



VICO'S VISION OF EDUCATION: RESTORING THE IMAGO DEI

● *By Patrick Halbrook* ●

The first warning bells against overemphasizing STEM education sounded not in recent years, but over three centuries ago. In 1709, the Italian scholar Giambattista Vico lamented, “The greatest drawback of our educational methods is that we pay an excessive amount of attention to the natural sciences.”¹ By neglecting subjects like ethics, philosophy, and rhetoric, “our young men . . . are unable to engage in the life of the community, to conduct themselves with sufficient wisdom and prudence; nor can they infuse into their speech a familiarity with human psychology or permeate their utterances with passion.” School had become an institution for training technicians, not cultivating human beings.

If this sounds like a familiar problem, it may be because it is so easy to misconstrue the purpose of schooling. What is education for? Preparing for a career? Socializing children? Developing critical thinking skills? Pursuing self-fulfillment? The list goes on, with each answer partly correct yet also deficient in itself.

1. From Giambattista Vico's *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, translated by Elio Gianturco. For a good introduction to Vico, see the selections featured in *The Great Tradition: Classic Readings on What It Means to Be an Educated Human Being*, edited by Richard M. Gamble.



To pursue this question in a more imaginative way, we could ask what fundamental problem a school exists to solve. If you go to a hospital because you have a broken arm, check into a hotel because you need a room for the night, and get a table at a restaurant because you're hungry, then what need prompts you to send your child to school? What deficiency, dilemma, or difficulty exists within the child which must be addressed and resolved?

One of the best answers—and a favorite among classical Christian educators—was penned by John Milton. Pointing us back to the earliest chapters of the book of Genesis, he wrote in *Of Education*:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.

If Milton was right, then the purpose of education is synonymous with the purpose of life itself: sanctification. Education is a moral and spiritual task which, as an application of the gospel (but never its replacement), aligns itself with the ways that God is at work in the world to reverse the effects of the Fall by reconciling us to himself and making all things new. Like the men of Nehemiah's day who, brick by brick, reconstructed the razed walls of Jerusalem, educators—from kindergarten teachers to graduate school professors—engage in the lofty project of repairing the ruins in which each of us is born.

What within Us Must Be Repaired?

To help us better understand the nature of our rebuilding project, Giambattista Vico—our eighteenth-century critic of STEM—can help guide the way. Vico served as professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples during a crucial period of European history. In an age enthralled by Cartesian science, secular Enlightenment thought, and the technological, institutional, and moral progress these two inno-

ventions promised to deliver, Vico labored to rehabilitate a humanities-driven worldview that preserved the role of the imagination, the necessity of theological wisdom, and the liberal arts tradition that had shaped the best of Western thought for millennia.

Vico's key works on education, *On Humanistic Education* and *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, were originally delivered as inaugural orations between 1699 and 1709. In his sixth oration, "On the Proper Order of Studies," he, like Milton, takes us back to Genesis on a quest to understand the true aims of education.

Vico begins by considering human nature—what it is that makes us unique among all of God's creatures. We have been endowed with three qualities which we alone share with our Creator: "mind, spirit, and capacity for language." These qualities enable us to understand the world and how to live in it, allowing us to pursue fellowship with God and with each other. Tragically, they have become distorted by the effects of sin, so "man is thoroughly corrupted, first by the inadequacy of language, then by a mind cluttered with opinions, and finally a spirit polluted by vice."¹

Language, mind, and spirit: their corruption and need for restoration form Vico's paradigm for education. But first, he must more fully examine the effects of the Fall.

Corruption of Language

God created us with the gift of language so we could understand and relate to each other. The fragmentation of languages, a consequence of our sin at Babel, hindered this ability. Even within our own native languages, communicating is not easy. Born to imitate the glory of a God who spoke the world into existence, our capacity for language seems perpetually stunted by ineffective development:

Since man's language in almost all situations is inadequate, it does not come to the aid of the mind and even fails it when the mind seeks its help in expressing itself. Because speech is awkward and uncultivated, it corrupts the meaning

1. From "On the Proper Order of Studies" in Vico's *On Humanistic Education: Six Inaugural Orations*, 1699–1707, translated by Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee. The quotes that follow also come from this oration.

of the mind with words that are without merit. With words that are obscure, it betrays it, or with words that are ambiguous what we say is misunderstood or stumbles over itself by the very words which are spoken.

Our struggle to communicate effectively is, therefore, the first problem that education must address. The remedy is to teach students to read and write well, to translate foreign languages, and to speak clearly, articulately, and graciously. An education which seeks to restore our God-given potential will equip us anew in the skillful use of language.

Corruption of the Mind

Divided and confused from our inability to communicate, our situation is made even worse by disagreement, misinformation, and fallacious thinking:

To these deficiencies of language are added those of the mind. Dullness constantly grips the mind. False images of things toy with it and very often deceive it. Rash judgments cause the mind to form hasty conclusions. Faulty reasoning lays hold of it, and finally this confusion of things baffles and bewilders it.

Since the serpent deceived Eve, erroneous ideas have filled us with false perceptions of the world. Not understanding what the world is really like, we struggle to live in it with wisdom; not being able to agree with each other about what is true or false, we fight over mere opinions. A second problem education must address, therefore, is our lack of knowledge. An effective education will help us to overcome our ignorance by training us to observe and understand the world rightly, teaching us to value the pursuit of truth and to follow wherever it may lead.

Corruption of the Soul

The Fall's most destructive effect is, of course, on our souls. In some cases our interpersonal and social conflicts stem from misunderstanding or honest disagreement; in many others, the corruption in our own hearts is to blame:

How much more grave are the shortcomings of the soul which are churned up by every storm and flux of the passions more turbulent than those of the straits! Thus it burns with desire and trembles in fear! It becomes dissipated in pleasures and is given to weakness in pain! It desires all things but never finds delight in any choice! . . . It is constantly unhappy with itself, always running away from itself and yet seeking itself! Moreover, self-love, as its own tormentor, makes use of these wicked plagues and tortures.

The soul cannot be saved through education. That is a task for the gospel. But education can become an extension of Christian discipleship, aiming to renew not only the mind and tongue but also the heart. This moral dimension of education is the one most frequently neglected—yet if we are attentive to the story in Genesis, we will realize that it may be the most vital.

Education's Right Aims

Only when we have properly diagnosed how nature has been corrupted can we understand the needed remedy:

The punishments for corrupted human nature [are] the inadequacy of language, the opinions of the mind, and the passions of the soul. Therefore, the remedies are eloquence, knowledge, and virtue. These three are like the three points around which all the orb of the arts and sciences encircles. All wisdom is contained in these three most excellent things—to know with certainty, to act rightly, and to speak with dignity. Such a man as that would never be ashamed of his errors, never repentant for having acted viciously, never regretful of having spoken without propriety and decorum.

Eloquence, knowledge, and virtue: these must be the aims of education because they are the remedies we need most. We need schools that instruct us in eloquence, giving us the ability to read, listen, and speak rightly; that equip and motivate us toward the

pursuit of truth; and that train us to know, desire, and do good. Though education cannot save us, it can certainly *sanctify* us through the restoration of our God-given human nature. Of all the possible goals of education, what could be more important?

The Distractions of Our Own Day (and Vico's)

Vico's paradigm of education exposes the shortcomings of schooling that excessively prioritizes the wrong subjects. In Vico's day, the scientific revolution had shifted the curriculum toward the sciences and away from the humanities. Valuable as the study of science may be—and Vico had no intention of denigrating it, recognizing it as a valuable component of human knowledge—when cut off from eloquence and virtue, it could not fully address our predicament as human beings. Education with an excessive focus on science supposes that our problem as human beings is a lack of technology. And while technology may further our ability to subdue the earth, it fails to address the weaknesses of the human heart.

Another mistake is to exalt eloquence apart from knowledge and virtue. It would be better to receive no education at all than to spend years in school only to become an excellent sophist. True eloquence, according to Vico, is essentially “wisdom, ornately and copiously delivered in words appropriate to the common opinion of mankind.”²² His emphasis on virtue echoes Quintilian, whose true orator was “a good man speaking well.” A teacher who trains students in the skillful use of language cannot neglect what words will be used *for*.

In short, we can imagine Vico's vision of education as a three-legged stool, with the three supports of eloquence, knowledge, and virtue bearing up the wisdom that enables individuals and societies to flourish. Remove one, and the others will not stand for long.

A Lofty Aim

As a high school teacher, I love to read Vico with my students and ask them to consider each of their classes through the lens of his trifold paradigm. Which studies cultivate eloquence by improving their ability to communicate? Which fill them with knowledge and

equip them with skills to attain even more? Which encourage them in virtue?

We place their classes—history, rhetoric, pre-calculus, Spanish, and others—in a Venn diagram of three circles, considering the ways that many classes cultivate more than one, or even all three aims. My students are surprised by the overlap. I challenge them to ask whether every one of their classes, rightly taught, might land in the center. A good literature class, for instance, can help students to grow in their reading, writing, and conversation skills, impart knowledge about the lives and historical contexts of authors, and stir students to personally grapple with the moral choices made by a novel's characters.

Other classes likewise have the potential to train students in much more than students first assume. If the circle of virtue includes intellectual virtues like carefulness, patience, and humility, then every class is a vital training ground for the soul. As Simone Weil observed in “Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God,” to cultivate the discipline of attentiveness is to prepare students for the spiritual practices of prayer and meditation.

Ultimately, to educate for eloquence, knowledge, and virtue—“to repair the ruins of our first parents,” in Milton's phrase—is to pursue an education in the imitation of Christ. The God who spoke the cosmos into existence, who comes to us as the Word incarnate, is a God who has instilled within us the ability to think and to commune with each other and with him through the gift of language. The God who compels us to seek the truth wishes for us to know him as the Truth, transforming us by the renewing of our minds so we might truly know him, ourselves, and the world he made. And the God who teaches us to live virtuously, who not only loves but also is Love itself, calls us to know him and to imitate him, restoring to us the sanctity that was lost in Eden long ago.

To this end the *imago Dei* points us, and our schools deserve an aim no less lofty. ■

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2. *On the Study Methods of Our Time*.