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Between Bacon and Descartes: Vico's Methodology and the Critique of Algorithmic Reductionism

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This paper examines Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* as an epistemological alternative to the algorithmic rationality underlying artificial intelligence. Grounded in Vico's *verum-factum* principle that humans can only truly know what they have created, it argues that data-driven models distort knowledge by detaching it from its historical and creative origins. Through a comparative analysis of Baconian empiricism and Cartesian rationalism, the study demonstrates how Vico synthesises these traditions into a hermeneutic methodology centred on the *mondo civile*: the human-made world of meanings, laws and institutions. By uniting *philologia* (the domain of historical particulars) with *philosophia* (the pursuit of universal truths) within a dynamic interpretive circle, Vico establishes the autonomy of the human sciences against technological reductionism. His concepts of *sensus communis* (communal understanding) and *ingenium* (contextual judgment) reveal why algorithms can simulate but not comprehend meaning. The article concludes that Vico's human-centred framework offers an indispensable foundation for preserving interpretive understanding in the digital age.

Keywords: Vico, *verum-factum*, *mondo civile*, algorithmic rationality, artificial intelligence, human sciences, epistemology, scientific reductionism

INTRODUCTION

The rise of algorithmic rationality and the datafication of social life have produced an epistemic crisis within the human sciences. This paper situates the contemporary dilemma, whether the study of culture and society can sustain a distinct form of knowledge or be absorbed by data-scientific reductionism, within Giambattista Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1744). Central to Vico's project is the *verum-factum* principle: the claim that humans can truly know only what they have made. This study argues that this principle offers a vital epistemological alternative in the digital age. While algorithmic rationality treats the human world as a set of computable patterns, Vico's methodology grounds knowledge in the creative, historical and symbolic interpretation of the *mondo civile*: the human-made world. He thereby establishes the autonomy of the human sciences not by rejecting systematisation, but by rooting inquiry in a world that is constructed, not discovered. Vico's synthesis of philosophy and philology provides a robust framework for resisting the reduction of meaning to data and for reasserting a human-centre epistemology.

This article positions Vico's *Scienza Nuova* as an epistemological alternative to the algorithmic rationality that underlies artificial intelligence. Drawing on Vico's *verum-factum* principle, the claim that humans can truly know only what they have themselves created, it argues that what Bai (2022) describes as 'machine knowledge' lacks the dimension of meaning intrinsic to the human-made *mondo civile*; and, as Diržytė (2025) notes, although large language models can process statistical patterns, they remain devoid of hermeneutic understanding and of the Gadamerian *fusion of horizons*. The qualitative deficiency (*qualia*) highlighted by Chursinova and Stebelska (2021) in their analysis of Emotional Artificial Intelligence further reinforces this epistemological boundary. As Evangelista (2023) and Sanna (2024) have shown, Vico's methodology is grounded in *sensus communis* and the synthesis of *philologia* and *philosophia*. When viewed alongside Vanzulli's (2023) emphasis on its meta-anthropological framework and Barbi's (2024) rethinking of *ingenium* through Arendt, this approach establishes a powerful foundation for what Rocafort (2024) terms an interdisciplinary 'conspiracy of the sciences'. Ultimately, Vico's legacy offers an indispensable framework for reestablishing the autonomy of the human sciences in the digital age.

The article proceeds in three parts: first, it outlines Vico's ontological and epistemological foundations through his concept of the *mondo civile* and the *verum-factum* principle; second, it examines his philosophical-philological method by analysing the hermeneutic circle between philosophy and philology and the role of *sensus communis*; third, it analyses his critical synthesis of Baconian empiricism and Cartesian rationalism to articulate the enduring relevance of his method in the face of algorithmic reductionism. By recovering Vico's methodology, this article both provides a systematic framework for asserting the autonomy of the human sciences and offers a vital philosophical critique of the reduction of human meaning to algorithmic logic.

THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND METHODOLOGY IN VICO

Vico's *Scienza Nuova* defines its object as the *mondo çivile*, the entire domain of human existence, including religion, law, language and art. He seeks universal forms of humanity by grounding Aristotelian metaphysical principles not in abstraction but in empirical, historical data (Vico 1959: 90). The structure of the 1744 edition, beginning with the chronological 'dipintura' and outlining a systematic method, reveals his ambition to establish a genuine science of the social world (Evangelista 2023: 60). Crucially, Vico adapts Bacon's inductive method to social phenomena, arguing that historical reality is understood not through causal laws but through cultural and symbolic mechanisms. This transfer of scientific rationality to the historical world asserts that poetic, juridical and linguistic phenomena are legitimate objects of systematic knowledge, making the *Scienza Nuova* neither pure metaphysics nor mere positivist historiography.

Vico's theory of historical knowledge **serves as a conceptual bridge connecting** Baconian empiricism **with the hermeneutic tradition later refined by** Gadamer. By adopting an inductive method, he maintains that history demands interpretation, thereby regarding it as an autonomous science of meaning rather than mere chronology (Liebel-Weskowicz 1982: 466–469). Drawing on Newtonian notions of order but stressing their limits, he argued that history follows its own laws. Tristram identifies six principles that systematise this view: 'knowledge depends on human creation; both divine and human realities exist; will and reason define agency; certainty comes from consciousness; truth from reason; philology and philosophy complement one another; and genuine knowledge develops historically' (Tristram 1983: 148–149). Thus, the *Scienza Nuova* should be seen not only as a theory of history

but also as a 'system of the historical-social sciences' (Vanzulli 2023: 172). It unifies philology's dispersed objects, religion, myth, language, law and institutions, within the 'common nature of nations', reconstructing meaning from fragments, as Sanna notes (Sanna 2024: 253–254). Vanzulli (2023: 173) adds that 'Vico's originality lies less in individual insights than in creating a meta-anthropological framework that integrates these fragments, providing a philosophical basis for the autonomy of the human sciences.'

Thus, by synthesising empirical induction with philosophical interpretation, Vico's *Scienza Nuova* transcends mere historiography to establish a system of the historical and social sciences, providing a meta-anthropological framework that grounds the autonomy of the human sciences in the creative and historical nature of its object: the human world itself.

THE VICHIAN METHOD: GROUNDING THE HUMANS SCIENCES AGAINST ALGORITHMIC REDUCTIONISM

The Made, Not Found: The *Mondo Civile* as an Epistemological Limit for AI

Vico's methodology hinges on key conceptual pairs. Philologia constitutes the domain of human certainties – the empirical evidence of languages, laws and myths. Philosophia pursues universal truths. Their dialectical interplay prevents philology from devolving into antiquarianism and philosophy from devolving into empty speculation, thereby generating true historical knowledge. This framework, which includes a 'philosophy of authority' explaining how communal beliefs ground certainty, allows Vico to transform philology from an ancillary discipline into the cornerstone of a new human science, a transformation central to his methodology (Vico 1959: 165).

Vico's *Scienza Nuova* establishes its object of inquiry not as the divinely created natural world but as the *mondo civile*, the human-made civil world of laws, myths, languages and institutions. This world is constructed, not discovered, and defined by its inherent meaningfulness rather than by mere cause and effect. This ontological distinction carries a decisive epistemological consequence: methods that are effective for understanding nature prove inadequate for grasping the *mondo civile*. While modern science and, by extension, data-driven AI succeed in domains governed by universal and ahistorical laws, the human world is historical, contingent and symbolic. It operates through the internal logic of traditions, authority, and shared understandings, rather than through deterministic physical laws. As a result, the *mondo civile* constitutes an epistemological limit for algorithmic rationality. AI may model behavioural patterns within this world, but it cannot access its lived, historical, or interpretive reality. True intelligibility of the civil world arises not through computation but through interpretive reconstruction, **thereby realizing** Vico's vision of a science adequate to its creative, historical and meaning-laden character. The contemporary relevance of Vico's *verum-factum* principle becomes strikingly clear in current debates on machine learning. Huiren Bai (2022), for instance, describes a form of 'machine knowledge' that transcends human experience and reason. Yet this very notion exemplifies the epistemological limit anticipated by Vico: while machines may produce statistically reliable outputs, these lack the dimension of meaning intrinsic to the human-made *mondo civile*. From a Vichian standpoint, what Bai calls 'machine knowledge' does not constitute knowledge in the human sense; it remains a sophisticated form of data correlation, fundamentally distinct from understanding. This distinction between correlational data and genuine understanding finds methodological expression

at the core of Vico's *New Science*: the hermeneutic circle of philosophy and philology, which stands in stark opposition to the linear logic of the algorithm**.**

The Hermeneutic Circle vs the Algorithm: Philology as the Foundation of Human Science

Vico's project centrally claims to ground philology (the historical-cultural domain) scientifically; this process is framed by his 'philosophy of authority' (Vico 1959: 165). For Vico, authority is not a mere command but the normative bedrock of cultural memory. This framework enables a systematic philosophical analysis of philological material. His concept of philology, **anticipating** Croce's 'history of things' (Croce 1922: 31), transcends the study of texts to encompass all human institutions. Philologia, as the realm of certainty, complements philosophia, the realm of truth; knowledge emerges only from their synthesis. By centring this expanded philology, Vico anchors philosophy in history and tradition, transforming his 'New Science' from a record of culture into an active reconstruction of meaning.

Vico's revolutionary method rests on a hermeneutic circle between philosophy and philology. Philology provides the empirical data of the human world, while philosophy supplies the interpretive principles to discern universal truths within historical particulars. Knowledge emerges from this continuous dialogue between evidence and interpretation – a process fundamentally opposed to the operational logic of artificial intelligence. Whereas AI processes data through statistical inference, Vico's method interprets testimony. Algorithms identify correlational patterns within datasets, following a linear path from input to output in pursuit of predictive accuracy. Vico's synthesis, by contrast, is inherently circular and depth-oriented. It treats a myth or a law not merely as a data point but as symbolic testimony emerging from a past *sensus communis*, demanding hermeneutic engagement to elucidate its meaning. Vico thereby establishes a foundational axiom for the human sciences: meaning may be statistically approximated, but it can only be grasped in its full richness through interpretation. AI computes the 'what'; Vico's method seeks to understand the 'why'. This commitment to interpretation as the primary mode of knowing the *mondo civile* affirms the autonomy and necessity of the human sciences in a computational age. Diržytė (2025) observes that, although large language models excel at processing statistical patterns, they lack the hermeneutic understanding inherent in a Gadamerian 'fusion of horizons', and, like Searle's Chinese Room, fail to achieve a genuine semantic comprehension. Vico's *verum-factum* principle clarifies the root of this limitation: since LLMs did not create the human world they analyse, they cannot access its immanent reality beyond a superficial correlational level. What Diržytė diagnoses as a failure of understanding is, in Vichian terms, a failure of creation. This epistemic failure, rooted in a lack of creative participation, consequently renders machines incapable of accessing the very foundation of the civil world: the sensus communis, the pre-reflective ground of shared certitudes that gives human creations their meaning and normative force.

Sensus Communis versus the Statistical Norm: From Correlation to Meaning

A core tenet of Vico's methodology, directly challenging algorithmic rationality, is his concept of *sensus communis*. This is not a mere common sense, but the foundational, historically sedimented body of shared judgments and certitudes that bind a community and make its institutions intelligible. An AI can identify and replicate statistical norms – the behavioural residue of the *mondo civile*. However, a statistical norm is not the *sensus communis*. An algorithm can detect *that* a pattern exists, but remains blind to *why* it exists and what it *means*. The *sensus*

communis is the lived, historical and ethical context that gives patterns their significance and normative force. For example, an AI can correlate 'justice' with blindness and scales in legal texts. But it cannot access the *sensus communis*, the historical struggles, philosophical ideals, and collective commitments, that gives this metaphor its power. The AI grasps the correlation but is incapable of interpreting its meaning.

Thus, Vico's methodology insists that the study of the human world should not be limited to statistical patterns. It must engage in what he called the philosophy of authority – the interpretive work of reconstructing the *sensus communis* that grants beliefs, laws and myths their binding power in specific historical contexts. Where algorithmic rationality offers a thin description of what is, Vico's philological-philosophical synthesis aims at a thick description of what it signifies. This categorical distinction between a world of data and a world of meaning resonates strongly with contemporary critiques of artificial intelligence. As Chursinova and Stebelska (2021: 79) note in their analysis of Emotional AI, the fundamental challenge is that 'emotions are tied not only to brain activity, but also to our physicality in general… and their perception of reality will be significantly different from ours; the grasp of spatial structure and movement will be unattainable for them.' This is not a technological deficit, but a categorical distinction in the objects of knowledge. The human world is a realm of meaning, rooted in specific physical, social and cultural conditions of being, and its study must be correspondingly interpretive. Chursinova and Stebelska (2021: 80) further substantiate this Vichian divide by highlighting the problem of qualia, the subjective, qualitative experiences inherent in human consciousness. They argue that artificial entities cannot feel or experience the world as humans do. They may recognise and respond to emotions, but this is unrelated to subjective inner experience, which they fundamentally lack. Therefore, while AI can process statistical data drawn from the human world, Vico's framework, buttressed by modern philosophical analysis, shows that it cannot access the lived, meaningful reality that arises from human creation and embodied experience.

VICO'S CRITICAL SYNTHESIS: BEYOND BACONIAN EMPIRICISM AND CARTESIAN RATIONALISM

Transcending Bacon: From Nature to the Civil World

Vico's inquiry does not mythologise history; rather, it treats myth as a genuine narration, an epistemological instrument that enables a fully internal, historical understanding (Vanzulli 2023: 173). In *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione*, Vico takes Bacon's methodological framework as a starting point, but repurposes it to address the historical and social world, aiming toward a more comprehensive conception of knowledge. Central to his project is the recovery of symbolic, poetic and intuitive forms of understanding that have been marginalised by modern science – not to reject modern reasoning but to integrate ancient wisdom through the *verum-factum* principle. Thus, Vico moves beyond the opposition between progress and loss, seeking instead to reconcile ancient thought with modern science. As Sanna (2024: 252) notes, his vision of progress is cyclical, guided by Divine Providence through advances and regressions – a view that balances modern notions of historical development with a theological horizon. *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione* thereby lays the epistemological groundwork for the *Scienza Nuova* by introducing the *verum-factum* principle, according to which humans can truly know only what they have created. Knowledge arises not from divine representation

but from historicised human action. Ultimately, Vico's work is more than a critique of Bacon or Descartes; it is a call for a distinct regime of the human sciences, one in which knowledge is historical, pedagogical and ethical. By framing learning as structured by instruments, auxiliary factors, and ends (Vico 1990: 6), he presents knowing as a disciplined process rooted in the act of creation itself. In this sense, Vico's critique anticipates the epistemic limitations of algorithmic rationality, revealing how both Cartesian formalism and Baconian empiricism prefigure the logic of machine learning. Integrating Bacon's inductive method with Hobbes's insights on civil institutions, Vico grounded scientific knowledge not only in observation but also in the artificial, historical and symbolic nature of human creations. As he famously stated, 'This civil world has been made by men; therefore, its principles can and must be found within the modifications of the human mind itself' (Vico 1959: 128).

Vico's *verum-factum* principle establishes a fundamental epistemological limit: true understanding is possible only for the civil world, which humans have constructed, not for God-created nature. Rejecting the dogmatic application of existing methods, Vico proposes a new approach grounded in this principle. He distinguishes between geometry, whose truths we fully grasp because we created them, and physics, whose divinely created objects remain beyond the full human demonstration. This distinction critiques modern science's pretensions to dominate nature, asserting that human knowledge is structurally confined to the civil world, the only realm we have made and thus can truly know.

Against the Cartesian Cogito: The Primacy of Creation over Consciousness

In his early works, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione* (1709) and *De antiquissima Italorum sapientia* (1710), Vico challenges the Cartesian foundation of science, proposing the *verum-factum* principle as an alternative. He argues that Descartes' cogito, confined to the 'truth of consciousness', neglects the creative dimension of knowledge. For Vico, truth emerges from acts of making, not merely from thought; thus, the cogito represents ordinary awareness rather than true scientia (Vico 1988: 53–55). Rejecting Descartes' geometric-rational method as inadequate for capturing humanity's creative essence, Vico articulated a principle that underscores the historicity of understanding. Each era possesses unique modes of sensing and thinking, requiring not a universal model of reason but a hermeneutic engagement with its internal dynamics and lived experiences. This historicist dimension asserts that truth is accessible only through knowledge of what has been historically produced and culturally embodied.

Vico's critique does not reject geometry or rational inquiry but challenges Descartes' dogmatic grounding of science in the cogito, which privileges abstract certainty over creative understanding. Rather than dismissing geometry, Vico re-embeds it within a historical and human context, transforming it from a transcendental ideal into an instrument of cultural self-knowledge. He thus develops a human-centred philosophy of science that reorients both Bacon's empiricism and Descartes' rationalism toward the interpretive study of the *mondo civile* – the world of language, law and myth that humans themselves have created. For Vico, truth is not merely discovered but made: knowledge coincides with creation. This insight anticipates a central conflict of the digital age. Cartesian rationalism, with its pursuit of clear and distinct ideas, prefigures algorithmic rationality, the faith that computation can exhaustively model reality, whereas Baconian empiricism, rooted in observation and the accumulation of facts, finds its analogue in big data. Against both, Vico insists that facts without interpretation are mute and that understanding arises only through the hermeneutic dialogue between *philologia* (historical particulars) and *philosophia* (universal principles). His *verum-factum* principle

thereby establishes the autonomy of the human sciences and offers a lasting critique of algorithmic reductionism. The *mondo civile*, as a product of human creativity, cannot be computed; rather, it must be interpreted. True knowledge of the human world thus remains inseparable from the historical, communal and meaning-making acts through which humanity continually re-creates itself.

CONCLUSIONS

Vico's *Scienza Nuova* establishes the autonomy of the human sciences not through imitation of the natural sciences, but by grounding inquiry in the *mondo civile* – the historical world created by humans. His *verum-factum* principle marks a decisive break from the Cartesian identification of truth with formal certainty, insisting instead that knowledge arises from the creative and contingent realm of languages, institutions and myths. This perspective resonates powerfully with contemporary philosophical movements such as hermeneutics and critical theory, which similarly foreground the production and transmission of meaning. Recent scholarship underscores the contemporary relevance of Vico's epistemology. Tateo (2015) positions the *Scienza Nuova* as a foundation for cultural psychology, arguing that the *Scienza Nuova* integrates history, linguistics and philosophy in opposition to the Cartesian fragmentation. Pern (2019) develops a semiotic-imaginative approach inspired by the *verum-factum* principle, while Rocafort (2024) explores Vico's 'conspiracy of the sciences', anticipating the modern interdisciplinary dialogue centred on the *mondo civile*. Barbi (2024) further revitalises Vico's thought by linking *ingenium* with Arendtian *sensus communis*, offering a framework for judging singular phenomena without sacrificing contextual nuance.

In today's digital landscape, where artificial intelligence increasingly shapes knowledge and decision-making, Vico's distinction between divine and human creation gains renewed urgency. He reminds us that knowledge of the human world must remain interpretive, historically situated and self-reflective, resisting absorption into a universalising technical rationality. Vico's enduring contribution lies in his methodological pluralism and his defence of a human science rooted in the *comune natura delle nazioni*. He reframes science not as domination over nature, but as humanity's historical and cultural self-knowledge – a timely alternative in an age of blurred boundaries between natural, artificial and social realities. This Vichian understanding of *ingenium*, the capacity for creative, context-sensitive judgment, responds directly to contemporary limits in artificial intelligence. As Diržytė (2025: 17) notes, large language models may generate ideas, but they lack the capacity for grounded judgment that defines human intellect. The true 'intellectual partner' remains the human mind, endowed with *ingenium*. This limitation reflects a broader epistemological flaw in technoscience: the detachment of knowledge from human creation. Petrushenko and Chursinova (2019) reinforce this Vichian insight through their anthropological interpretation of technoscience. They argue that technology is never neutral but is always embedded in human meaning-making. The reduction of cognition to algorithmic processing thus represents not an advancement but a loss of the creative and ethical dimensions essential to human knowledge. In Vico's terms, algorithms may replicate the factum of knowledge, but they cannot grasp its verum, for they do not participate in the interpretive and historical life of the *mondo civile*.

In conclusion, Vico's epistemology stands as a critical intervention in the age of AI. His distinction between the natural and civil worlds, along with his key concepts of *verum-factum*, *sensus communis*, and *ingenium*, provides a robust foundation for the human sciences – one that algorithmic rationality cannot supplant. True understanding of human reality arises not

through computational modelling, but through interpretive engagement with the meanings we ourselves have created. Vico's centuries-old insight endures: to understand humanity is not to model its behaviour, but to interpret the meaning of its world. Vico's epistemology thus provides not merely a critique but a constructive framework for the digital age, a human science capable of interpreting, rather than computing, the meaning of its own world.

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Tarp F. Bacono ir R. Descarteso: G. Vico metodologija ir algoritminio redukcionizmo kritika

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjama Giambattistos Vico „Scienza Nuova“ kaip epistemologinė alternatyva algoritminiam racionalumui, kuriuo grindžiamas dirbtinis intelektas. Remiantis G. Vico *verum et factum* principu, kad žmonės gali iš tikrųjų žinoti tik tai, ką sukūrė, teigiama, jog duomenimis pagrįsti modeliai iškreipia žinias, atsiedami jas nuo istorinės ir kūrybinės kilmės. Lyginamoji Francio Bacono empirizmo ir René Descarteso racionalizmo analizė parodo, kaip G. Vico sujungia šias tradicijas į hermeneutinę metodologiją, kurios centre yra *mondo civile* – žmogaus sukurtas prasmių, dėsnių ir institucijų pasaulis. Sujungdamas *philologia* (istorinių detalių sritį) su *philosophia* (universalių tiesų siekimu) dinamiškame interpretavimo rate, G. Vico įtvirtina humanitarinių mokslų autonomiją technologinio redukcionizmo atžvilgiu. Jo *sensus communis* (bendruomeninis supratimas) ir *ingenium* (kontekstinis vertinimas) sąvokos atskleidžia, kodėl algoritmai gali imituoti, bet nesuprasti prasmės. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad G. Vico į žmogų orientuota sistema suteikia nepakeičiamą pagrindą interpretacinio supratimo išsaugojimui skaitmeniniame amžiuje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: Giambattista Vico, *verum et factum*, *mondo civile*, algoritminis racionalumas, dirbtinis intelektas, humanitariniai mokslai, epistemologija, mokslinis redukcionizmas