi brings to modern cognitive science.

First, Danesi argues that Cartesian/computational, "cognitive science enterprise has taken an orientation that is ultimately indefensible" (1995, p. 34). But his Vichian stance is not a simple humanistic knee-jerk, anti-science response. Rather, it is a reasoned analysis. He says,

My aim in this book has not been merely to criticize nor to antagonize cognitive scientists. As a matter of fact, I am strongly attracted by the very idea of a *cognitive science*. And like everyone else in our technological society, I cannot but admire and delight in the staggering achievements made possible by the computer revolution. This is why my critique has been a narrowly-focused one: i.e., it has been directed at the computationalist orientation . . . which, as I have attempted to argue, is grounded on a 400-year old fallacy. (p. 121)

In the first six chapters of *Vico, Metaphor, and the Origin of Language* (1993), Danesi reviews alternative theories on the origin of language, explicates Vico's theory of the origin of language and metaphor, and applies modern linguistic and psycholinguistic findings to Vichian theory.

In chapter seven, Danesi reviews research from cognitive science and critiques the current computational/information processing models of mind. This paves the way for the second volume of the project, *Giambattista Vico and the Cognitive Science Enterprise* (1995), where in the opening chapter Danesi traces the ancient origins of Vico's thought and reviews the long list of subsequent philosophers influenced by Vico. The list is a veritable "Who's Who" in Western philosophy.

In chapter two, "The Cognitive Science Enterprise," and in chapter three, "A Vichian Model of Mind," and again in chapter four, "A Vichian Project for Cognitive Science," he further critiques, applies, and synthesizes linguistic and cognitive psychology to Vichian theory. Danesi takes the reader through the controversy in cognitive science that revolves around whether imagery or propositional thought is the primary mode of cognition. As a Vichian, he clearly comes down on the side of imagery production being primary. Danesi translates Vico into modern cognitive terms thusly:

The *fantasia* is the deep-level capacity that allows humans to generate “inner models” of the sensible or perceived world. These are, therefore, “figurative” in nature: i.e., they model experience in terms of basic *figurae* or forms. It is at this level that *poetic logic*, which can be defined as “figurative coding” of reality, is the operative mode in the generation of thought. This faculty is anchored in the general physiology of perception: i.e., in *exteroception*, or perception of the external world; in *interoception*, or the modeling of perception; and in *proprioception*, or the awareness of perception in itself. The external world is thus “exterocepted” as *figurae* or models. These are then transformed, or “interocepted,” into actual models: i.e., our *figurae* of the world becomes *figurae* of thought. Finally, these can be “propriocepted” into emotional and affective wholes. (1995, p. 69)

The implications for such a Vichian cognitive science project are numerous, since the assumptions we bring with us to understand how the mind/brain works determine in large measure not only what phenomena we investigate but how we investigate them. In turn these often shape the interpretation of our findings. Since the imaginative process is primary in Vichian theory, Danesi maintains that a Vichian project in cognitive science would focus on how to study the *fantasia* and metaphoric process. “This project, he says, “would explain the computational faculties of the mind as end-products of a progression that starts from iconism and that moves towards symbolism through the metaphorical capacity” (1995, p. 121).

The goal of Danesi’s Vichian project is no less an odyssey than applying and transforming cognitive science theory and methodology into a Vichian epistemology, where Vico’s epistemology becomes the cardinal axis and cognitive science the ordinal axis in a new model of mind. Danesi’s Vichian cognitive science project has taken Vico and cognitive science where no one has gone before.

References

- Haskell, R.E. (1987). Giambattista Vico and the discovery of metaphoric cognition. In R.E. Haskell (Ed.), *Cognition and symbolic structures: The psychology of metaphoric transformation* (pp. 67–82) Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex.
- Haskell, R.E. (1994). A comparative analysis of Vico and Jaynes: Neurocultural and cognitive operations in the origins of consciousness. *New Vico Studies*, 11, 24–51.
- Vico, G. (1948). *The new science* [T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch, Trans.]. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press. (originally published in 1725)