



Giambattista Vico and the Pedagogy ~~

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Philosophy of Education

Giambattista Vico and the Pedagogy of 'Heroic Mind' in the Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT: Vico's concept of the Heroic Mind forms the pedagogical basis for his view of the liberal arts in university education. It is also the key to understanding his humanist critique of Cartesian epistemology. This essay studies Vico's Heroic Mind concept as revealed in his 1732 De mente heroica Oration, discusses the nature of Vico's challenge to Descartes' view of the human person and of knowledge, and points out the development of Vico's ideas on mind, education, and knowledge from his earlier works. Vico's writings not only offer a portrait of eighteenth century European intellectual and cultural thought, but also prophesy the change, disruption, and dehumanization that result from the exaggerated emphases on rationality as the end of all knowledge divorced from other physical, emotional, natural, or historical contingencies and from a neglect of the de mente heroica concept at the foundation of the humanistic world view. His understanding of the state of learning, wisdom, and culture in his own age as well as his exposure to the aversion of the Cartesian mathematical paradigm which discounted the Heroic Mind issues forth in an understanding of the forces driving modern technological society and the problems plaguing contemporary consciousness and life. He has influenced and inspired much modern thinking in sociology, politics, anthropology, language, pedagogy, literature, psychology, and even science. It is the concept of the historical and cultural evolution of the Heroic Mind which Vico passionately pursued in his monumentally creative *The New Science*.

On October 20, 1732 a distinguished Neapolitan Professor of Rhetoric and Eloquence, who had held the position of head of the faculty for over thirty-three years at the University of Naples, by the name of Giambattista Vico presented his annual Oration signalling the opening of the academic year. The Oration, entitled "On the Heroic

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Mind," was addressed directly to the entire student body in attendance at the prestigious Royal Academy of Naples. In his address Vico urges his "noble students . . . to bend your best efforts toward your studies . . . exert yourselves in your studies in order to manifest the heroic mind you possess . . ." (HM 229). Throughout his Oration Vico refers repeatedly to this concept of the heroic, near-divine nature of the mind as the measure of a truly liberal university education:

Do not breed within you any indolent wishes about learning dropping down from heaven into your bosoms while you slumber. Stir yourselves up with a productive desire for wisdom. By your increasing and undaunted labors, make trial of what you can do, put to the test how much you are capable of. Ply your gifts and energies in all possible directions. Stir your minds up, enkindle the divinity that fills you. If you take this course of action (poets came to it by nature, as it happens) you too will engender God-inspired marvels of your own, and surprise yourselves in the doing of it (HM 233).

Vico's concept of the Heroic Mind forms the pedagogical basis for his view of the liberal arts in a university education. It also is the key to understanding his humanist critique of Cartesian epistemology. This essay will offer a detailed study of Vico's Heroic Mind concept as revealed in his 1732 *De mente heroica* Oration, it will discuss the nature of Vico's challenge of Descartes' view of the human person and of knowledge, and it will point out the development of Vico's ideas on mind, education, and knowledge from his earlier works, namely the Six Humanistic Orations (1699-1707) and the *On the Study Methods* (1708-09).

In his 1732 address Vico defines the purpose of studies as not for the "gaining of riches" or "high office and influences" or even for the "love of learning itself" (HM 229). Vico asserts that it is "to manifest the heroic mind you possess and to lay foundations of learning and wisdom for the blessings of the race" (HM 230). Vico reminds the students that the human mind has divine origins and a near-divine nature which requires only educating through a pursuit of studies which is focused on the ultimate well-being of the whole human race. Vico cautions that self-improvement, self-advancement, self-glorification or other self-oriented goals are not the purpose of education, but rather its goals lie beyond and outside the self, instead being directed by and toward God and toward the betterment of the human race through the accomplishments of the monumental and outstanding. By paying tribute to the important officials in attendance at the event, Vico establishes the principle of exemplary behavior and the role of mentorship in modeling what indeed can be achieved by the Heroic Mind in advancing the communal well-being. In admonishing the students to respect, honor, and be humbled before these examples of heroic accomplishment and social dedication, Vico also alerts them not to think that true learning comes easily, as clearly pointed out in the passage cited earlier.

In the next part of the essay Vico explores the true meaning of a university education, The characteristics, requirements, and effects of a properly defined and pursued curriculum and learned instruction. A university education is defined as "every form of learning, the general or encyclopedic, the esoteric or acrobatic" (HM 233), the mastery of all branches of knowledge, reminded, of course, that according to Socrates the various disciplines equate with the various virtues. A university is rightly called "Sapientia," Wisdom, remembering as well Plato's definition of Wisdom as "purge, curative, completion of the inner man" (HM 233). A university education will treat, heal, and perfect one's better nature and the powers are reinvigorated, strengthened, and multiplied by the mental gymnastics carried on in the "public gymnasia," the name learned past author

s gave to universities. Learning must be real, not merely apparent, since the goal of Wisdom is not wealth, fame, or self-improvement, but the healing, restoring, and perfecting of the soul so that one can regain his "image and likeness of God" in mind and in soul. Next Vico discusses what constitutes wise and heroic knowledge and the intellectual attitude which will best advance the pursuit of knowledge. A university education is required to teach new discoveries, new truths revealed, and new efforts on established knowledge that are better focused. In doing so, Vico argues for the principle we now call academic freedom, that is, to teach the same or different disciplines employing a variety of proofs and methods. In order to ensure this freedom of knowledge, Vico admonishes the students not to swear loyalty to any professor or sectarian ideology, that they not become absorbed by any single period of human knowledge or single discipline which would obstruct what they should learn from all periods and disciplines and what they contribute to the sum of wisdom. He lists each of the university disciplines and specifies what errors one will overcome through its study:

Metaphysics trains the senses, Logic corrects false opinions, Ethics curbs corrupt desires, Rhetoric enhances speech which fails the mind and theme, Poetics reigns uncontrolled Imagination, Geometry limits innate errors, Physics rectifies ignorance of nature, while Languages rectify ignorance of nations, History ignorance of empires, and Poetry ignorance of the ideal types of men. Through the learned and scholarly cultivation of the human, natural, and eternal realms, the inherent godhead in man's mind can emerge.

Vico explores topics in this Oration which continue to hold our interest today, as, for instance, the issue of choice of authors, or canonicity, advising the students not to wear out their entire scholarly careers in reading second-rate authors, but to acquire the whole of knowledge through a study of the "best authors," those who are original archetypes, who provide true exemplifications of the Idea, For whoever sets up as his critics authors who have lasted throughout the ages cannot but produce works which will also be admired by subsequent generations (HM 241).

By seeking the unalloyed wisdom of these best authors, students will discover [to] which particular discipline you will apply yourself, search out your veiled and hidden capacities so that you may recognize your unknown and superior talents (HM 240-41).

For Vico, therefore, this is the grandeur of spirit, the sublime mastery, the beauty of human genius which marks the Heroic Mind. Vico's final plea, "Prove to be heroes by enriching the human race with further giant benefits" (HM 244).

For Vico the Heroic Mind was one that leaped beyond its capacity and its preparation. The Heroic Mind exhibited a dynamic, on-going process of holistic, integrated thought and imaginative fluency. This process dialogically unified the cognitive, or critical, analytical, and conceptual, with the creative, or making capacities of the human mind. As the ultimate, but ever-eluding goal of humanistic education, the Heroic Mind used knowledge in the quest for Wisdom, Sapientia, which Vico defines as a knowledge of the whole and how the parts participate in that whole. The Heroic Mind in its Wisdom dedicates its knowledge of the whole to the service of the human community in order to articulate and promote the *sensus communis*, the sense of shared, communal human experience.

For Vico, rational, reflective thought, as had been singularly advanced by Descartes in his *Method* (1637), was inextricably connected to intuitive, sensorial, contextual understanding and to imagination, aspects of the human experience Descartes had discounted. It was as in ignoring this connection of reason to imagination, of though

t to emotion that Vico believed Descartes has grossly erred. Fearing that education would eventually falter if Descartes' approach were followed, Vico was the first to challenge the hegemony of the Frenchman's error, an error which remains influential in Western sciences and humanities. Vico believed that meaningful human thought in the liberal arts synthesized both the rational and imaginative figuration of the world with an engaged, relational involvement in human and environmental reality. Reason detached from reality would breed brutality; imagination detached from reality would breed delusion. Formal abstract thinking would produce an alienated, fragmented consciousness if it ignored the transcendent, ethical soul, if it detached the human person from existence, being, and context. Vico's guiding principle, therefore, in his humanistic writings is known to himself, *Temet nosce*, through imagination first, which presumes that being precedes thinking, and which creates the new, and then followed by reason, which requires being and creativity before it can logically order what has been created. Self-knowledge is never analytic, formal, introspective, or personalized to one individual. Involving several dimensions and levels, self-knowledge is acquired by the active effort and direct participation of the Heroic Mind with the curriculum being studied in a systematic order which results in the human person identifying with humanity, not simply amassing facts, concepts, or information as isolated units. Self-knowledge sees particular knowledge within the context of a total human framework first, and then beyond that within a larger transcendent framework. This kind of self-knowledge allows the Heroic Mind to conduct itself in accordance with the divine elements inherent to human nature; thus self-knowledge is both an epistemological as well as a metaphysical ideal which can be reached through a pedagogical process which focuses on the order and wholeness of the curriculum. Wisdom, then, is the end result of differentiated and particularized knowledge being integrated and synthesized. Rational clarity was dismissed by Vico as the measuring stick for humane charity, a heroic sense of human interrelatedness and interdependence with the divine, with other humans, and with nature in a great historical and providential design.

Vico perceived the problems inherent to the Cartesian model based on systematic doubt, the meditative power of the mind, and on the devaluing of probability, which as it turned out, would permeate all aspects of modern western culture and would become the epistemological paradigm for understanding human history, existence, and behavior. Vico's critique forms the foundation for late 20th century reassessments of the beneficial impact of modern technology as acknowledged by the renowned Vico scholar Donald Phillip Verene (*Vico's Science of Imagination*, pp. 192-202). Verene's argument is sustained by the observations of the social thinker Jacques Ellul (*The Technological Society*) and those of "hard" scientists such as Fritjof Capra (*The Turning Point: Science Society and the Rising Culture*) Even more recently Antonio Damasio (*Descartes' Error*), a neurobiologist and neurosurgeon, has advanced convincing data which challenges Cartesian disembodied mind views on the nature of rationality by demonstrating the neural underpinnings of reason and the cognitive dimensions of feelings and emotions. For Damasio, who advocates an "organic" mind/body approach, being came first, and from that elementary consciousness came greater rational complexity. In a most recent work, the psychologist Daniel Goleman (*Emotional Intelligence*) uses neurological data on the brain's emotional architecture to provide an expanded model of what it means to be "intelligent," concluding that human emotional and rational life are intertwined, and that our human emotional genetic heritage may be much more significant in assessing intelligence than previously thought.

What each of these thoughtful contemporary reassessments offer are mind-healing antidotes to the Cartesian glorification of rational thought and specialized knowledge so valued in our age which these critics argue has resulted in a technocratic society, cultural and educational decline, and an amoral, non-heroic view of human behavior and potential. What these critics unknowingly highlight is the groundbreaking nature of Vico's original challenge, the authenticity of his humanistic approach to learning and knowledge, and his heroic vision of human intellectual capacity and aspiration.

The development of Vico's concept of the Heroic Mind and its connection to his critique of the Cartesian epistemology can be traced through his earlier works, specifically the Six Humanistic Orations (1699-1707) and the *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (1708-09). While a study of Vico's entire canon provides a clear picture of the comprehensive philosophy and pedagogy of education Vico was advocating, we will focus here only on clarifying the notion of the Heroic Mind as it is treated in the Orations and Study Methods.

Vico's Orations on Humanistic Education establish an approach to learning founded on a concept of the heroic quest for self-formation through holistic knowledge and communal connection. The object of the Heroic Mind is not certainty, but truth. Vico sees the Heroic Mind as the thinking mind, self-conscious of its relation to the whole or the divine which it recognizes as extrinsic to the reality of the conscious self. The Heroic Mind is a questing mind that seeks to define its identity and meaning through connection, imagination, and reason. This self-knowledge, a knowledge of what we can excel in and what we are capable of doing, is not acquired for any self-centered enhancement, but rather to bring one through a study of the entire curriculum of knowledge to understand what distinguishes the human from the divine and how that knowledge can benefit the community.

In Vico's *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (1708-09) he reaffirms that learning is a grand heroic project of self-education whereby the learner does not "find" or "discover" knowledge either in oneself or externally, but rather should "construct" it based on a psychogenetic understanding of the relationship between human development and the knowledge acquired. The sequential order of heroic individual educational growth as described in Oration six, the Proper Order of Studies, recapitulates the macrocosmic cultural development traversed by the species (as he describes it in his mammoth *New Science*) and demonstrates the connection between the individual and communal quests. The nature of heroism in learning means that the student engages in a self-constructive, self-directed, and essentially non-rationalist dynamic process whereby all of the disciplines are absorbed and understood in relation to each other and to the world. Vico's concept of heroic learning means that the student is imagining, doing, and then only later thinking rationally. The approach is imaginative, relational, and autobiographical, resulting in knowledge which is self-created, self-cognized, and self-assimilated. It is this heroism of self-making and autodidactic education which distinguishes the Heroic Mind as Vico portrays it in *On the Study Methods* and it explains why he tells the story in his *Autobiography* (1725) of his fall at the age of seven from a ladder, after which he remained unconscious for five hours. The story functions as a symbolic narrative about the physical and intellectual rehabilitation of the Heroic Mind in his autobiographical account of the meaning and results of self-education.

The study of Vico's writings presented here offers not only a portrait of eighteenth century European intellectual and cultural thought, but his writings also prophesize the change, disruption, and dehumanization resulting from the exaggerated emphases on rationality

as the end of all knowledge divorced from other physical, emotional, natural, or historical contingencies and a neglect of the demerite heroica concept at the foundation of the humanistic world view. Vico's understanding of the state of learning, wisdom, and culture in his own age and what he experienced as an aversion for the Cartesian mathematical paradigm which discounted the Heroic Mind, extended to an understanding of the forces driving modern technological society and the problems plaguing contemporary consciousness and life. The Heroic Mind is founded on an ethical epistemology and an ordered humanistic program of study aimed at forming a wise, humane character which in turn is actuated in the public life of the community. Vico practiced what he preached. The heroic creativity of his ideas and techniques leaped beyond the rhetorical vigor of his words spoken to the students in his 1732 Oration, or the various arguments he makes throughout his canon on the Heroic Mind in the liberal arts, and even beyond their courageous challenge of Descartes' advocacy of the disembodied mind. He has influenced and inspired, directly and indirectly, much in modern thinking in sociology, politics, anthropology, language, pedagogy, literature, psychology, and even science. It is the concept of the historical and cultural evolution of the Heroic Mind which Vico passionately pursues in his monumentally creative *The New Science*.

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