



## **Vico's Doctrines**

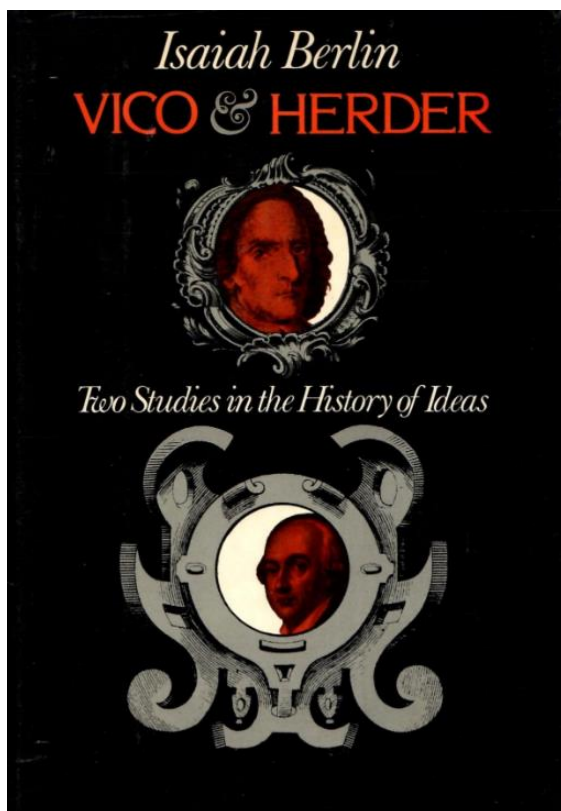
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## Vico's Doctrines

*History Today* 26 no. 12 (December 1976), 829–30



*The Viking edition of Vico and Herder (New York, 1977)*

TO THE EDITORS, *HISTORY TODAY*

22 October 1976

Headington, Oxford

Gentlemen,

Reviewers may not be obliged to expose error, but they should at least not add to it. Miss Joanna Hodge, in her review of my book on *Vico and Herder* in your October issue,<sup>1</sup> chides me for my inadequate treatment of what she correctly describes as an important doctrine of Vico – the distinction between *scienza* and

<sup>1</sup> 'Vico and History', *History Today* 26 no. 10 (October 1976), 685–6.

## VICO'S DOCTRINES

*coscienza*. Unfortunately, Miss Hodge's description of this distinction is wildly mistaken. She speaks of 'the distinction between "*scienza*", the systematic knowledge of the causes of attitudes, beliefs and actions, and "*coscienza*", the unreflective participation in such attitudes'. *Coscienza* in Vico is not this at all. The distinction is between *scienza*, the realm of 'philosophy' concerned with universal laws, as conceived from Aristotle to Descartes, the aim of which is *verum*, incontrovertible truths; and, as against that, the realm of human activities governed by human choices – topics dealt with by lawyers, grammarians, historians, scholars of every kind, studies of man, not of nature, which men can understand because they create them – this is the Sphere of *coscienza*, which aims at *certum* – certainty, which is distinguished from true knowledge, and is anything but unreflective; it is, indeed, the province of knowledge of which Vico himself was a student. Miss Hodge goes on to say that Vico wished 'to create an understanding of historical events more complete than that available to their agents'. This compounds her blunder; there is nothing in Vico's text to indicate that, in his view, retrospective knowledge is necessarily more complete than that open to the agents themselves: his doctrine would collapse if (as Miss Hodge seems to suppose) men could fully understand the reasons for their own actions only retrospectively or by observing others.<sup>2</sup>

Yours sincerely,  
Isaiah Berlin

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<sup>2</sup> In the original typescript the letter continues: 'Even if your reviewer is unacquainted with the text of Vico himself, even in translation, there now exists a large, clearly written and comprehensive literature in English on virtually every aspect of Vico's thought: an hour or two in the British Museum Reading Room or the London Library would have saved your reviewer from so crude a distortion of a, by now, very well known doctrine. 'Ignorance', as Karl Marx once remarked, 'has never yet helped anyone' [P. V. Annenkov, 'Zamechatel'noe desyatiletie' (1880), *Literaturnye vospominaniya* (Moscow, 1960), chapter 31, 304; P. V. Annenkov, *The Extraordinary Decade: Literary Memoirs*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel, trans. Irwin R. Titunik (Ann Arbor, 1968), 170]. Miss Hodge evidently needs to do a good deal more homework before she sets up to enlighten your readers.