

Vico's Orations on *Paideia* and *Humanitas*

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As part of Giambattista Vico's duties as a professor of Latin Eloquence at the University of Naples in the 18th century, each year he gave an inaugural oration. (1) His orations were meant to inspire students to become better human beings through education, to rouse in them the courage to pursue difficult studies. Vico confidently tells the young students that they are "born for wisdom" (*IO* 1.4). The emphasis throughout the inaugural orations is on the free choice to become wise through purifying the mind and spirit, or to be a fool through allowing the passions to rule. Only individuals who can rule themselves first can rule others. Vico's task is to encourage these students by conveying his confidence in their capacity to become wise. In order to persuade them, Vico draws on ideas from a remarkable array of sources from both Latin and Greek traditions. I will be concerned only with the echoes of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's *Oration On the Dignity of Man*. (2) Vico learned from Renaissance thinkers such as Pico his confidence in the ability of *paideia* to create *humanitas*.

The reader of Vico's first oration is immediately struck by Vico's use of exclamations. One finds many lines echoing Pico's "O supreme generosity of God the Father, O highest and most marvelous felicity of man!" (*O* 225). Vico summarizes the goal of the first oration in the imperative "let us constantly cultivate the divine force of our mind" (*IO, Appendix*, 141). What is celebrated in the first oration is that the human mind is among the divine things, and self-knowledge involves knowing the divinity of one's mind. Vico repeatedly conveys his excitement about the depths self-knowledge can uncover: "O wonderful knowledge of oneself! How high you exalt and honor us! For each one of you, O listeners, the mind is to you your own god" (*IO* 1.12). In his enthusiasm Vico even modifies Cicero's famous claim about Socrates. "Socrates is said to have derived his moral philosophy from the heavens. On the contrary, he raised man's spirit up to the heavens" (*IO* 1.12).

In 1732 in "On the Heroic Mind" Vico makes *paideia* central as he does in his first oration of 1699. (3) In "On the Heroic Mind," Vico responds to his students' rhetorical question: "Are you asking of us something surpassing the human condition itself? I do indeed so reckon it; but although surpassing, yet befitting that nature of yours" (*HM* 230). There he uses "heroic mind" as he uses "divine" in the earlier orations, but it amounts to the same thing. In oration four, he makes the similar point that "the liberal arts and sciences are mastered only with effort. . . so much effort is needed in their attainment that it often seems beyond the limits of human nature... if, therefore, by exhortation, admonition, and entreaty, man is persuaded to assume his duties, none of which is foreign to humanity but rather totally in conformity with it, how much more incentive is necessary so that he will surpass his own nature" (*IO* 4.3).

The goal of education is to cultivate one's *daimonion*, the part of oneself that is more than

human, and resembles most closely God himself. In both cases human beings are raising themselves up to the divine, as heroes are the offspring of gods and mediators of the gods and humans. Besides amplifying the claims in the earlier orations, "On the Heroic Mind" shows that Vico persisted in viewing philosophy in the Platonic sense of *paideia* even after he discovered the New Science. (4) "If heroes are those who, as poets say or as they invent, were wont to boast of their divine lineage from 'all-judging Jove,' this much is certain: the human mind, independent of any fiction and fables, does have a divine origin which needs only schooling and breadth of knowledge to unfurl itself. So you see, I do ask of you things greatly surpassing the human: the near-divine nature of your minds—that is what I am challenging you to reveal" (*HM* 230). Learning how to govern oneself, to make one's passions into virtues, is a Herculean task.

About the imperative of the Oracle at Delphi "know thyself," Vico says that it is the axis of the sphere of liberal arts. Vico states that "as a sphere rotates on its axis, so my argument" (*IO* 1.3). This is a clever metaphor, since a commonplace about education is its circularity; encyclopedia is the circle of *paideia*. Vico argues that it would not have such force "if formulated to subdue pride of spirit and cast down human arrogance, since innumerable and almost infinite proofs of human frailty and misery are available everywhere" (*IO* 1.4). Vico continues that "man, who by lack of courage constrains his divine mind, by lack of confidence in himself debases it, and by despair of great accomplishments wears it down, may instead be incited and encouraged to undertake great and sublime endeavors for which he has more than ample capacity. Know thyself, therefore, O youth, so that you can attain wisdom, since you were born for wisdom" (*ibid.*). It is this confidence that Vico has learned from the Renaissance, and in particular from Pico's *Oration*. His purpose as an educator is to encourage students so that they will not give up, and take the easier road of pleasure described in the *Pratica* of the *New Science*, rather than the road of virtue (*NS* 1411).

If it is right to see the human mind as divine, Vico says that what is astonishing is that the love of wisdom faces so many obstacles. It is unnatural for human beings to be ignorant. "Such men have never known themselves. They neglect the divine power of the spirit. They do not know in what they can excel. Therefore, they remain deprived and unenlightened concerning the highest truths because they have never ventured by using the faculties of the spirit as wings for soaring upward to divine things" (*IO* 1.13). Vico ends his first oration on self-knowledge by encouraging the students to try these wings, not to remain ignorant of themselves. The praise of human greatness as our natural potential spurs them to want to learn what Vico inspires them to believe is already theirs. All the students must do is just look for it and accept the models offered to them for moderating the passions and cultivating virtue. Vico encourages them to be the "earthly Mercuries" Pico speaks of in his *Oration* (*O* 231, cf. 234). But as for Pico, one first must bathe in the living river of moral philosophy if one would climb the ladder to become angelic oneself. There are no shortcuts to wisdom, and those who "rush ahead" will fail to reach their goal (*IO* 6.14)

So far we have seen how Vico has considered human beings as they ought to be. But the

account is not complete until this ideal is related to the way human beings are, not by nature but in actuality. Vico opens the second oration with a litany of the paradoxes of the human condition: "men are lovers of truth but surrounded by errors; they are gifted with reason but subservient to passions; they are admirers of virtue but full of vices; they are searching for happiness but oppressed by miseries; they have a desire for immortality but languish in their idleness of which, as of death, it is best not to speak" (*IO* 2.1). How does Vico hold both that the mind is divine and that most human beings are fools? The answer involves understanding that the dignity of human beings is a goal, not a given. Only through education, through the development of knowledge, judgment, and love in Pico's terms—knowledge, virtue, and eloquence in Vico's terms—are human beings "divine." Such wise beings rise above the usual human situation to realize the potential of their nature. As is evident from the selections from the orations, Vico embraces calling human beings "divine" and makes free will central in his thought in the orations, because as an educator he sees the importance of inspiring confidence in human potentiality.

As in Pico, freedom is what makes human beings great as well as miserable. Vico echoes Pico's claim that human beings have "to become what they are to be" in order to get the students to recognize their potential for greatness in the third oration (*O* 225; *IO* 3.1). Vico emphasizes that freedom is unique to human beings; "man alone is whatever he chooses to be. He becomes whatever he desires to become. He does whatever pleases him. . . . Because of his freedom, which no other created thing possesses, the world would recognize him as being, if not its lord, then nearly its lord" (*IO* 3.1). However, Vico is far from claiming that human beings are divine more often than bestial. We may be capable of becoming god-like, but we tend to fall short of our potential. Vico even exclaims that we would be better off without such extensive freedom; "O would that God Eternal had made man subservient to his own nature like all other creatures! With his will thus shackled man would then follow the course of right reason for which he was intended" (*IO* 3.2) It is optimal freely to choose to be wise, virtuous, and eloquent, but it would be better not to have such freedom than to live in the self-imposed slavery of the fool.

"Nature" is the ideal human being, what God created Adam to be as described by Pico, but after the Fall we have to toil to be wise and happy. "Certainly those who think that wisdom is idleness have simply failed to understand it. Wisdom indeed is the improvement of man. And man is mind and spirit. While mind is misled by error, the spirit is corrupted by passions. Wisdom heals both ills, ordering the mind by truth and the spirit by virtue" (*IO* 5.2). Human beings can become divine or nearly divine, but in order to imitate God we have to tame the passions and cure the corruptions of human nature through education. "In fact, nature has unhappily established that we, by the impetuosity of our mind, fall into error and are brought around to that truth which we are born to reach by a direct path only by a tortuous one" (*ibid.*). On this path "while other created things must follow their nature, man instead must follow wisdom as his guide" (*IO* 2.2). Human beings differ from all other creatures in that wisdom, not nature, is our guide. The enthusiasm for our potential (as we saw in the first oration) is not eclipsed in the later orations, but the hard work of becoming virtuous and wise is

emphasized.

The definition of wisdom that emerges as central to the account of *paideia* in the inaugural orations is from Plato's *Alcibiades*: "wisdom is the perfecter of man" (*Alc.* 1 124e). It is likely that Vico is following Pico who makes the *Alcibiades* an important source for Plato's views of self-knowledge and wisdom. Recall that in the *Alcibiades*, Socrates asks "what is a human being?" And Alcibiades answers, "I do not know what to say." (*Alc.* 1 129d). How one answers this most Socratic of questions is definitive of what one thinks philosophy as the love of wisdom is.

Vico paraphrases the *Alcibiades* when he defines wisdom in the New Science as "wisdom is the perfecter of man" (*Alc.* 1 124ff). In addition, he uses this in the prayer at the end of his last oration, which he gave to an Academy; "wisdom, which is mind and language, is the perfecter of man in his properly being man." (5) This account of wisdom as self-knowledge in Vico's later writings was first expressed in the fifth inaugural oration, as quoted above (*IO* 5.2). To be wise one must know who one is. This knowledge is creative as opposed to merely reflective since one must make oneself actually what one is potentially. Perfection is both the process and the goal of human nature, and wisdom is what makes the achievement of the human *telos* possible. For Aristotle human beings were distinguished primarily by reason, but also by their political and mimetic nature. It is this third definition from the *Poetics* that most Renaissance thinkers (at least the Platonists) adapt, that "human beings *by nature* delight in imitation" (*Po.* 1448b5-9, emphasis added). That both Pico and Vico select the dialogue that defines wisdom as perfecter of man reveals the commonality in their view of humanity.

What can be done to remedy the human corruption that obscures this divine nature? Pico answered this question of what we are to do given this paradoxical state of fallenness and freedom with a division of angels: the seraphim for love, cherubim for knowledge, and thrones for judgment. We imitate the cherubim in order to know how to judge and what to love. Vico's answer involves another tripartite division. He clearly states that human beings are comprised of various parts, each of which has its own perfection and its own vice. "The punishments for corrupted human nature [are] the inadequacy of language, opinions of the mind and the passions of the soul . . . the remedies are eloquence, knowledge and virtue" (*IO* 6.5). These correspond to spirit, mind, and speech: "the spirit being the part of human beings perfected by virtue, as the mind by truth, and speech with eloquence" (*IO* 6.7). Only those who do the three "duties of wisdom" are compared to the gods; "Those who do these things are indeed men much above the rest of mankind, and, if I may say, only a little less than the gods. A glory neither counterfeit nor transitory but solid and true follows such men" (*IO* 6.6). In this way Plato "has rightly merited the name of Divine" (*IO* 3.6; cf. *NS* 365). Such human beings have through the cultivation of the virtues embodied *humanitas*; they have expressed the image of God which is the potential of all human beings. Human beings can become divine or nearly divine, but in order to imitate God we have to tame the passions and cure the corruptions of human nature through education.

Ernst Cassirer explains that for the Renaissance "the gap between them is closed; between the creative principle and the created, between God and creature, stands the spirit of humanity, *humanitas*, as something at once creator and created." (6) This is the philosophical anthropology beneath cultivation of the virtues, of humanistic education. The goal of *paideia* is *humanitas*. We are making ourselves into human beings. Self-knowledge involves making oneself into the image of God through governing one's passions, that is, by shaping them into virtues. The definition of wisdom as the perfecter of man is united with the more common definition from Cicero that wisdom is "the knowledge of things divine and human" (*De. Off.* 1.153). For the way one knows oneself is through education about both things divine and human. For the Platonists, the human mind has a divine element within itself that gives human beings dignity when perfected; but that divinity must be fostered or it will be obscured by vice.

In order to cure our failings we must have sufficient power to transform ourselves. We must believe we can change ourselves, and hence are capable of becoming virtuous, in order actually to become virtuous. After arguing that the fool is the most miserable of men, Vico encourages his audience to "take refuge in the sanctuary of wisdom;" "Let us obey the law of nature which commands each one of us to be true to himself. It is within our power because it is indeed within us. It is for our well-being because it is indeed within nature" (IO 2.15). The universe must allow for our freedom to change ourselves for *paideia* to be possible. Vico's metaphysics of Providence is essential for this same reason; in a world of Stoic fate or Epicurean chance, *paideia* cannot be achieved.

The teaching of the inaugural orations is that corruption obscures the natural splendor of human beings and can be cured through knowledge, virtue, and eloquence. The humanist educational ideal could hardly be stated more strongly than Vico states in these orations. Wise and virtuous human beings are rightly considered "divine" for such accomplishments. What tempers the optimism of Pico and Vico alike is the acknowledgment that humanity is the perfection of human beings, and that this is only achieved through making oneself virtuous and following wisdom as all other creatures follow nature. Vico's orations inspire students by showing them that their own minds are among the divine things. Education requires a genuine sense of one's freedom and dignity, a sense of the greatness of humanity at its best.

In the fourth oration Vico exhorts himself to live up to his ideal for philosophy, praying "God help me to force myself according to my ability to exhort them repeatedly every time I see them so that they do not lose courage and give up" (IO 4.3). The educational dimension of Vico's thought is not limited to these orations. The continued centrality of education in Vico's mature ideal for philosophy is evident in his axiom 5 of the *New Science* which states that to be useful to the human race philosophy must "raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption" (NS 129).

Notes

(1) Giambattista Vico, *On Humanistic Education (Six Inaugural Orations, 1699-1707)*,

trans. Giorgio A. Pinton and Arthur W. Shippee, introduction by D. P. Verene. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993). Hereinafter cited parenthetically by *IO* and the oration and paragraph number common to the Italian and English editions.

(2) Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Oration on the Dignity of Man in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, ed. Cassirer, Kristeller, Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Phoenix Books, 1959). Hereinafter cited parenthetically by *O* and the page number of this translation.

(3) Giambattista Vico, "On the Heroic Mind," trans. Elizabeth Sewell and Anthony C. Sirignano, in *Vico and Contemporary Thought*, ed. Tagliacozzo, Mooney, Verene (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979). Hereinafter cited parenthetically as *HM* and the page number of this translation.

(4) Giambattista Vico, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Thomas Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983, 2nd ed.). Hereinafter cited parenthetically by *NS* and the paragraph number common to Italian and English editions.

(5) Giambattista Vico, "The Academies and the Relation between Philosophy and Eloquence", trans. D. P. Verene, in Vico, *On The Study Methods of Our Time*, trans. Elio Gianturco (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 90.

(6) Ernst Cassirer, *Individual and Cosmos*, trans. Mario Domandi (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1963), 40. Cassirer is here taking Cusanus as the epitome of Renaissance thought.

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