

Preliminary Communication UDC 1(091)(430)“17/18”Jacobi, F. H.
141.13Kant, I., Vico, G.

Received January 25th, 2015

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Viewing Vico within German Idealism

On Jacobi's Comparison of Vico with Kant and with Schelling's System of Identity

Abstract

Although it generally holds that Giambattista Vico was almost never mentioned in Germany during the heyday of German idealism, there is an important exception to this general statement. As he happened to be acquainted with Vico's early work De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda (1710), Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi made interesting use of a passage from this book in his Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung (1811), which is famous for its polemical tone towards Schelling's system. He here indicates that Kant's central insight that we conceive an object only insofar as we are able to construct it in our thoughts (as is the case in geometry as opposed to metaphysics) had been formulated in Italy "long before Kant" in Vico's work, as well as in France in the work of Pascal. The paper will examine this curious comparison between Vico and Kant and the role it might have played in its original context.

Keywords

Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *verum-factum* principle, theism

It has often been said that Giambattista Vico exerted little influence on his contemporaries, and that the novelty and potency of his thoughts were not – and could not have been – recognized and appropriately evaluated outside of Naples until the 19th century. This observation should hold even truer for the reception of his philosophy in Germany during the heyday of German idealism. Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, to mention only the four most prominent representatives of this great philosophical era, seem to be unaware of his work as they never mention it. On the other hand, it has been stressed, especially in the work of the Italian idealist Benedetto Croce,¹ that Vico's philosophy and the German idealist systems bear such striking similarities that one is tempted to declare Vico the forerunner of this movement or simply “an Italian Hegel”. Although such claims have been disputed and denounced for making a myth out of Vico, who is here deprived of his original late 16th and early 17th century Neapolitan context,² one can hardly overlook the fact that

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Croce, Benedetto, 1913, *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, (transl. R. G. Collingwood), New York: The Macmillan Company, pp. 237–238, 274 etc.

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Burke, Peter, 1987, *Vico – Philosoph, Historiker; Denker einer neuen Wissenschaft* (transl. from English by Wolfgang Heuss), Berlin: Klaus Wagenbach, pp. 7–9.

Vico was the founder of the modern philosophy of history, which was central to Hegel's system, and the founder of the modern philosophy of mythology, which became central to Schelling's thought in 1797 when the so-called *Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus* was presumably written.³

However, I shall neither attempt to confront these claims by tracing each of them back to its origin, nor shall I try to evaluate them as such in this presentation. Instead, I shall restrict myself to a description and exploration of an account of Vico's philosophy written in the heyday of German idealism by its most controversial and influential adversary. This adversary, who may be rightly called "the gadfly of the post-Kantian idealist movement", is Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (b. 25 January 1743 in Düsseldorf, d. 10 March 1816 in Munich). Being a religious enthusiast from an early age, Jacobi developed a specific and strongly personal devotion to God, which was often criticized for its sentimentality yielding most of his inspiring writings in an unsystematic form. His profound mind and noble character were nevertheless always widely acknowledged, and already Hegel readily gave him a distinguished place in the history of German idealism. In Hegel's *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* the first chapter of the section entitled "The Latest German Philosophy" is entirely devoted to Jacobi's philosophy, followed only by chapters on Kant, Fichte and Schelling. Jacobi came to be widely known and was continuously present in the discussions of his time because he eagerly engaged in controversies with leading rationalist or idealist philosophers. In distinct and elaborate treatises over a span of more than three decades he proved to be the only philosopher to dispute with Leibniz-Wolffian metaphysician Moses Mendelssohn, critical idealist Immanuel Kant and post-Kantian idealists Fichte and Schelling.

Jacobi's account of Vico is built into a controversial work known in the history of philosophy for its covert polemic against Schelling's pantheistic philosophy of nature and system of identity. This is Jacobi's latest single work *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung* (1811) (*Of Things Divine and Their Revelation*). Although it is not restricted to this polemic and overtly begins as Jacobi's extended review of the sixth volume of the collected works of Matthias Claudius (Wandsbecker Bote), the second half turns into an explication of Jacobi's theism and an accusation of implicit atheism against the pantheism of the philosophy of identity. This so stirred Schelling that he wrote and published *F. W. J. Schellings Denkmal der Schrift von den göttlichen Dingen etc. des Herrn Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi und der ihm in derselben gemachten Beschuldigung eines absichtlich täuschenden, Lüge redenden Atheismus* (1812) the following year as a lengthy and bitter reply. In the ensuing period until the end of his life Jacobi devoted himself to preparing a collected edition of his works, but he died before its completion. Although Jacobi left Schelling's reply without a direct response, the lengthy foreword to the fourth volume of his collected works, the last Jacobi wrote, is still filled with polemical overtones against Schelling's views.

Turning to Jacobi's account of Vico we should first briefly address the question of how Jacobi came to be aware of Vico's views and which of Vico's works he was familiar with. From what Croce reports in his monograph on Vico,⁴ we can see that three men, all of whom were close to Jacobi and influential in his life – Hamann, Herder, and Goethe – all knew of Vico from their travels to Italy, and that Goethe himself lent *Scienza nuova* to Jacobi in 1792. This book must have aroused Jacobi's interest in Vico's philosophy and his other works. Indeed, in the aforementioned 1811 work, he cites an early

work by Vico written in Latin entitled *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (1710). There are more points of convergence between Vico's and Jacobi's views than one would expect at first. However, we shall restrict ourselves here to one central point of convergence and to one of its instances. They converge in their common belief as theists in a personal God, whose providence guides the history of mankind. An instance of this view common to both is that they find primordial governments or constitutions to be necessarily theocratic or divine.⁵ Another reason that, among all the German philosophers of this period, Vico attracted Jacobi's attention specifically and found an honourable place in one of his books lies in Jacobi's exceptional propensity for reading classical and modern English, French and Italian philosophical literature as well as for citing other authors, sometimes at length, in support of his own view.

Let us now turn to the narrower context within which Vico is mentioned in Jacobi's *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung* (1811). Approximately in the middle of his book,⁶ Jacobi closes his review and discussion on the religious views of his old friend Matthias Claudius and heralds to bring now his own religious convictions to light. These are the same views he held in his first writings more than twenty five years earlier during the pantheism controversy with Mendelssohn. However, the philosophical scene in Germany had changed drastically in the meanwhile and Jacobi is resolved to make a sharp contrast between Kant's critical philosophy, on the one hand, and Fichte's science of knowledge and Schelling's philosophy of identity as its "two daughter philosophies", on the other. To be sure, the emphasis is placed on Schelling's latest idealistic system because Jacobi already expressed his observations and reservations concerning Fichte's and Kant's enterprise in his open letter to Fichte *An Fichte* (or *Jacobi an Fichte*, 1799) and *Ueber das Unternehmen, die Vernunft zum Verstande zu bringen* (1802). Although Kant exerted a great deal of effort to show that all speculation presumptuously aimed at objectively demonstrating the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, and the freedom of human will had proven to be and would remain futile, he nevertheless, as Jacobi observes, held the common conviction that these three ideas constitute the main object of philosophy. Everything else that philosophy is concerned with serves as no more than a means by which to arrive at these ideas and to prove their reality. After showing that this goal could not be attained straightforwardly on the theoretical path of reason, Kant invented a roundabout way in which we are led by our practical use of reason in moral matters. The categorical or unconditional imperative of the moral law we find in ourselves testifies that we are ordered to be free from conditioned actions, and if we only do what we ought to out of reverence for this moral law, we may hope that there is an intelligent God who will freely grant our immortal soul the blissfulness it has made itself worthy of. However, this

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Verene, Donald Phillip, 2002, "Giambattista Vico", in: Nadler, Steven (ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell, p. 562–572, here p. 570.

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Croce, *Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*, p. 271.

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Vico, Giambattista (1948), *The New Science of Giambattista Vico. Translated from the*

third edition (1744) by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, p. 305 (paragraph 925); Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich, 1816 (reprogrammatic reprint 1968), *Werke. Dritter Band*, Leipzig: Gerhard Fleischer der Jüngere, p. 244.

6

Jacobi, *Werke. Dritter Band*, p. 339.

conciliatory solution of Kant's, famously presented in Reinhold's *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie / Letters on Kantian philosophy* (1786–1787) and then highly praised by many, had already been abandoned by Fichte in his ethics (*System der Sittenlehre*, 1798). Here, God ceased to be the indispensable discrete cause of the moral world order and became the moral world order itself. Because of this claim, Fichte even came to be expelled from Jena under the accusation of atheism by the authorities. However, as Jacobi vividly describes, this did not prevent Schelling's system from going even further as "the other daughter of the critical philosophy" and fully annihilating the remaining difference between the philosophy of nature and moral philosophy, i.e. between necessity and freedom, and openly teaching that only nature exists and nothing beyond it.⁷ Schelling must have come to his naturalism, according to Jacobi, because he had presupposed that philosophy must overcome every dualism and start from an absolute principle. Materialism and idealism would arise from such a principle as twins, as two faces of one and the same "ideal-materialism", a form of reversed or enlightened Spinozism. Just as Jacobi combated Spinozism during the pantheism controversy, seeing it as the perfect expression of the atheistic and fatalistic tendency of every rationalism, he now combated Schelling's system of identity. To clearly detect the starting point from which materialism's and idealism's conflicting claims were annihilated and overcome in their higher unity, Jacobi turned to what he calls "the core of Kant's philosophy". And this is an insight that Vico and Pascal were already familiar with.

In Jacobi's interpretation, this is the truth that Kant had made perfectly evident: we can conceive of an object only insofar as we can construct it in our thoughts, produce it in our intellect. Since we can not produce substances, but only movements and combinations of movements or figures outside of us, and only concepts and combinations of concepts inside of us, referring to perceptions of either the inner or the outer sense, there are only two sciences in the strict sense of the word: mathematics and general logic. Every other field of knowledge acquires the characteristic of science only insofar as its objects can be transformed into mathematical and logical objects by a kind of transubstantiation. Since this can not be done with the objects of metaphysics, i.e. with God, freedom and immortality, we can not decide from the principles of mathematics and logic whether there is a reality corresponding to these three ideas or not.

This Kantian revolution in speculative philosophy can be compared, just as Kant himself compares it in the second preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason*, to Copernicus' revolution in astronomy two centuries earlier. However, just as Copernicus' system had its precursors in the heliocentric systems of classical antiquity, so did Kant have at least two forerunners that Jacobi knew of: Vico in the first half of the 18th century in Italy and Pascal in the mid-17th century in France. Fully aware that Kant had probably never read Vico, Jacobi nevertheless cites a passage from Vico's early work *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (1710) (*On the Most Ancient Wisdom of Italians Unearthed from the Origins of Latin Language*). As the title itself suggests, the work broadly resembles Plato's *Cratylus* in that it searches for ancient wisdom preserved within some Latin words as though they came from some sort of "esoteric doctrine" (*interiori aliqua doctrina profecta*) in contrast to people's vulgar use (*vulgaris populi usus*) of Latin.⁸ Although the first chapter opens with Vico's famous *verum–factum principle* claiming that "Latinis verum et factum reciprocantur, seu, ut scholarum vulgus loquitur, convertuntur" (What is true and what is made /produced/ mutu-

ally correspond in the view of the Latins, or – as scholars say – they are convertible.),⁹ the passage Jacobi cites is an abridged ending of the third chapter. This chapter deals with causes and presupposes the *verum–factum* principle to explain what it means to prove something from its causes:

“nam si verum est, quod factum; probare per causas idem est ac efficere; et ita causa et negotium idem erit, nempe operatio; et idem factum et verum, nempe effectus.” (If what is true is what is made /produced, a fact/, then to prove something from its causes is one and the same as to make it /produce it/. Thus to cause and to trade will be the same, namely to operate; and what is made /produced/ and what is true are one and the same, namely what is effected.)¹⁰

Hence it follows that arithmetic and geometry truly demonstrate or produce their proofs from causes because the human mind contains elements of their truths, which it can therefore dispose of and combine, and on the basis of which, when ordered and combined, the truth which the mind demonstrates exists. What is true is the same as what is made because demonstration is here the same as operation.¹¹ This, however, is not the case in physics. Here we can not produce proofs from causes because the elements of natural things are outside of us. However finite they may be, we would nevertheless need infinite virtue to be able to dispose of them, combine them and produce an effect out of them.¹² Now, here starts Jacobi’s aforementioned quotation from Vico’s work, which itself begins with Vico’s own quotation from his work two years prior, *De nostri temporis Studiorum Ratione* (1708):

“geometrica ideo demonstramus, quia facimus, physica si demonstrare possemus, faceremus.” (We demonstrate geometrical truths, for we make them, and if we were able to demonstrate physical truths, we would also produce them.)

For Vico, however, this is obviously not the case. Only God can make nature and actually creates it *ex nihilo*. The same is corroborated by Jacobi’s following short quotation from Pascal: *Ce qui passe la Géométrie, nous surpasse*. (What goes beyond geometry, surpasses us.)

There is more to Jacobi’s longer quotation from Vico, the remainder of which is the ending of the third chapter, abridged by Jacobi. The quotation runs as follows:

“Hinc impiae curiositatis notandi, qui Deum a priori probare student. Metaphysici veri claritas eadem ac lucis, quam non nisi per opaca cognoscimus; nam non lucem, sed lucidas res videmus. Physica sunt opaca, nempe formata et finita, in quibus metaphysici veri lumen videmus.” (Hence those who try to demonstrate God a priori should be stigmatized for impious curiosity. The light of the metaphysical truth is the same as sunlight, which we can cognize only through opaque things, for we do not see the light, but things that are under the light. Physical things are opaque, i. e. formed and finite, and in them we see the light of the metaphysical truth.)¹³

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Ibid., p. 347.

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Vico, Giambattista, 1835, *J. B. Vici opera latina, recensuit et illustravit Joseph Ferrari, tomus I.*, Mediolani: Societas typographica classicorum Italiae scriptorum, p. 49.

9
Ibid., p. 52 (Caput I).

10
Ibid., p. 63 (Caput III).

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“Et ideo a causis demonstrant, quia mens humana continet elementa verorum, quae

digerere et componere possit; et, ex quibus dispositis et compositis, existit verum quod demonstrat; ut demonstratio eadem ac operatio sit, et verum idem ac factum.” Ibid., p. 63.

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“Atque ob id ipsum physica a causis probare non possumus, quia elementa rerum naturalium extra nos sunt. Nam quanquam essent finita, tamen infinitae virtutis est ea dirigere, componere, et ex eis effectum dare.” Ibid.

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Jacobi, *Werke. Dritter Band*, p. 353.

Jacobi could have at least two reasons for citing this curious quotation. The first is to explain the implication of the aforementioned *verum–factum* principle for natural theology which tries to demonstrate the existence of God as an unconditioned cause from the existence of the world as its conditioned effect. The second reason is to provide, by means of Vico's striking comparison, an illustration of what our knowledge of God derived from His creation is really like. As finite beings, we can not comprehend God as the Absolute directly, just as we do not discern anything when looking directly at the Sun. However, when we turn our gaze from the Sun to the opaque things under its light, we discern the sunlight in them.

Although from Kant's aforementioned discovery, or, as we may add to Jacobi's words, from Vico's *verum–factum* principle to Schelling's system of identity, there was only one step to take, Kant and – we might add – Vico never took that step. Jacobi asks himself why this is so. Agreeing with Bouterwerk and Fries' expositions describing the new idealism as having consequently developed out of Kant's on the one hand but contrary to its spirit on the other, Jacobi contrasts Kant and Schelling by contrasting their forerunners (*Vorläufer*): just as much as Plato's philosophy is contrary to that of Spinoza, so is Kant and, we may add, Vico's philosophy contrary to Schelling's philosophy of oneness (*Alleinheitslehre*).¹⁴ Jacobi's comparison is justified insofar as Schelling repeatedly proclaimed Spinoza to be his forerunner, and Kant intentionally called his highest concepts of God, immortality, and freedom ideas in keeping with Plato's use of the word.

From today's perspective, the way in which Jacobi managed to compare and contrast philosophers as different as Plato, Pascal, Vico, Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, and Schelling seems ingenious. He saw the early central insight of Vico as a prefiguration of the core of Kant's philosophy; however, he did admit that it nurtures a tendency to develop into a productive principle of idealism. This principle is most clearly expressed in Schelling's system of identity, but it is already present in Fichte's science of knowledge (which was therefore rightly labelled by Manfred Frank as *Produktionsidealismus*).¹⁵ In his polemic against Schelling, Jacobi could have sided with Kant, who was an Enlightenment thinker. However, being a Christian thinker, he could lean on Vico even more. The system of productive idealism must have appeared atheistic to him insofar as it presupposes that our mind can imitate God's mind in producing the world. Vico would have fully supported Jacobi's endeavour in this respect. Vico would have also considered letting nature develop in front of us out of an absolute perspective of God, as in Schelling's speculative philosophy of nature, an impious endeavour that surpasses our abilities. In support of this, we can close this paper quoting from *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia*:

“... intellectus verus facultas est, quo, quum quid intelligimus, id verum facimus. Igitur arithmetica, geometria, earumque soboles mechanica sunt in hominis facultate; quia in iis ideo demonstramus verum, quia facimus. Physica autem in facultate Dei Opt. Max. sunt, in quo uno vera facultas est, quia expeditissima et expromptissima est: ut quae in homine facultas est, ea in Deo purissimus actus sit. Atque haec dissertata illud consequitur, quod quemadmodum homo intendendo mentem modos rerum, earumque imagines, et verum humanum gignat; ita Deus intelligendo verum divinum generet, verum creatum faciat.”

(True intellect is the faculty by which we produce whatever we conceive. Therefore arithmetic, geometry and their progeny – mechanics – are within the human faculty because we prove the truth in them by producing it. Physics, however, lies within the faculty of God, the Best and the Greatest One, in whom alone the true faculty resides, which is the most efficient and the most obvious, so what is faculty (potentiality) in man, that is the purest act (actuality) in God. From

this discussion, it follows that – in the manner by which man, by directing his mind, generates the modes of things and their images, and the human truth – thus God, by conceiving, generates the divine truth and makes the truth of creation.)¹⁶

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Vidjeti Vica pogledom iz njemačkoga idealizma

O Jacobijevoj usporedbi Vica s Kantom i Schellingovim sustavom identiteta

Sažetak

*Iako općenito vrijedi da Giambattista Vico biva jedva spomenut u Njemačkoj u vrijeme cvata njemačkoga idealizma, postoji i znatna iznimka ovoj općoj tvrdnji. Slijedom okolnosti upoznat s Vicovim ranim djelom *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (1710.), Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi na zanimljiv je način upotrijebio odlomak iz njega u svojem spisu *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung* (1811.), slavnome po polemičkome tonu spram Schellingova sustava. Tu Jacobi naznačuje da je Kantov središnji uvid, po kojem poimamo objekt samo ukoliko ga možemo konstruirati u našim mislima (kao što je slučaj u geometriji u oprjeci s metafizikom), već izražen u Italiji »davno prije Kanta« u Vicovu djelu, kao i u Francuskoj u Pascalovu djelu. Članak istražuje ovu zanimljivu usporedbu između Vica i Kanta te ulogu koju je ona mogla imati u svojem izvornome kontekstu.*

Ključne riječi

Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, načelo verum–factum, teizam

Ljudevit Fran Ježić

Vico aus der Sicht des deutschen Idealismus

Über Jacobis Vergleich von Vico mit Kant und mit Schellings Identitätssystem

Zusammenfassung

*Obwohl es im Allgemeinen gilt, dass Giambattista Vico während der Blütezeit des deutschen Idealismus in Deutschland kaum erwähnt worden ist, gibt es eine wichtige Ausnahme zu dieser allgemeinen Behauptung. Da er mit Vicos Frühwerk *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda* (1710) vertraut war, hat Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi auf eine interessante Weise einen Abschnitt aus diesem Buch in seiner Schrift *Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung* (1811.) gebraucht, die für ihren polemischen Ton gegenüber Schellings System berühmt ist. Jacobi gibt hier zu verstehen, dass Kants Haupteinsicht, dass wir einen Gegenstand nur insoweit begreifen, als wir ihn vor uns in Gedanken werden zu lassen vermögen, schon „lange vor Kant“ in Italien, in Vicos Werk sowie in Frankreich, in Pascals Werk ihren Ausdruck fand. In diesem Aufsatz wird sowohl dieser eigenartige Vergleich zwischen Vico und Kant als auch die Rolle, die er in seinem ursprünglichen Kontext gespielt haben könnte, untersucht.*

Schlüsselwörter

Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, das verum-factum-Prinzip, Theismus

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Ibid., pp. 356–357.

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Frank, Manfred, 1997, 'Unendliche Annäherung'. *Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp (lectures 5 and 6 Frank derives the *Produktionsidealismus* from Maimon's works).

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Vico, *Vici opera latina, recensuit et illustravit Joseph Ferrari, tomus I.*, p. 80 (Caput VII).

Ljudevit Fran Ježić

L'étude de Vico dans l'idéalisme allemand
Sur la comparaison jacobienne de Vico avec Kant
et avec le système d'identité de Schelling

Résumé

Bien qu'il soit généralement admis que Giambattista Vico n'ait pratiquement pas été mentionné en Allemagne à l'époque de l'idéalisme allemand, il existe une importante exception à cette déclaration générale. Étant donné que Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi s'était familiarisé avec l'oeuvre première De antiquissima Italarum sapientia ex linguae latinae originibus eruenda (1710), il fait un usage intéressant d'un des passages du livre dans son écrit Von den göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung (1811) – connu en raison de son ton polémique envers le système de Schelling. Ici, il explique que l'idée centrale de Kant selon laquelle nous concevons un objet uniquement dans la mesure où nous pouvons le construire dans nos pensées (comme dans le cas de la géométrie, à la différence de la métaphysique) a préalablement déjà été formulée en Italie « bien longtemps avant Kant » dans l'oeuvre de Vico, mais également en France dans les oeuvres de Blaise Pascal. Cet article interroge cette intéressante comparaison entre Vico et Kant et le rôle qu'elle a pu avoir dans son contexte originel.

Mots-clés

Giambattista Vico, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, Emmanuel Kant, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, le principe *verum-factum*, théisme