

Cognitive Science, Vichian Semiotics, and the Learning Paradox of the *Meno*: Or What is a Sign a Sign Of?

Robert E. Haskell

*University of New England*¹

While I am not a semiotician or Vichian scholar, through the years my work on metaphorical cognition and analogical reasoning has taken me into both semiotics and the Italian philosopher and rhetorician Giambattista Vico's (see Haskell, 1978, 1985, 1987b, 1993) seminal work, especially when I have been confronted with epistemological concerns. More recently, in returning to an early interest in transfer of knowledge, I have been led to a problem space involving the *origin* of new knowledge. I will re-enter this problem space through Vico's (1948) work.

There has been a rediscovery of Giambattista Vico's (1668-1744) work and its significance to both philosophy and psychology. In the U.S., this renaissance has largely been due to the work of Giorgio Tagliacozzo (1969), Director of the *Institute of Vico Studies* in New York City and more recently carried on by Donald Verene through the *New Vico Studies* at Emory University, and more recently extended by Marcel Danesi, Director of Program in Semiotics at the University of Toronto.

Like scientific psychology, Vico's philosophy is grounded in an empirical data base. Unlike psychology, however, his data were the ancient fables, myths, and Homeric epic poetry of early history; his method was a psycholinguistic analysis of that vast body of data. He saw in the data a series of cognitive, structural, and linguistic transformations extending through time, the assumption being that the developmental changes he observed in the surface linguistic processes of that body of data were indices of changing psychological functions. Vico's method, however, was not entirely unlike that of many behavioral scientists and linguists today in their analysis of verbal protocols (e.g., Levi-Strauss, 1963, 1966; Thorndyke, 1977). Indeed, there has been an increasing number of papers written on how Vico anticipated not only