

剑桥政治思想史原著系列（影印本）

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新 科 学

The First New Science

Vico

维 柯

Edited by
LEON POMPA

中国政法大学出版社

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电子信箱	zf5620@263.net
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Introduction

I

One of the main lessons that *The First New Science* teaches in relation to political theory is that any such theory must be located within a science that incorporates both a philosophy and a history of the whole of human nature and human practice. In what follows, I shall begin, therefore, by tracing some key points which led Vico to this conclusion, before discussing some of the issues that arise from the conception he finally reached.

Vico's earliest theoretical writings show that, from the start of his professional career, one of his primary concerns was the relationship between the education of the individual and the interests of society. In the First Oration (1699) he argues that while the goal of education is self-knowledge, this can be reached only by a true understanding of the liberal and scientific arts. The theme re-emerges in the Fourth Oration (1704), where it is extended to the claim that the individual should be educated for the well-being of the state. In the Sixth (1707), Vico focuses on the forms of corruption that we inherit from Adam, specifically inadequacies of language, belief and desire, the remedy for which lies in the development of eloquence, knowledge and virtue. These, again, require a grounding in the liberal and scientific arts.

The Seventh Oration was extended and published as *On the Study Methods of our Time* (1709). Here these themes are elaborated further in a systematic assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the ancient and modern methods of approaching all disciplines in the academic curriculum. Vico begins with a brief criticism of Bacon's *On the Dignity and Advancement of Learning*, which had, he believed, failed to provide the

complete system of knowledge that it promised. The Cartesian critical method comes in for particular criticism, being seen as an obstacle both to eloquence, i.e. wisdom expressed in a language appropriate to the common man, and to an empirical approach in the natural sciences. Vico goes on to admonish the universities to develop all disciplines in accordance with the best of ancient and modern methods in order that their students should be able to acquire eloquence, knowledge and virtue. He does not, however, suggest that this is possible on a democratic basis. The stress that he lays upon the need for the development of eloquence arises precisely because it enables those who can acquire wisdom to persuade those who cannot, the vulgar, to act correctly through feeling rather than through understanding. The overall emphasis is thus on the importance of a correct relationship between the intellectuals and the general populace for the good of society. This emphasis was to re-appear, though with the intellectuals and the populace related in a quite different way, among the conclusions of *The First New Science*. Finally, in a most important section which foreshadows later developments, Vico expounds the virtues that he sees in Roman juridical practice and the history of Roman law. Whereas the Greeks had separated legal theory from legal practice and subsumed it under philosophy, the Romans, he argues, had construed jurisprudence so as to include knowledge of all things, religious and secular, thus pursuing the arts of government and justice through their positive experience of public affairs. The sequence of laws observed in Roman history constituted, therefore, the best of Roman thought embodied in actual practice. Vico's assessment of the importance of the sequence embodied in the development of Roman law was such that, together with the reconstruction of the history of the fabulous period of Greek history, it was to become one of the principal sources, and exemplifications, of the content of the 'ideal eternal history' developed in *The First New Science*.

Vico's next major work, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, was the metaphysical and epistemological part of an intended three-part treatise, the other parts of which were to cover ethics and physics. Though it contains no direct discussion of political theory, two points of importance were carried from it into Vico's later thought. The first is his striking endorsement, as an alternative to the Cartesian theory of knowledge, of the *verum-factum* theory: that the true and the made are identical. At this point, however, the only example that he could offer of human, as distinct from divine, knowledge, on this conception, was geometry. The second is the consequence that he

drew from this theory: that to know something requires knowledge of all that is required to make it, i.e. of all its causes. With regard to the *verum-factum* theory itself, Vico never again formulated it specifically in these terms. It is plausible, however, to see a version of it re-appearing in his later claim that the knowledge afforded in *The First New Science* was grounded in 'the unique truth . . . that the world of gentile nations was certainly made by men . . . and that its principles must therefore be discovered within the nature of the human mind . . . by means of a metaphysics of the human mind', a mind now considered, however, as the common sense of the nations or of mankind and not merely of intellectuals. With regard to the second point, however, it is quite certain that Vico never abandoned the claim that knowledge consists in knowledge of causes, though the kinds of cause brought forward in his later works were enlarged to cover everything relevant to the nature of their subject matter. This is precisely what he thought that he had achieved in *The First New Science*.

Vico's next major work, *The Life of Antonio Carafa* (1716), although somewhat of a by-way in the development of his general thought, contains one relevant point. Whereas, in *On the Study Methods of our Time*, he had emphasised the importance of wisdom, virtue and eloquence in training the intellectual to guide the masses, in his biography of Carafa he attributes Carafa's success to his natural, rather than acquired, shrewdness and suggests that formal culture is likely to hinder rather than to promote effective action. This was not a view that he was to maintain in its generalised form, but it is indicative of a decreasing confidence in the capacity of the intellectual to bring about political well-being by the methods advocated earlier.

At this point it is necessary to turn to the importance of Grotius's influence on Vico, though this is a highly debated matter. Vico may have known something about Grotius's doctrines, possibly through discussion, as early as 1708, but as part of his preparation for *The Life of Antonio Carafa*, he had undertaken a thorough reading of *The Law of War and Peace*. In the *Autobiography*, he offers his general assessment of what he had gained from Grotius in the context of a set of comments on his 'four authors', i.e. the authors by whom he considers he was most influenced up to the time of, and in connection with, *Universal Right*. The writers mentioned are Francis Bacon, who had seen the need to supplement and correct all knowledge, human and divine, but had failed to derive from this a universal system of law; Tacitus, who had realised the need to inform his

more theoretical thought with facts about human nature but had failed to provide a system for understanding these facts; Plato, who had succeeded in devising a truly universal system of philosophy but had failed to confirm this esoteric wisdom by reference to common wisdom; and Grotius, who, unlike the others, had related philosophy and philology in a single system of universal law, including under philology both the history of facts and of the three best-known oldest languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. From all this, Vico says, he saw that he could fulfil what he had aimed at in his Inaugural Orations and *On the Study Methods of our Time*, by relating the philosophy of Plato, in a Christianised form, to a philology which introduced scientific necessity into its account of languages and things. As a result, he believed, the maxims of the academic sages and the practices of the political sages could be brought into accord.

The first fruits of this new conception were the two volumes, *The One Beginning and the One End of Universal Right*, *The Constancy of the Jurist*, and a concluding volume of *Notes and Dissertations*, all of which, following Vico, are usually referred to as *Universal Right*, published between 1720 and 1722. Much of this major work is taken up with discussions of detailed points about the nature and history of natural law, too complex to be summarised here. Its general contents, however, show that Vico was already working on many of the themes, both general and particular, that were to appear in *The First New Science*. Many of his etymological derivations, his interpretations of particular myths and of the nature of the different Roman laws, many aspects of his theory of language, particularly the poetic language of early man – versions of all this and much more appear here for the first time.

An important feature of *Universal Right* in the present context is the influence it reveals of the effect on Vico's political thought of his reading of Grotius, in particular his acceptance of the legitimacy of Grotius's appeal to historical facts as a way of establishing the legitimacy of a universal natural law. First, however, he criticises Grotius for having failed to supply a metaphysical basis for either the authority or the functions of the state. In his own account he begins with an assertion of the necessity to accept the existence of God. Given this, in one line of argument he attempts to establish the legitimacy of the state's authority over the regulation of ownership, freedom and tutelage, the importance of which for a stable civil community he had grasped from his reading of Roman history, by deducing these civil properties from the divine attributes of knowledge,

will and power. Although he abandoned the deduction itself in his later works, he retained part of the view upon which it rested: that, like the divine mind, the human mind consisted in knowledge, will and power.

Second, to substantiate the appeal to historical fact as a way of establishing the legitimacy of different historical conceptions of law, he introduces the idea that there is an eternal sequence of the order of things which, because the ideas involved in it are eternal, must be the product of an eternal mind, i.e. God. The sequence mentioned here, which anticipates the 'ideal eternal history' of *The First New Science*, is presented as constituting the inner causes of the development of nations from the state of original bestiality of fallen man to one of the highest cultural achievement. From this sequence flows, among many other things, a developing order of political states involving conceptions of law which are barely or only partially rational, until it culminates in a state in which the utilities of life are distributed in accordance with a law embodying the dictates of pure reason. Vico is careful, however, to confine the application of this sequence to the gentile nations. The history of the Hebrews, the followers of the 'one true God', takes a different course, though no systematic account of this course is given.

In connection with these claims, he introduces a further distinction between two important concepts, which re-appear in *The First New Science*: the true and the certain. The true is defined initially as the conformity of the mind with God's order of things. It is, therefore, though Vico does not explicitly say so, an objective epistemological relationship. Later, however, it is also defined as the order of ideas laid down by God, which, as stated above, constitutes the essence of the human world. Thus, it is both metaphysically and epistemologically basic. Similarly, the certain has two aspects. First, it is a state of consciousness which is free from doubt. Though its contents may be far from true, a consciousness of this sort is necessary, especially in primitive societies, to provide a solid basis of belief for communal activity. In this cognitive sense, however, the certain is not just brute consciousness, for the things about which we can be certain can be true or false, thus requiring the operation of *some* form of reason to judge them. Moreover, given the growing knowledge of the causes of things which follows from the claim about an eternal sequence of ideas, the certain can, and eventually will, attain the status of the true. Second, however, Vico uses the concept of the certain to characterise the particular institutions that arise in history from the operation of two

other factors. The first is the will of fallen man, which contributes to the creation of institutions that satisfy demands that stem from the corporeal, non-spiritual part of his being. The second is the existence of certain 'seeds of the true', the *semi eterni di vero*, which constitute a certain potential for the rationality left within man after the Fall to develop through the eternal sequence of ideas, in order that he can eventually overcome his corrupt nature and reach the stage of pure mind. The rationale for the appeal to historical fact in establishing the legitimacy of the authority of law within the state rests, therefore, on the claim that law is always the embodiment of at least a partial development of reason, and hence shares in the divine.

Third, despite his debt to Grotius's recognition of the need to establish the legitimacy of universal law by the appeal to historical fact, Vico criticises him, along with others, for having failed to understand the historically conditioned nature of human culture which results from the divine 'order of things'. Hence the law for the universality of which Grotius had argued was the law of his own day – what Vico calls 'the law of the philosophers' – leading him to misunderstand many aspects of Roman law and rendering many of his criticisms of it invalid. What he should have recognised was the universality of the divinely inspired order of things of which the historical phases of law were a part. But, as Vico himself had begun to realise, a demonstration of this would require a comparative empirical investigation of the earliest historically instantiated phases of this order. Hence, as his many new and striking re-interpretations of Homer in later parts of the work reveal, he had begun to realise the need for a systematic canon of interpretation, particularly for the fabulous periods of history, in order to be able to go back to the origins of history and to trace from them the actual historical sequences of cultural, social and political forms through which the development of the different nations has proceeded. The idea that there could be a science for all this is first made explicit in a famous chapter, entitled 'A New Science is essayed', in which Vico asserts that philological interpretation must be governed by arguments which presuppose man's corrupt nature and, on this basis, regulate it with scientific norms. Many of these ideas were to re-appear, albeit in more developed form, in his next published philosophical work, *The Principles of a New Science of the Nature of Nations through which the Principles of a New System of the Natural Law of the Gentes are Discovered* (1725).

II

One of the principal aims of *The First New Science* is to discover the causes of social and political stability in order to enable us to identify and correct instabilities should they arise. In the way in which Vico approaches these causes, however, they come forward as part of a wider conception, a science of the nature of nations, which is later described variously as a philosophy and history of humanity, or of human customs or of the natural law of the nations. Before turning to the implications of the work for political philosophy, therefore, it is necessary to form some idea of this wider conception.

The governing idea of the whole work is that, under certain conditions, the history of all nations will develop in accordance with an identical pattern of social, political and cultural change. The reason for this is that they all share the same nature, which develops through the interplay of two different features, which Vico distinguishes as the cause and the occasion of historical development. The ultimate cause of this development is a potential for an increasingly rational understanding of the true nature of things, in particular the nature of justice. Hence the reference to the discovery of the natural law of the gentes or nations in the title of the work. The occasion for the progressive development of this cause is the actualisation of a sequence of desires, beginning with a desire for the necessities of life, followed by a desire for what is useful, then for what is comfortable, and so on, which belongs to man by nature. As a result of the interplay of cause and condition, the legal, social and political conditions of life emerge from an original brutish and almost wholly irrational state to reach an *acme*, or state of perfection, from which they then descend.

This basic hypothesis is clearly related to the idea of the eternal order of things dependent upon an eternal order of ideas of *Universal Right*. It differs from the scheme in *Universal Right*, however, in two important respects. First, Vico has now included the idea, quite common at the time, that the pattern will exhibit both a rise and a fall. Second, he claims that the historical establishment of this pattern will show that the state of perfection can be reached only when certain practical maxims which have been the basis of successful human practice, above all in contributing to the relative stability of their states, can also be demonstrated by the political philosophers. Then not only will political practice and political theory cohere but, should practice begin to depart from these maxims, it can be restored to them through the advice and help of the philosophers.

In giving this as the reason for conceiving *The First New Science*, Vico is clearly attempting to fulfil the ambitions with which, as he says in the *Autobiography*, he had first been concerned in the Inaugural Orations, *On the Study Methods of our Time* and *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*.

Vico finds the underlying basis of this pattern in a metaphysics of the human mind, which he describes as 'a metaphysics . . . raised to contemplate the common sense of mankind as a certain human mind of the nations'.¹ In the way in which this claim is developed, it becomes clear that it is because it is based upon this communal essence of mind that Vico's Science can claim to be a philosophy of humanity, i.e. human nature.² Since no previous thinker has reached such a conception, he believes, it follows that nobody has been in a position to provide a coherent and defensible basis for the governing ideas, i.e. both the causes and the occasions, used in their interpretations of the nature and history of different nations. Conversely, nobody has yet been in a position to show that history could provide a demonstration that the principles involved in such a metaphysics were the fundamental principles of human nature.

Though the relation that Vico envisages between the philosophy and history of human affairs is circular, the circle is not vicious. Rather it is one of coherence and mutual support. It is worth noting, however, that though it can plausibly be argued that the satisfaction of such a relation may be a necessary condition of the truth of Vico's claims, whether it can be accepted as a sufficient reason for them, or whether it requires the support of some more fundamental principle, is more contentious. Vico does not, however, provide this metaphysics of human nature with any further support by deriving it, as in *Universal Right*, by deduction from some *a priori* primary truths. Instead he sees it as the universalisation of a developing series of human capacities, i.e. both ideas and volitions, which can be proven to be true of ourselves by relating them, in some way or other, to what we know is fundamental to the existence and continuation of our shared human experience.

The first point to note about the historical sequence which arises from this metaphysics is that it is based upon Vico's conviction that nothing – customs, languages, social or political institutions – can start initially from some kind of consent or contract. Such a theory, he argues,

¹ *The First New Science*, 40; *The New Science* (1744), 331, 347. Hereafter references to paragraphs in *The First New Science* will be given solely by a paragraph number.

² 23.

would require us to attribute implausibly rational powers to primitive man. Instead of rational choice, therefore, his account of early society is given in wholly naturalistic terms. This can be seen with regard to three things that become central to his social and political theory. The first is belief in a provident divinity, a belief which arises without human intent, through the natural workings of the imagination. This alone, he argues, can provide the context of normative belief in which any initial form of society can arise. From this belief comes the second basic institution, the development of legalised marriage, required as an indication of divine approval of human behaviour. This is equally basic because it secures the identity of children and their parents, which is necessary for establishing hereditary fortunes, hereditary claims to political power and the formation of the clans and great ruling families. The third institution is burial of the dead, which, starting from the sheer physical disgust caused by unburied bodies, leads to the development of genealogies, which constitute the first form of history, and, later, to public monuments which commemorate the glories of families and nations. All this, Vico insists, arises from natural, non-rational features of human nature.

The second point to note is the role of certain governing beliefs in the different forms of society in the sequence Vico offers. The sequence itself which, in so far as it deals with anything remotely social, begins with isolated family units, proceeds first to primitive sacerdotal societies. These are the societies of the 'theological' or 'poetic' age, in which everything is governed by the imagined belief that the sky is a god, Jove, who issues commands and warnings to man through thunder and lightning. On this basis idolatry and divination become structural features of these societies which take on their sacerdotal character through the need to placate Jove with sacrifices. Accordingly, law consists in Jove's commands and political power rests with the priests and priestly kings through whose mediation his will is interpreted in the auspices. Next comes the 'heroic' age, the age of the great aristocratic republics, in which political power lies with the leaders of the aristocratic families on the basis of the belief that they are of semi-divine origin and, as such, superior in nature to the bestial plebeians. Finally, however, with the greater development of reason, doubts begin to arise about this semi-divine origin, the plebeians begin to realise that they are equal in nature to the aristocrats, and democracies arise on the basis of belief in the equality of nature of all human beings and of their entitlement to equal status under the law and to participation in social and political decision-making.

Vico does not believe, however, that the development of human societies and different political structures on the basis of the interplay between these governing beliefs and the sequence of natural desires is a smooth and easy process. On the contrary, a central component is what would now be called the class war. Holding to his claim that individual man is corrupt, he sees every change in the sequence as involving a contest between those who are favoured by its political structure as embodied in the law and those who suffer from it. Ultimately, however, the increasingly rational governing beliefs will prevail over their less rational predecessors. Throughout the series, therefore, there is a tension between the way things are and the way, more rationally, they ought to be, i.e. between the certain and the true, in the ontological sense explicated in *Universal Right*.

The conviction that in giving this changing series of beliefs he has given the sequence of causes, be they naturalistic or, later, more rational, upon which social, cultural and political development rests, is the basis of Vico's claim that his science contains a philosophy and history of human customs. In perhaps his clearest statement of this conception he describes the philosophical aspect of it as consisting in a linked series of reasons, and the historical aspect as a continuous sequence of facts of humanity which are in conformity with these reasons. Thus, he concludes, his Science comes to be 'an ideal eternal history, in accordance with which the histories of all nations proceed through time'.³

The 'ideal eternal history' is one of the crucial conceptions in *The First New Science*. It is plainly related to the order of eternal ideas, deriving from an eternal mind, i.e. God, which was said to govern the divine order of things in *Universal Right*. There is, however, a major change in that Vico has now subsumed the whole notion of an order of ideas which governs the historical order of things within his concept of a metaphysics of the human mind.

It is clear, therefore, that in developing the 'order of ideas' of *Universal Right* in this way Vico has abandoned the idea that what makes the order eternal is that its author must be God, i.e. the god of Christianity, in favour of the idea that what makes it eternal is that it springs from the nature of man. This does not mean that the Christian God disappears entirely from the philosophical framework of *The First New Science*, for Vico makes frequent references to the Christian God by characterising the generally beneficial nature of the sequence as the outcome or realisation

³ 90.

of a providential plan. Yet he realises that he cannot consistently maintain that all societies must rest on belief in a god, which must therefore arise from certain *universal* features of human nature, and identify this god with the God of Christianity. His solution, which looks distinctly question-begging, is to propose a different account, barely specified, for Hebrew history and its dependence upon revealed knowledge of the one true God. The crucial question of where this leaves his references to some supra-historical activity by the God of Christianity, as implied in the idea of a providential plan, is, however, too complex to be taken further here.

Three final points about the 'ideal eternal history' should be made here. First, although Vico often talks as though its existence is independent of the physical world in which man lives, it is clear that when he applies it he is thinking of it as embodying the causes of human activity in the real world. The necessities and utilities, for example, which provide the occasions for change, are often physical and biological. So, as he insists, his Science must take account of the *whole* of human nature and this includes its relation to all aspects of the physical world.

Second, and partially as a result, Vico does not believe that the histories of all nations will follow the pattern outlined in the 'ideal eternal history'. For since it outlines a sequence which will obtain in what may be described as normal conditions of the world in which we live, where abnormal causal conditions obtain, as, say, in the case of massive floods or plagues or aggression by other more powerful nations, the history of some nations will not conform to the pattern. Thus in Latium, for example, only Rome, upon which, understandably, he relies heavily, exhibits the full pattern. But where some fail to conform to it, he gives a further causal account why this is so.

Finally, and most noticeably, he never gives a description of the total contents of the 'ideal eternal history'. This is because, since it consists in the eternal sequence revealed in the evolving history of each nation, its detail is shown in what is common to those histories.

III

Given that one of Vico's intentions in *The First New Science* is to make a contribution to political theory, book IV, in which he directly addresses this contribution, is often seen as a distinct disappointment. By far the shortest book in the work, it is also, in the eyes of many scholars, the

most puzzling. The book mentions two arts which derive from the work as a whole. Although the first, a new critical art, i.e. a canon of rules of interpretation, which has been employed throughout in Vico's historical investigations, is one of his crowning achievements, it need not detain us here. The second, however, is quite different, and refers us back to the original aim of the whole Science. Vico explicitly likens it to a 'diagnostic art', the purpose of which is to enable us to discern the sequence of stages of necessity and utility in the order of human affairs and thus to fulfil the point of the Science: knowledge of the signs of the state of the nations. But the sequence of stages itself is that which has been mentioned frequently before: first, the need for belief in a provident god; next, the need for the institution of legal marriage by which to establish the continuity of families, from which arise so many practices in the structure of civil life, such as the inheritance of property; and, finally, the need for ownership of lands for burial of the dead, which leads to the citizens' pride in the glory of their ancestry, and their wish to give it immortal public expression. Thus the common sense of mankind consists in its grasp of the need to maintain these practices in order not to relapse into the bestiality in which it started. The sequence of stages of the utility of *recondite wisdom*, i.e. philosophical wisdom, on the other hand, is determined by that of common sense. For the end of philosophical wisdom is to support common sense when it is weakened and to guide it when it goes astray.

But if these pronouncements seem disappointing, this is, to some extent, because they are mere summaries of what Vico has already exhibited, in great detail and throughout the whole work: the indispensable nature of the institutions of religion, marriage and burial of the dead. For what he has shown is not only that they are necessary for the internal cohesion of any society but that, as they change in character in accordance with the slow development of human rationality, in addition to performing these indispensable functions, their effects spread out to have many further effects on institutions that are crucial to the development of social and political structures. A single example, that of ownership and the aristocracy, must suffice to illustrate this point. According to Vico, ownership begins as simple use of the land, common to everybody. Ownership as property arises when those who first occupy the land have their right to occupancy made legitimate through their auspices. For this to become permanent, however, it is necessary to be able to certify hereditary ownership, which can be done only through the *genealogies* which arise from burial of the dead. When others later enter these lands for food and

shelter, they enter lands already legitimately owned and, consequently, can enjoy food and shelter only on the basis of an exchange of work for rural commodities. The owners of the land are thus in a position to build up, with full legal approval, their vast private fortunes which leads to the division between the aristocrats and the plebeians. This will endure in history until the plebeians are in a position to take the auspices and to belong to legally recognised families. At this stage, of course, the whole concept of ownership as such must change. Thus when Vico's claims about the necessity for religion, marriage and burial of the dead are read in the light of his actual account of the ways in which social and political structures change, they become much more illuminating.

Vico's pronouncements about the way in which his basic institutions should be recognised and supported by the philosophers represent the fulfilment of his original thoughts about the role of the intellectual in public life, a wish that is implied by the fact that the whole work is, if not dedicated, at least addressed, to the academies. There is, however, an obvious difference in that, whereas, in his earlier writing, he had enjoined the intellectuals to develop the knowledge and rhetorical capacities necessary to persuade the people to act in ways to which their understanding could not lead them, he now suggests that the people have a grasp of the need to act in certain ways and the task of the intellectual is confined to giving philosophical justification and support for these forms of activity when they are weakened. Thus where philosophical wisdom originally took precedence over common belief, it is now secondary to it.

In these general remarks Vico is also clearly thinking of his criticisms of philosophers who had provided prescriptions that were inimical to the requirement to maintain certain socially cohesive practices: the Epicureans, with their doctrines of the rule of chance in human affairs and pleasure as the guide to individual activity; the Stoics, with their demand for ways of life so harsh as to discourage people from trying to live good lives; and even Plato, with his suggestion that the women of a nation should be held in common, a suggestion which Vico takes to be destructive of the conditions for the education of children within institutionalised family life necessary for social and cultural development.

Nevertheless, it would seem that Vico has little else to say about many of the problems with which political philosophy, including that of some of his chosen opponents, has traditionally been concerned. Indeed, the fact that he does not at this point produce any substantive prescriptions either of a moral nature or about the traditional question of the nature of