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CORRUPTION IN VICO'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY. SACRED, PROFANE AND CIVIL TIME

Among early modern political and historical philosophers, Giambattista Vico would seem to be among the most promising subjects of a study of the uses of the concept of "corruption". A theory of the *corso* and *ricorso* of nations, the latter occurring only after a nation had fallen back from its acme, or summit, of achievement, could hardly do without the idea of corruption¹. Yet when we turn to the texts of the *Scienza nuova* – both the *Scienza nuova prima* (1725) and the *Scienza nuova terza* (1744) – we discover that Vico uses the term «corruzione», or parts of the verb «corrompere», only rarely and with a specific association.

In the *Scienza nuova prima* the term appears where it might be expected, in the rapid, aphoristic sentences of Book II, cap. XVIII, characterising «i termini dentro i quali corrono i costumi delle nazioni»². Thus, «Gli uomini comunemente prima attendono al necessario, indi al comodo, poi al piacere, in oltre al lusso o

¹ For an earlier treatment of the theme, which asserts that the *Scienza nuova* contains a completely developed theory of decline, see L. BERGEL, *La Scienza nuova di Vico et le problème de la décadence*, «Archives de Philosophie», XL, 1977, pp. 177-201. As will be seen, I believe this mistaken.

² G.B. VICO, *Principi di una scienza nuova, intorno alla natura delle nazioni, per la quale si ritrovano i principi di altro sistema del diritto natural delle genti II XVIII* (1725), in *Opere*, a c. di A. Battistini, Milano, Mondadori, 1990 («I meridiani»), vol. II p. 1046 (hereafter *Scienza nuova prima*).

superfluo, finalmente al furore di strapazzare e di buttar via le sostanze»³. Followed a few paragraphs later by, «prima ne' costumi son barbari, poi severi, indi umani, appresso gentili, più in là delicati, finalmente dissoluti e corrotti»⁴. The equivalent sentences in the *Scienza nuova terza*⁵ are even briefer, and make no mention of 'corruption'.

Elsewhere in the *Scienza nuova prima* (§§11, 247)⁶, Vico introduces the concept of an *acme*, or perfect state, from which a nation may decline. «Corruption» is not implicated in that process of decline, but at one point⁷ Vico does suggest that decline will be associated with the rise of certain philosophies, including the Epicurean, the Stoic and the sceptical, which will undermine the dominant religion of the nations which have reached their *acme*. Vico alludes to such an association again the *Scienza nuova terza*, where although he no longer invokes the idea of an *acme*, he does explicitly associate "corruption" with certain schools of philosophy. A first, brief connection is drawn between the two in the fifth of his "axioms" in the Sezione Seconda of Libro Primo⁸, after which Vico does not raise it again until the Conclusione, where he associates the corrupting of the «popular commonwealths» with the influence of Epicureanism and scepticism⁹.

The questions arising from Vico's references to "corruption" in the *Scienza nuova* seem, on this evidence, to reduce to two, one of them a negative. Why does Vico, a philosopher of history steeped in

³ Ivi, par. 125.

⁴ Ivi, par. 129.

⁵ G.B. VICO, *Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla commune natura delle nazioni* (1744), in *Opere*, ed. cit., I, par. 241-242 (hereafter *Scienza Nuova terza*).

⁶ VICO, *Scienza nuova prima*, par. 11, 247.

⁷ Ivi, par. 247, capo LXVIII.

⁸ *Scienza Nuova terza*, par. 129.

⁹ Ivi, par. 1102-1105. There is another use of the term, in relation to «la corrotta natura» of men, «tiraneggiati dall'amor proprio, per la quale non sieguono principalmente che la propria utilità» (par. 341). This I take to refer to the Fall, a theme which needs separate treatment. As I have argued elsewhere, *The case for the Enlightenment. Scotland and Naples 1680-1740*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Pr., 2005, pp. 201-255, Vico's conception of human nature combined Augustinian and Epicurean elements. But the fallen, corrupt nature of man does not entail that Vico's philosophy of history is also one of corruption, any more than it is a theology of salvation.

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the ancient authors, make so little of the concept of "corruption"? And why, to the extent that he does identify corruption, is it specifically linked to certain schools of philosophy, the Epicurean and sceptical? A negative question is often more difficult to answer than a positive one; but in this case the answer is, I think, of some interest, since it takes us down to the conceptual foundations of Vico's philosophy of history. More particularly, I would like to suggest, the answer lies in exploring the way in which Vico constructed his philosophy of history in response to the accounts of the formation of human society offered by the Natural Lawyers, specifically «i tre celebri uomini» Grotius, Selden, Pufendorf, along with their philosophical associate, Hobbes.

Vico singled out these as his antagonists early in the *Scienza nuova prima*¹⁰, and in successive editions of the work he returned repeatedly to the attack. This is of course well-known, but there are aspects of Vico's preoccupation which have not, perhaps, been as commented on as one might expect. As Vico acknowledged, these were Protestant jurists and philosophers; yet in treating them as his opponents, Vico had no recourse to the great Catholic natural lawyers of the Second Scholastic. This tradition, whose exponents, the Dominicans Vitoria and Soto, the Jesuits Molina, Suárez, Lessius, Arriaga and Lugo, had formed such a powerful school of moral and political thought in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, is almost entirely absent from the *Scienza nuova*. Why did Vico address himself to the Protestant, not the Catholic natural lawyers? The answer seems to be that human sociability was a problem for Protestant natural law in a way it was not for Catholic natural law.

Following Aquinas, the philosopher-theologians of the Second Scholastic had taken as axiomatic Aristotle's proposition that man was social by nature and purpose; natural law was the sphere of human participation in God's eternal law for the good of the individual and the community, the *civitas*. The interesting questions were those which arose in the space between the individual and the *civitas*: as Annabel Brett has argued, the Catholic natural lawyers were thus typically interested in questions of the scope for individual agency, and in those who were on the margins of the *civitas* – the

¹⁰ *Scienza Nuova prima* I v.

poor, travellers, refugees – as well as those within it¹¹. From Vitoria to Arriaga and Lugo, these questions engaged with some of the major political issues of the day; but from the mid-seventeenth century, it seems, the focus of Catholic natural law had increasingly narrowed to casuistry – to issues of conscience and moral conduct, treated probabilistically. Among its greatest exponents in the later seventeenth century was Juan Caramuel, the Spanish Cistercian who as Bishop of Campagna 1656-1673 was an intellectual presence in Naples, and a member of the Accademia degli Investiganti. His ally, Francesco Verde, briefly taught Canon Law to Vico. Such a preoccupation with casuistry, however, only enlarged the distance between the Catholic natural lawyers and their Protestant counterparts, for whom the question of human sociability had become ever more pressing.

It was a problem for Protestants because their theology presented fallen man as egoistic and sinful, wholly reliant on God's grace for his salvation, and justified by faith alone. This had left open the question why men and women were to be obliged to behave morally in this world – and if the earliest Reformers had thought they could dispense with natural law for the purpose, their followers quickly thought better of it. From Melancthon onwards, Protestants understood the law of nature as a 'sphere of behaviour towards others': at the heart of Protestant natural law, Brett argues, was a *jus ad alterum*, an obligation to preserve others as well as oneself. Grotius' conception of natural law followed this structure, reinforcing what he took to be the natural human 'desire for society', the *appetitus societatis*, with agreements to respect the rights of others. So too did Hobbes's presentation of natural law, the first of his laws of nature being to seek peace.¹² But Hobbes had of course also recharged the problem which had given rise to this edifice of Protestant natural law, when at the very beginning of *De Cive* (1642, 1647) he bluntly denied Aristotle's proposition that man was naturally fit for society.¹³ Henceforth it would be much more difficult to assume man's natural sociability: new and better explanations

¹¹ A. BRETT, *Changes of State. Nature and the limits of the city in early modern natural law*, Princeton, Princeton Univ. Pr., 2011.

¹² *Ivi*, pp. 62-71.

¹³ Th. HOBBS, *De Cive: the Latin Version*, ed. by H. Warrender, Oxford, Clarendon Pr., 1983, pp. 90-93.

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were required for the formation of society, and if these explanations were not simply to reduce to the imposition of sovereign power, as Hobbes argued, they must offer an account of how society could come into being before the *civitas*. This was the problem confronted by the third of Vico's «*celebri uomini*», Pufendorf, and also, though Vico would mention him only in passing, by Locke.

For both Grotius and Pufendorf, if not for Hobbes, a resolution to the problem of sociability must have occurred in time. For Grotius the division of the earth (though not the sea) had occurred after the Fall, as groups of men contracted to put themselves under civil law, and thus secure their property. By contrast, Hobbes had insisted that «the natural condition of mankind» should not be understood historically, although it might be exemplified from both the past and the present; his priority had been to separate the natural from the sacred, allowing that the latter existed in historical time, but denying that it trumped or qualified the obligations men naturally acknowledged when they placed themselves under a civil sovereign. To counter Hobbes, however, Pufendorf had insisted on a return to history, offering a conjectural account of how men's needs had brought them together in societies before they formed civil governments. The attainment of sociability was a "stadial" process, and was not achieved, as Hobbes would have it, by politics alone¹⁴.

It was thus the Protestant not the Catholic natural lawyers who raised the problem of the first formation of society which was Vico's starting point in the *Scienza nuova*, and who began to frame that problem in historical terms. This still does not explain, however, why a Protestant problem became so urgent to a Catholic philosopher such as Vico. It did so, I suggest, as a result of the violent assault launched upon the Scholastic natural lawyers by the Augustinians of Port-Royal, spear-headed by Pascal's *Lettres provinciales* (1659). Pascal's critique was aimed at both casuistry and the Jesuit missionary strategy of "accommodation" to native, non-Christian beliefs; against the Jesuits' indulgent view of human nature he insisted on the baseness of Fallen man, his moral worthlessness, and his consequent utter reliance of God's grace for his salvation. It was a

¹⁴ I. HONT, *The language of sociability and commerce: Samuel Pufendorf and the theoretical foundations of the "four stages" theory*, in *Jealousy of Trade. International competition and the nation-state in historical perspective*, Cambridge (MASS.), Harvard Univ. Pr., 2005, pp. 159-184.

critique inspired by moral rigorism, but which also raised, in a far more acute form than Catholic natural lawyers had needed to do, the problem of sociability. Here Augustinianism converged with the newly-fashionable Epicurean philosophy, and Catholic philosophers who sympathised with the challenge to casuistry and scholastic natural law found themselves uncomfortably close to the Hobbesian thesis that men were naturally unsociable. There seems little doubt that Vico was exposed to the Augustinian challenge, whose literature was widely available in Naples by 1700; as Enrico Nuzzo has observed, he displayed considerable sympathy for moral rigorism¹⁵. But where one might expect such sympathy to lead Vico to an acute concern for moral corruption, it had no such effect, at least in the *Scienza nuova*. On the contrary, Vico revealed a deeper interest in, and offered a more imaginative response to, the Hobbesian problem of natural unsociability than perhaps any Catholic contemporary. How Vico responded to the Protestant problem of sociability goes far, I suggest, to explaining his lack of interest in the motif of corruption.

In the *Scienza nuova prima* Vico found fault with the three «celebri uomini» on specific and in the case of Grotius and Pufendorf overlapping grounds. All three had failed to acknowledge that the formation of the earliest gentile societies and the recognition of natural law had occurred under the aegis of divine providence. Grotius, indeed, had explicitly denied the principle, in claiming that his system would hold even if there were no knowledge of God. But he had also supposed that the earliest men were good, denying the Fall in the manner of a Socinian: characterising the first men as solitary «semplicioni», Grotius suggested that they had sought «la vita socievole» from «utility» alone – «che è, in fatti, l'ipotesi di Epicuro»¹⁶. Selden had been misled by Jewish learning into identifying the natural law with the precepts given by God to Noah, failing to notice that of the three sons of Noah, only Shem and his offspring had subsequently followed the law of Noah.¹⁷ Finally

¹⁵ E. Nuzzo, «Sagezza moderna» e «Sapienza-prudenza» nella cultura napoletana tra '600 e '700. Vico e il diniego della sagesse, in Id., *Tra religione e prudenza. La "filosofia pratica" di Giambattista Vico*, Roma, Ediz. di Storia e Letteratura, 2007, pp. 19-118: pp. 112-118.

¹⁶ Vico, *Scienza Nuova Prima* I v, par. 16.

¹⁷ Ivi I v, par. 17.

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Pufendorf had been even more open than Grotius in adopting the Epicurean or (which is the same thing) Hobbesian hypothesis of men abandoned in this world as «destituti», identical to Hobbes's own «licenziosi violenti»¹⁸. These charges were repeated in the *Scienza nuova seconda e terza*: Vico, it seems, had set himself to offer an alternative, anti-Epicurean, anti-Hobbesian account of the first formation of societies. In fact, he was engaged in an altogether less straightforward but much more imaginative exercise in historical reconstruction.

Vico departed from the Protestant natural jurists in offering an account of the formation of societies which was both philosophical and historical, which combined the «true», the vero, with the certain, the «certo», derived from the evidence of the earliest myth and poetry. The inquiry must begin, he insisted in the *Scienza nuova prima*, «tra principi della storia sacra»¹⁹. The premise was renewed and amplified by the subsequent addition of the Tavola cronologica and accompanying explanation in the *Scienza nuova seconda e terza*: affirming Vico's adherence to the chronology of the Vulgate Bible, the Tavola cronologica set the known history of the ancient peoples, from the Chaldeans and Egyptians to the Greeks and the Romans, securely within the framework of sacred history²⁰. But Vico's use of the framework was supremely imaginative. Taking off from the Flood rather than the Fall, he filled the centuries given by the longevity of Noah and his descendants with an account of the socialisation of the gentile peoples, the heirs of Ham and Japhet, through idolatry and the formation of families.

In its highlighting of the prevalence of idolatry, Vico's story was an explicit refutation of Bayle's hypothesis that a society of atheists was as plausible as one of idolaters. It was also a dramatic alternative to the story told by the Protestant natural jurists. The solitary giants who roamed the earth after the Flood, coupling with any woman they encountered, could have had no knowledge of a common law of nature enjoining sociability. Nor could they ever have agreed to join together by pact, as Locke (and Grotius) had suggested²¹. Only

¹⁸ Ivi I v, par. 18.

¹⁹ Ivi, I v, par. 25.

²⁰ Vico, *Scienza Nuova terza*, «Tavola cronologica», «Annotazioni alla tavola cronologica nelle quali si fa l'apparecchio delle materie».

²¹ Vico, *Scienza Nuova prima*, par. 45.

gradually could they have come together as nations, forming their own laws out of the customs by which they worshipped their idols and secured their families and property. And only as they encountered each other in war and trade could they have discovered that their separate laws shared a common ground – a «senso commune degli uomini d'intorno alle umane necessità o utilità» – and thus that they should recognise a common «diritto naturale delle genti»²².

But the difference of Vico's historical account of the first formation of societies from that of the Protestant jurists belied a fundamental common ground. As he would admit, the giants of his post-Diluvian history behaved as Hobbes's «fieri e violenti»²³; motivated by «utilità», they would resort to force whenever preservation required it, whether in seizing and holding in caves the women by whom they had children they recognised, in securing their burial grounds, and in protecting their families and clients. In other words, the premises of Vico's historical account of the socialisation of the earliest men were fully as Epicurean as those of Grotius, Hobbes and Pufendorf. Vico had, after all, accepted those premises – the better to argue that rather than Epicurean chance, it was divine providence which, through the conato, had directed the human passions so that men and women might live in societies.

Because Vico believed that the earliest history of the nations demonstrated the operation of divine providence, his response to the problem of man's natural unsociability differed from that of the Protestant natural lawyers in another respect. It was not merely a historical conjecture. For not only was it “certain”, confirmed by the evidence of ancient sacred and profane history; it was also “true”. It was the manifestation of «una storia ideal eternal, sopra la quale corron in tempo le storie di tutte le nazioni ne' loro sorgimenti, progressi, stati, decadenze, e fini»²⁴. It was a history, as he had just observed, which would be valid «anco che dall'eternità nascessero di tempo in tempo mondi infiniti» – a hypothesis «lo che certamente è falso di fatto»²⁵. (The implied concession to Giordano Bruno's idea of

²² Vico, *Scienza Nuova terza*, par. 141.

²³ Ivi, par. 178-79.

²⁴ Ivi, par. 349.

²⁵ Ivi, par. 348.

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infinite worlds can be read as a Vichian echo of Grotius's *etiamsi daremus* clause.)

Against the arbitrary Epicureanism of Hobbes and the Protestant natural lawyers, Vico framed his "new science" as «una teologia civile ragionata della provvidenza divina»²⁶. The earliest men may have been Hobbesian in their passions; but once the role of divine providence in harnessing sexual lust and idolatrous fear was recognised, an account of human socialisation could be constructed which was both historically certain and philosophically true, both evidentially plausible and conceptually coherent. It was an account which acknowledged the primacy of the passions, on terms consistent with the Augustinian-Epicurean critique of Scholastic natural law, but which transcended moralistic condemnation. It was an account, in short, in which the theme of corruption had little or no place.

The *corso* followed by the «storia ideal eterna» was set out in Libro Quarto of the *Scienza nuova seconda*. Vico modelled it on the three ages («età») of the Gods, Heroes, and Men. But the discussion is organised topically, not historically: there is passage from one age to the next, but with little sense of «progress», let alone of decline («decadenza») and corruption. (To my knowledge Vico always uses the term «progressi», in the plural; but he does not write of «progress» in general.) When he finally confronted the problem of corruption, in the closing paragraphs of the Conchiusione, it was with reference to «gli stati popolari», and, by implication, ancient Rome in particular. In the later stages of the republic, philosophy had succumbed to scepticism and false eloquence, the rich had sought power on their own, and the outcome had been civil war. From «a perfect liberty» the republic had succumbed to the «perfect tyranny» which is anarchy. For this condition there were only three remedies: submission to monarchy (as under Augustus), conquest and reduction to the status of provinces, or a return to the initial state of barbarism, making cities once more into forests, and restoring «la premiera semplicità del primo mono de' popoli, sieno religiosi, veraci e fidi». But it was not the corruption which interested Vico; it was the opportunity for renewal: «e così ritorni tra essi la

²⁶ Ivi, par. 2, 342.

pietà, la fede, la verità, che sono i naturali fondamenti della giustizia e sono grazie e bellezze dell'ordine eterno di Dio»²⁷.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of Vico's lack of interest in the theme of corruption, however, is the immediately preceding Libro Quinto, *Del ricorso delle cose umane nel risurgere che fanno le nazioni*. Vico's consistent object in this short book is to demonstrate the extent to which the "second barbarism" which followed the fall of the Roman Empire reproduced the essential features of the first. The point is demonstrated most fully with regard to fiefs: the law of feudal property was Roman before it recurred after Rome's fall²⁸. But its most striking application is to religion: Vico insisted on the ways in which Christianity after the fall of the Roman Empires reproduced practices characteristic of the earlier idolatrous worship of the pagan gentiles²⁹. In other words, sacred history was not now separated from profane (as it was when Vico distinguished the ancient Hebrews, descendants of Shem, from the gentile descendants of Ham and Japhet); in the «ricorso», sacred and profane are merged into a single civil history. Only in the case of forms of government did Vico allow that the second barbarism had yielded a new and better outcome than the first³⁰. For as the "heroic" aristocracy of feudal property-owners was once again replaced by free commonwealths, then monarchies, Christianity was able to diffuse a new spirit of 'humanity' throughout Europe:

Ma dappertutto l'Europa cristiana sfolgora di tanta umanità, che vi si abbonda di tutti i beni che possano felicitare l'umana vita, non meno per gli agi del corpo che per gli piaceri così della mente come dell'animo. E tutto ciò in forza della cristiana religion, ch'insegna verità cotanto sublimi che vi si sono ricevute a servirla le più dotte filosofie de' gentili³¹.

Made to serve Christianity, the ancient philosophies, even Epicureanism, had lost their corrupting tendency. The modern world of Christian monarchy, Vico was confident, continued to exemplify «la storia ideale delle legge eterne, sopra le quali corron I fatti di tutte le nazioni, ne' loro sorgimenti, progressi, stati, decadenze e fini, se ben fusse (lo che è certamenti falso) che dall'eternità di tempo in

²⁷ Ivi, par. 1102-1106.

²⁸ Ivi, par. 1057-1086.

²⁹ Ivi, par. 1047-1056.

³⁰ Ivi, par. 1088-1096.

³¹ Ivi, par. 1094.

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tempo nascessero mondi infiniti». For which reason, he concluded, it would be invidious to deny the title of *Scienza Nuova* to the work which had established this principle³².

As I read the *Scienza Nuova*, therefore, Vico's construction of the "storia ideale eterna" left little conceptual space for "corruption". Corruption may indeed occur when a society permits the Epicurean and sceptical philosophies to flourish, and men are persuaded that these philosophies permit moral laxity. But 'corruption' was not integral to Vico's understanding of the historical process. Not even the idea of a 'ricorso' entailed corruption. Rather, the idea that history was characterised by "corso" and "ricorso" was further evidence of the continued operation of divine providence in human affairs. It was the conclusion to an account of the formation and development of the nations making up human society intended to refute the rival accounts offered by the Protestant natural jurists. Despite their differences, those accounts had all depended on Epicurean principles which discounted the role of divine providence. Vico's "new science", by contrast, demonstrated the continuous, regular direction of human affairs by divine providence.

By way of epilogue, Vico's conception of the formation and development of society may be compared with Rousseau's. At the outset of his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), Rousseau attacked the natural lawyers' account of man in his original *état de la nature*. They had ascribed to men in that state ideas of the just and the unjust, without attempting to demonstrate that they needed them, or even that they would have been useful to them. «Ils parloient de l'Homme Sauvage et ils peignoient l'homme Civil». Had they heeded the Holy Scriptures – that is, the oldest available historical record of early man – they would have seen that men were never in a pure state of nature, even before the Flood. Rousseau, however, did not choose the "Ecrits de Moïse" as a better starting-point; he discounted sacred as much as any other form of recorded history. Instead, he offered an account of the earliest men and women which was strictly "conjectural", and not at all dependent on available historical evidence. His reasonings were «hypothétiques et conditionnels», comparable to those of

³² Ivi, par. 1096. It is striking that Vico repeats his «etiamsi daremus» clause in the very last paragraph of the *Scienza Nuova*.

physicists speculating on the formation of the world³³. The account of natural man which Rousseau proceeded to outline in Part I of the *Discours* envisaged men as originally solitary, coupling with women only as they encountered each other in their wanderings. Settlement in families occurred only with the passage of time, as population increase and geographical obstacles to mobility made a continued existence as solitary individuals impossible.

As many contemporary readers of Rousseau pointed out, this was still effectively the Epicurean account of the origins of human society. Some, indeed, observed that it was very similar to Vico's account of the formation of families, and identified Vico as the key intermediary between Hobbes and Rousseau³⁴. There was, however, a crucial difference: the point of Rousseau's conjectural story was to distinguish natural man from civil man. As he proceeded to explain in Part II of the *Discours*, men and women left the state of nature at the moment when they accepted the institution of property. This was the true foundation of civil society, and with it came inequality, the growing gulf between "amour de soi" and "amour propre", and the imposition of government. And to characterize this process, the "civilizing" of civil man, Rousseau was happy to invoke the term "corruption".

In this way, in one short work which, more than any other, was to shape moral, political and historical thinking across Europe in the second half of the eighteenth century, Rousseau revived and revitalised the concept of "corruption" as indispensable to the understanding of society and history. From Adam Ferguson, in the *Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767), to Francesco Mario Pagano in his *Saggi politici* (1783-85, 1791-92), philosophers of history once again wrestled with the conviction that corruption was an inherent feature of the human destiny. But they did so anew, at Rousseau's instigation, not by taking over a concern prominent among their predecessors in the first half of the eighteenth century. It is easy to assume that the concept, the *topos*, of corruption has been a continuous feature of moral, political and historical thought.

³³ J.-J. ROUSSEAU, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, III. *Du Contrat Social; Écrits politiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1964 («Bibliothèque de la Pléiade»), pp. 132-133.

³⁴ R. BASSI, *Natura, uguaglianza, libertà. Rousseau nel Settecento Veneto*, Pisa, Ediz. ETS, 2008, pp. 78-80.

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But in the early eighteenth century it was widely (if not universally) discounted and even discredited. Among its most radical critics were Vico's contemporaries, Bernard Mandeville and David Hume. Vico was not as radical as these; "corruption" still has a place in his vocabulary. But it was not a concept central to his philosophy of history. Corruption was not, for Vico, the problem which Rousseau insisted on making it.

ABSTRACT. – Giambattista Vico's conception of a «*storia ideale eterna*», in which history is characterised by «*corso*» and «*ricorso*», is, on the face of it, highly likely to give prominence to the theme of *corruption*. It is argued here, however, that *corruption* plays only a minor part in Vico's philosophy of history. The explanation for this is found in Vico's purpose in the *Scienza Nuova*, to provide an explanation of the formation of human societies which would refute that offered by the Protestant natural jurists, Hobbes, Grotius, Selden and Pufendorf. Against these, Vico would demonstrate the regular operation of divine providence in the «*corso*» and «*ricorso*» of nations; and in the «*ricorso*» following the fall of Rome he believed that modern monarchies had acquired the capacity to resist corruption. By way of epilogue, Vico's philosophy of history is compared with Rousseau's: it was the latter, it is argued, who made corruption once again a major problem for moral, political and historical philosophers.