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# GIAMBATTISTA VICO

(1668-1744)

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## The inaugural discourses

Vico was born in Naples on 23 June 1668, the son of Antonio Vico (1638-1706), a bookseller, and Candida Masullo (1633-99). He completed his elementary and secondary education at the Jesuit School. An intellectual conception common to many young men in the upper classes attending Jesuit schools during the eighteenth century marked the form and, in part, the content of Vico's later meditations. The images and metaphors in his writings are taken from a biblical and classical repertoire. Vico's Jesuit education led to the acquisition of an expressive vocabulary that he used to communicate new ideas about the concept and practice of education.

After finishing his studies in 'literature' and completing a specialization in 'rhetoric', he was appointed Professor of Rhetoric at the Royal University of Naples. On 18 October 1699, at the age of 31, Vico gave the first of his 'Inaugural Discourses'. Following the tradition of contemporary Italian universities, a lecture opened the academic year and clarified certain educational intentions of the teacher. From 1699 to 1706 Vico gave these *Orazioni Inaugurali* [Inaugural Discourses] which were collected and published in a volume ending with a 'Final Dissertation'. This work is the fruit of the first phase of Vico's thought.

The 'Inaugural Discourses' are arranged around four principal themes. The first relates to the 'aims of the appropriate study of human nature', and takes up the first three 'Inaugural Discourses'. The educator, wrote Vico, must be familiar with the natural predisposition of the human soul and must impel the student to develop this familiarity as well. The purpose of this study is to identify the path that leads from knowledge to wisdom. In the first 'Inaugural Discourse,' the educator invited the student to 'always cultivate the divine force of the mind'. Vico did not distance himself from the familiar themes of his Jesuit education; however, the creative power of the human mind was also important and was one of the fixed points of classical philosophy.

In the second 'Inaugural Discourse,' Vico introduced the themes of virtue and wisdom. These must 'adorn the human soul' and transform learning, which is sterile and rudimentary, into knowledge. The latter is a common goal towards which every teacher and student must aim. The establishment of a communion of ends is fundamental to an education system. Vico added in the third 'Inaugural Discourse' that this complicity between master and disciple 'dispels simulated and useless learning'.

These words elevate Vico from a simple repeater of common formulas to an original thinker. He was concerned with transmitting knowledge through the teaching of rhetoric, but he also wanted to start a movement of autonomous self-development in the student. The latter must rediscover his soul himself, and must seek the connection between human nature and the Divine. The study of the classics and their expressive formulas becomes a means of intellectual development and not an end in itself.

The second principle theme of the 'Inaugural Discourses' concerns the political goals of study. The adjective 'political' recalls the etymological significance of the term. The student must

learn to aim towards the good of the *polis* or the city-state. In the fourth 'Inaugural Discourse', Vico underlined the importance of learning guided by 'the common good of the citizens'. The civic feeling of belonging to a community must be stimulated in the student. That which the disciple learns must help all his fellow citizens and all humanity. The subject of the fifth 'Inaugural Discourse' was, precisely, the growth 'with literature, of the glory of arms'. Like all men of his time, Vico was concerned with war and the fight for territorial domination. He lived at a time when reality was violence and he sought to act upon it. His students were the men who would assume the highest positions in the state. Vico wanted to make them understand that the true sign of distinction of a given people resides within its culture and not within the glory of its weapons.

The third theme of the 'Inaugural Discourses' concerns the Christian goals of learning. (The adjective Christian is used in the etymological sense.) This is developed in the sixth 'Inaugural Discourse'. Vico began by observing the corruption of human nature, and the necessity of correcting it in order to help the 'human community' as much as possible. Every man must act to improve himself in order to help the community of men to which he belongs. The classical philosophical theme of élitism in the 'Republic of Letters' of an uncultured people was present in Vico's thought. The students whom he taught would be the future leaders of the state, directing a shared evolution and development. The educator and student must be aware of the importance of their own roles and the worth of their education.

The last theme, the fourth, is developed primarily in the 'Final Dissertation' and concerns the comparison between the study methods of the ancients and that of Vico's time. The educator sought to investigate 'in what way one must avoid the disadvantages of our method of study as compared to that of the ancients, so that ours may become more correct and better than theirs'. The 'ancients' to whom Vico was referring are Seneca, Cicero and Grotius. Their method of study gave preference to a parallel research on the human soul and the examination of philosophy, literature, rhetoric and jurisprudence. Grotius, in particular, being a wise man and a great judge, was able to reconcile the different influences deriving from the law and from collective behavior in order to bring the two together as close as possible. Vico followed this line of teaching. To arrive at a total comprehension of human nature, social behavior, and the law, one must, according to Vico, have an interdisciplinary approach. In fact, Vico himself had studied mathematics because it was indispensable to the study of the rules of rhetoric.

## **The new science**

The *Lettere* [Letters], published posthumously, are a good example of this interdisciplinary approach and testify to a constant effort to accomplish it through practical learning. This correspondence, varied in tone and voice, is made up of a series of disconnected reflections by the educator on teaching and intellectual formation. However, they do not represent a true or complete education system. An attempt to formulate a complete method of knowledge, and how to transmit it, was the reason behind the compilation of *La Scienza Nuova* [The New Science]. This work was finished in 1725.

*La Scienza Nuova* is composed of five books and a conclusion. The entire work is absorbed with comparisons: between contemporary study methods and those of the ancients; with the differences between historical periods; and with research on the cultural characteristics of each period in human evolution.

The fourth volume represents the culmination of Vico's systematic thought. In it are distinguished three different ages, each corresponding to three different stages of nature, manners, law and government: the ages of (a) the Gods; (b) Heroes; and (c) Man. 'The nature of Man is intelligent and his manners are modest, full of the feeling of civic duty.' Natural law is interpreted by the jurisprudence dictated by an absolute state. The only means of improving the life of every individual is through learning and culture.

Vico's ideal is the attainment of an 'eternal natural Republic ordered by Divine Providence'. This concept is taken from Plato's *Republic*, in which it is written that 'good and honest men are the supreme lords: the true natural aristocracy'. This natural aristocracy is an aristocracy of letters and culture. In order to achieve it and to overcome the qualitative distance between the ancients and contemporaries, the system of teaching and education must be changed. The change must come about through interdisciplinary measures in the sciences. These were ordered by Vico in the fourth volume of *The New Science* and are visually represented by the Tree of Knowledge. In it the human sciences and the exact sciences are integrated in the education of the 'lords of the natural aristocracy' to which the educator wishes to refer in his daily teaching. Vico returned to this theme of interdisciplinary approaches in other works.

In his *Autobiografia di Giambattista Vico scritta da lui stesso* [Autobiography of Giambattista Vico], he declared that he was happy to have continued his studies in mathematics up to the fifth theorem of Euclid. This, in fact, facilitated his comprehension of a geometric method at the origin of numerous rhetorical arguments put forward by the ancient philosophers. This systemizing, interpretation and use of the sciences is at the source of different interpretations of Vico's thoughts that diverge from the three accredited schools.

The 'Inaugural Discourses' and 'The New Science' are Vico's most important works with regard to understanding his education system. However, this consideration does not diminish the merits of other works by the same author. The *Institutiones Oratoriae* [Instructions to Orators], the *De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Ratione* [On the Study Methods of Our Time] and the *De Antiquissima Italarum sapientia* [On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians] have their own importance in the field of rhetorical study. These, in any event, remain marginal to the study of aspects of a method of teaching and education. Vico was both a philosopher and a rhetorician. This double merit re-emerged with force at the time of his death.

He died in Naples, during the night of 22/23 January 1744. A strange tale has been handed down through the years regarding the treatment of his corpse during the days directly following his death.

Vico was a member of the brotherhood of Santa Sophia, a practice that was typical in the southern regions of Italy at that time. This devotional association satisfied the Christian needs of men belonging to the highest social classes. The members guaranteed each other reciprocal assistance in the event of sickness, and at the time of their death they could count on the intervention of the brotherhood in ceremonial practices. Vico was also a member of the Royal University of Naples and, on the morning of 23 January, his professorial colleagues came, according to procedure, to adorn the house and coffin of Vico for the funeral ceremony. A little later, the Brothers of Santa Sophia arrived to give the necessary funeral homage to an important member of their devotional congregation. A confrontation between the members of the two groups, each of which claimed exclusive rights to the adornment procedure and to the funeral ceremony, degenerated. There was a violent quarrel, and both groups abandoned the coffin and the house without any adornment or any other form of consecration.

This short account is not simply a curious fact that embellishes Vico's life and stimulates the reader's interest in his work: it is in itself worthy of attention. Such a reference is intended to reinsert Vico in his own time, amid the controversies for social prestige and political power among his contemporaries. The anecdote may also explain the little immediate success that the educator's theses enjoyed.

An academic, but also a philosopher capable of independent thought, Vico was considered an innovator by his contemporaries and, as such, a dangerous person. After his death he was forgotten, and had to await the beginning of the nineteenth century to be rediscovered. In that new epoch, rich in unexpected changes, the education system of Giambattista Vico resurfaced as a sound method for developing knowledge.

## The theory and practice of knowledge

The first 'Inaugural Discourse' examines the Greek saying inscribed on the temple of the Oracle of Delphi: 'Know thyself'. This invitation to know one's own soul was found in the thoughts of certain philosophers of antiquity, among them Plato, Seneca and Cicero. Vico's approach, however, is distinguished from that of these classical authors by its immediate and practical entry within the framework of an educational method. 'Knowledge of oneself,' said Giambattista Vico, 'is for everyone the highest encouragement to bring rapidly to a conclusion the study of the entire cycle of learning'. The educator adds that 'the body is a container, or, so to speak, a receptacle of the soul.' All that we do is done, in reality, from the soul. The capabilities of the soul are unimaginable; to know it perfectly is a divine undertaking, and it is only to God that its creation can be attributed. Through application and study we can seek to discover the potential of our soul and attempt to exploit it in order to examine our own consciousness.

At the moment of his entry into the academic world, Vico confronted one of the most important themes of philosophical and educational thought. The subject of the human soul, its characteristics and its capacity for total consciousness permitted him to participate in a tradition of thought and of teaching that does not strictly concern rhetoric. This is the first sign of the independence of judgement and of the autonomous educational method that characterized Vico's entire life.

Reference to the thought of the Classical period—Plato, Seneca, Cicero and Grotius—was inevitable. But the inevitable constant confrontation with the philosophies and systems of learning and education created and adopted by the greatest thinkers of Greece and Rome was not solely due to an intellectual debt toward them on the part of Vico. He knew that he would be accepted by his contemporaries only through the use of explicative parameters and classical images known to the world of philosophy and rhetoric.

In exposing his positions on teaching and education, Vico took up another theme dear to Seneca and Cicero: that of stupidity. 'No enemy is more dangerous and more adverse than is the fool to himself.' Human nature is senseless and completely incoherent to its own interests, wrote Giambattista Vico. Consequently, the interest and the primary aim for every man must be to achieve a balance between his own nature and his own actions, between theory and action. The method of obtaining this end is also a law that God gave to mankind: wisdom.

The influence of Seneca is particularly strong. 'If we turn our soul to the study of Wisdom, we follow Nature; if instead we pass from Wisdom to Stupidity, we renounce our nature and work against the Law whose statutes dictate punishments so ready and severe that the pain is formed and applied in the same instant.' As in Seneca, the soul's capacity to add to true knowledge, to wisdom, allays the risks of learning even to oneself. The essence of true learning lies in modesty.

'If we aspire to true and sound learning, substantial and not vain,' Vico confirmed, 'it is first necessary that all perfidy be far from the Republic of Letters'. The perfidy of which the educator is speaking comes from the presumption of knowledge, not from wisdom. The student must learn rules and ideas, but must be able to go beyond the simple accumulation of names and dates, of sterile book learning. He must think of his cultural heritage, and use it well for the collective good. He must be a member of the Republic of Letters, of a cultural and political élite that knows how to guide the community of man and thus to improve itself. The 'Republic' of Vico is formed of men who have grasped the methods of knowledge and of wisdom. These men distinguish themselves from the rest of humanity, but do not remove themselves from it. This is the major difference between the Republic of Letters of Plato and that of Vico. The Greek philosopher identifies a separate reality, much like an élite whose task is to guide ignorant people incapable of elevating themselves. The eighteenth-century educator described a distinct group in whom knowledge will come to maturity, but this group is in favor of diffusing its knowledge among all men.

The theme of the elevation of humankind was linked with the Patristics. The Fathers of the Church maintained the importance of learning as the true utility of study. This is not Adam's illicit desire for knowledge for which he was punished and deprived of true wisdom, but is the humility of the soul. 'Culture distinguishes the wise man from the common man,' said Vico. 'Neither the former nor the latter knows. But the common man believes he knows, while the wise man knows he does not know.'

Learning and knowledge are not true and complete if they ignore consideration of others. 'If someone wishes to obtain from the study of literature the greatest advantage, associated with personal prestige, he learns while keeping an eye on the good of the state, that is, the common good of one's fellow citizens.' The familiar term of the Patristics, that of a brotherhood of fellow Christians, is associated in the thought of Vico with that of a community of men governed by the law of the state. Like every thinker and scholar of his time, the eighteenth-century educator did not ignore the social and political forces of an absolute state. The students of the university will be the future leaders of that institution and it is to these men that a new concept of knowledge must be communicated. Rhetoric becomes, then, a means rather than not an end to knowledge. Vico differentiated himself from his predecessors and distanced himself from a large part of the teaching body of his time, which was still bound to a mediaeval interpretation of teaching.

The educator is aware of the social origins and the career aspirations of his students. He must succeed in making these future military and political men accept his concept of education and his method of knowledge, using the means offered by rhetoric. Vico devoted the fifth 'Inaugural Discourse' to explaining the power of classical instruction in the education of great philosophers and great generals. 'States reached the summit of military power,' he claimed, 'and the power of domination only when Literature flowered the most.' Literature acts directly on the sensibility of the soul, together they form the knowledge and humility of wisdom.

The best explanation of this tie between soul, thought and language was offered by Vico in the last 'Inaugural Discourse'. 'Every man,' he says, 'is composed of a soul, thought and language.' All humankind has a natural predisposition towards knowledge. This inclination must be individualized by the educator, a person with the task of making his student discover it. The best educational method is that based on interdisciplinary approaches. 'An awareness of the corruption of human nature is a motive to learn the entire cycle of the liberal arts and sciences,' wrote Vico, 'and suggests to us the exact method, coherent and easy, to study when one dedicates one's self to study.' With these words it seems that the educator is looking for the complicity of the student, a complicity that is a fellowship of spirit, of objectives and of language.

The same desire for clarity, in himself and in others, and of complicity permeates another work of Giambattista Vico: his autobiography. In this work one feels the desire to gather among all men the learning of a common cultural past and to use it to foster cultural growth among contemporaries that cannot ignore the knowledge that everyone must have both his own soul and a soul in common with his kind.

When Vico described his personal life and, above all, his intellectual life, he remembered and reflected upon his own experience, and suggested a general frame of education as he intended it to be. His great vexation, and the point of honor of his research and of his teaching, resided in his constant comparison of the educational method of his contemporaries with that of the ancients. Every time he was able to confirm that the method of the ancients was better than that of his contemporaries, it was as if he was joining a struggle to continue to improve the modern system of education, with the goal of aiding the intellectual growth of his contemporaries.

This is the central problem of *The New Science*. Vico was interested in his time, in the social and legal ordering of the human community and the conditions that make this possible. It is no coincidence that three of the four authors constantly cited by the educator had extraordinary political and legal knowledge. These include Plato, with reference to the *Republic*, and Tacitus and Grotius. The latter is a philosopher of natural law and of a peaceful life for humanity.

Sensitivity of language, as a way of communication and of transmission of knowledge, pervades all of Vico's work. It is through language that one can easily arrive at full knowledge of the components of the human sciences.

Interdisciplinary approaches to education, constantly proclaimed in *The New Science*, sets Vico apart between these extraordinary forerunners in the field of knowledge and the tutelary deity of Italian philosophy, which was often not taken into consideration by his contemporaries. He did not propose a universal system of knowledge that can be applied with pre-established rules and mechanisms. His method, based on the complicity between teacher and student, is not always easy to apply. Exploiting each student's aptitude and natural tendency perplexed his own students upon arrival from a Jesuit school and caused many of them to abandon him. What is not understood seems odd, and what seemed odd in Vico's time was considered dangerous.

He constantly tried to keep within the fundamental rules of the Jesuitical type of explanation. The title of the dissertation solemnly held at the Royal University of Naples on 18 October 1708, 'Studiorum Ratio' [The Order of Study], recalls the *Ratio atque Institutio Studiorum* [Reason and the Establishment of Studies] of the Jesuits. The correct translation of the Latin word *ratio* is not 'method', as is commonly used, but rather 'order'. The word 'method' is only used in the text to indicate the geometrical method.

Keeping in mind Plato, Tacitus, Grotius and Bacon, the latter of whom wrote *De Augmentis Scientiarum* [On the Expansion of Science], Vico confirmed the opinion that to bring human wisdom to perfection, new arts and new sciences are necessary. In the field of education, this is the winning argument of the contemporaries over the ancients. It is true, said Vico, that the advantages and disadvantages of the two methods have to be considered, but the inclusion of the study of new sciences and arts would eventually bring the system advocated by his contemporaries to be superior to the method of the ancients.

We owe our advantages, said Vico, to the 'instruments of the sciences: critical analysis, the geometrical method, the microscope, the university, and the goal of the studies,' while our disadvantages continue to stem from 'the eloquence that prevents and hinders the arts'. Vico's innovative method is most evident and is perfected in the fourth volume of *The New Science*. In this text, the educator traced the history of the three stages that he linked to the three different types of knowledge. Human beings are excluded from direct knowledge possessed by the 'Gods', and from the indirect or partial knowledge of the 'Heroes'. Humans must find a way to reach wisdom. In the Tree of Wisdom, all the sciences are well ordered and the basic principles of each are indispensable to reach full knowledge. The educator must assist the student, but in so doing he must favor the latter's natural predisposition towards knowledge. The course may be difficult; those who reach the end will enter and form part of a 'Republic' of wise men ready to become educational guides. Vico's aim was to try and form individuals' knowledge of themselves. The characteristics of a modern lawful state can only be achieved through knowledge and study. This study must include a geometrical method allowing us to surpass the knowledge of the 'Classics'.

The fundamental interdisciplinarity of Vico's educational method, his attention to comparing the ancients with his contemporaries, and his work as Professor of Rhetoric, are all important elements that have contributed to the interpretation of his thought. He has been viewed, in different epochs, as a philosopher, a historian and a rhetorician. Only during the last fifty years have researchers shown some interest in Vico as an educator or rather as a promoter of new methods for reaching the full knowledge of the human mind and of science.

## **Interpretative schools of Vico's thought**

In 1978, from 21 to 25 August, the town of Venice held an important congress on Vico and on the interpretation of his thought. From this meeting emerged three major interpretative schools. Is Vico a rhetorician, a philosopher or an educator?

The Italo-Neapolitan trend is mainly interested in the rhetorical aspect, and in the literary and juridical works of the author. From the interpretation of Croce and Nicolini presented in a research study, Vico is seen as a philologist, a scholar and a historian. The object of this school is to situate Vico in his intellectual and cultural sphere at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and to find the similarities and contradictions with the Jesuitical tradition. In particular, two authors, Piovani and Giarrizzo, took up again the rich documentary research carried out by the neo-idealists on some themes of Vico's meditation. Research by Berlin (1976), based on the attitude towards Vico's thought in the texts of his contemporaries, reduces the romantic image of the educator to that of a Robinson Crusoe and a little-appreciated prophet.

At the source of the Italo-Neapolitan interpretative stream is the division of the educator's production into different parts, and a predilection for rhetorical and philological works. Piovani says that the moment has not yet come to work on an entire interpretation of Vico. It is necessary to integrate a general analysis with specific studies.

During the 1960s there was a vast controversy between a current that supported the cultural backwardness of Vico and another that saw him ready to listen to the major thinkers of his time. These themes are the starting point for the German school that stresses the relation between this author and his era on the one hand, and, on the other, his anti-Cartesianism. Vico underlines the method of the human sciences and confronts it with that of the natural sciences. Lowith and Kessler devote much of their work to a study of this. The former begins by drawing a series of parallels between Vico and Hegel and Vico and Marx that enriches the vast bibliography on the educator at a monographic and mono-thematic level.

The American school, well represented by Verene (1976), tends to adapt these two aspects. This interpretative current is partly influenced by the strong presence of Tagliacozzo (1983) and his continuous connections with the Italo-Neapolitan school. This way of thinking, while concentrating on the connected aspect of Vico's education system, also maintains numerous historical and ideological procedures between the two above-named schools.

The American school represents one that has concentrated in the best way—that is, on a single theme instead of on the entire work of the educator—and has used different types of interpretative sources to give life to the description of some ideas about Vico's education system. The principal object of study is represented by the 'Tree of Knowledge' and by the attention to interdisciplinary learning. The American current does not succeed in identifying Vico's education system, in spite of its formulation in the works projected, expressed and realized by Vico. Vico's ideas on education are set forth in a lifetime of research on improved knowledge, yet this never becomes a separate method, independent and applicable in practice.

Perhaps some will object that one reason why the American school never really considered the idea of one of Vico's education systems is because of the strong presence of Tagliacozzo. Keeping in mind the philological needs of the Italo-Neapolitan school where he was trained, Tagliacozzo also incorporates the cultural and educational aspect present in Vico. The metaphor of the 'Tree of Knowledge', based on the distinction of three epochs and of the co-ordination of the human and exact sciences, has been adopted on the basis of an interpretation of Vico's education system. This 'Tree' supports the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach that was felt mainly at the beginning of our century.

Vico is not simply an inveterate opponent of the Cartesian method. He is the real creator of an education and of a complete cultural formation that, following the natural predisposition of each student, can create a group of men able to carry out their roles in society. The method of modern studies can be improved in this way so that it becomes better than the ancient one. Both are composed of warriors and political men. In the second, the philosophers have a major power of influence and counsel on politics and policy, due to their knowledge; also, the philosophers are a different category. The intellectuals are excluded from the management of power. Where and when this power is assigned to them because of their attire, it is only the tool of power and not its end.

This is the real innovation of Giambattista Vico. Is it a system or can it be considered one? It all depends on the meaning that is given to this word. It is important not to think of a system as a frame for fixing realities, because Vico's ideas were in constant evolution. They were forever being studied and re-thought by Vico himself during his entire life up to the writing of the *Scienza Nuova Seconda* [Second New Science], a posthumous publication.

During the nineteenth century, Vico was considered an important innovator, and there was a great deal of argument about him, mainly because his theories were open-ended, his meditations were not a system, and because his education and his works constantly recalled his character as a literary man, rhetorician, historian, philosopher and educator. If Vico had not been all of these, how could he have produced such reflection on education? He was a man of his time. It is Vico himself who expressed this in his 'Letters' and in his autobiography.

Labels cannot apply to a person who had such a rich human and cultural value.

#### Note

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