Giambattista Vico was born in Naples, the son of a bookseller. Although he attended a Jesuit college, his education came chiefly from reading in his father’s shop. He characterizes himself in his autobiography as an autodidact, one who is both self-taught and free from academic prejudice. Vico was appointed professor of rhetoric at the University of Naples in 1699 and served until 1741. The professorship of rhetoric was a minor post, and Vico hoped—though in vain—to be appointed to the much more prestigious chair of civil law. Although a growing number of scholars now see Vico as a major figure in the development of a rhetoric with a culturally based epistemology, in his own time he was regarded as a reactionary because of his opposition to Descartes.

In his major works, Vico criticizes the philosophy of Descartes for stressing that mathematics and science are the only legitimate sources of knowledge and treating other branches of human inquiry—such as law, history, and the arts—as inconsequential. Vico argues that rhetoric provides a superior philosophy of knowledge, for all knowledge, even the scientific, is based on argument and conviction. The excerpts here from “On the Study Methods of Our Time” (1709), originally a scholarly address that opened the school year at the University of Naples, include Vico’s argument against the Cartesian method, which he refers to as “modern philosophical critique,” and his defense of rhetoric as a modern method of study.

In “On the Study Methods of Our Time,” Vico seeks to reconcile humanism (the wisdom of the ancients) with a modern but non-Cartesian science. He objects to Descartes’s insensitivity to the function of language in producing knowledge. Without language, says Vico, the human knower is lost. Language reveals the processes of reason, passion, and imagination, as well as the social conventions and historical circumstances that shape our concerns. The etymology of the national language reveals our social history; similarly, language socializes each individual. Therefore, the university’s curricular philosophy or “study methods” will have a profound effect on both the individual and society. What kind of person, what kind of society, will be fostered by Cartesian disdain for the probabilistic knowledge of law, ethics, politics, and medicine? The Cartesian method is useful, Vico concedes, but it cannot be allowed to overpower the kind of sensus communis or common sense that the study of eloquence stimulates with its appeals to imagination and memory and its practice in the commonplace of argument.

Not only is Cartesianism ill suited to the kinds of knowledge that affect the affairs of society, says Vico, but it is not even well founded in the science it so prizes. Mathematical proof is ultimately based on our acceptance of the system of axioms created by human beings: We can point to no demonstration of the applicability of our axioms to the world itself. The world is created by God, not human beings, and cannot be directly known. Moreover, the Cartesian method of division focuses ideally on isolated particles of knowledge, stifling the kind of analogic thinking that generates so many insights. Vico also objects to the Cartesian model of the isolated
inquirer, for dialogue fertilizes thought. As a teaching approach, the Cartesian method fails to encourage independent discovery, proceeding instead on a plodding course from axiom to proof. Such a method oppresses rather than inspires students. Thus, if the educational system accepts Cartesianism, it will unduly privilege natural science and mathematics while devaluing other kinds of knowledge, and it will do so to the detriment of society, which will eventually lack leaders educated in public affairs. Vico recommends balance: The method of Descartes is useful for abstract knowledge that finds elemental causes for multiple effects, whereas eloquence finds many possible causes for single events, revealing the complexity of "merely" probable causes. To expect the Cartesian method to cover both kinds of knowledge, he reiterates, is to ignore the essential differences in their character and provenance.

Vico devotes a long section of his speech to the legal system of ancient Rome. Though the system was designed to support the privilege of the patricians, it encouraged eloquence in defense of equity and justice. Arguments produced under these conditions eventually led to a democratization of the courts and to a more equitable legal philosophy. But, Vico claims, the exceptional eloquence of the old courts was no longer necessary, with the result that, on the one hand, eloquence lost respect and, on the other, legal philosophy languished for want of inspired oratory. Finally, Vico proposes a curriculum that concludes with the study of eloquence, a study which he sees as interdisciplinary and (in modern terms) meta-theoretical, a way to link the other disciplines and bring them to bear on important public issues.

In The New Science (first edition, 1725; much-revised third edition, 1744), Vico elaborates the argument begun in "Study Methods" about the relationship between truth and human methods of producing knowledge. If, as the argument proposes, we can truly know only what we have made, then true knowledge is of the Cartesian kind, touching created systems of mathematics and science. Observation and experience ("conscience," as opposed to science) produce uncertain, probabilistic judgments. Vico now proposes a link between these two kinds of knowledge: It is possible, according to this argument, to reach true knowledge in the vast realm of human affairs, in a world that is, after all, created by humans and not "natural." In other words, though history is not a formal system, it is nonetheless made by people, and the appropriate method of study should produce certain knowledge of it. To establish this method, Vico seeks the origins of history in human nature and in an original common language. Through history, human nature and language give shape to social relations and institutions, reflecting historical circumstances and local developments.

Vico posits three stages through which human history evolves: the poetic, the heroic, and the human. In the poetic stage, knowledge is generated by metaphor. Just as young children learn by comparison, Vico argues, humankind in its infancy must have done likewise. In the heroic stage, nations develop, promulgating rigid systems of law to preserve the organization of society. And in the human stage, the self-conscious study of human knowledge leads to greater equity in law and democracy in politics. Here, too, individualism grows, and with it a disdain for communal and national imperatives. As a result, this last stage is fragile, threatened
by revolutions that will fragment society. Once society is shattered, however, the process begins anew.

Vico maintains that historical circumstances determine the characteristics and purposes of social institutions and individual actions. Historians are therefore in error when they try to evaluate earlier periods using the standards of their own time. To understand history, it is necessary to reconstruct the consciousness of the time and place to be studied, using the myths and language of the time. Etymology is invaluable in determining not only the conditions of life in an earlier age but also the psychological responses to them. Speech and thought are inseparable, in Vico’s view: They evolve together. Thus, what are for us casual or embedded metaphors can reveal the mental processes and perception of the world of those who first employed them. A persistently metaphoric view of the world will be different, too, from a view in which phenomena are identified by abstractions.

In elaborating and illustrating this view of historical analysis, Vico brought together the study of language and literature, social institutions and law, ideology and class structure, and personal psychology and human nature. His cyclical theory of history is easy enough to criticize, and for too long it obscured his contribution to historiography: the combination of a sympathetic perspective and a broad range of intercontextual knowledge. Moreover, in his theory of rhetoric, as John D. Schaeffer has argued, Vico unites ethics and eloquence through his concept of sensus communis, a “common sense” that is both epistemological in function and culturally based. Thus Vico forges a link between rhetoric and philosophy that contemporary thinkers are still exploring.

Selected Bibliography


From On the Study Methods of Our Time

We, the men of the modern age, have discovered many things of which the Ancients were entirely ignorant; the Ancients, on the other hand, knew much still unknown to us. We enjoy many techniques which enable us to make progress in some branch of intellectual or practical activity; they likewise had talents for progress in other fields. They devoted all their activity to certain arts which we almost totally neglect; we pursue some others which they apparently scorned. Many disciplines conveniently unified by the Ancients have been partitioned by us; a certain number which they inconveniently kept separate, we treat as unified. Finally, not a few sectors of culture have changed both appearance and name.

The foregoing provides the theme of the present discourse: Which study method is finer and better, ours or the Ancients? In developing this topic I shall illustrate by examples the advantages and drawbacks of the respective methods. I shall specify which of the drawbacks of our procedures may be avoided, and how; and whether those which cannot be eliminated have their counterparts in particular shortcomings by which the Ancients were handicapped.

Unless I am mistaken, this theme is new; but the knowledge of it is so important, that I am amazed it has not been treated yet. In the hope of escaping censure, I ask you to give thought to the fact that my purpose is not to criticize the drawbacks of the study methods of our age or of those of antiquity, but rather to compare the advantages afforded by the study methods of the two epochs.

This matter is of direct concern to you: even if you know more than the Ancients in some fields, you should not accept knowing less in others. You should make use of a method by which you can acquire, on the whole, more knowledge.
than the Ancients, and, being aware of the shortcomings of ancient methods of study, you may endure the unavoidable inconveniences of our own.

The better to grasp the subject I am proposing to you, you should distinctly realize that in the present discourse I do not intend to draw parallels between individual branches of knowledge, single fields of sciences or arts of ancient and modern times.

My goal, instead, is to indicate in what respect our study methods are superior to those of the Ancients; to discover in what they are inferior, and how we may remedy this inferiority.

For our purpose we must, if not separate, at least set up a distinction between new arts, sciences, and inventions on one hand, and new instruments and aids to knowledge on the other. The former are the constituent material of learning; the latter are the way and the means, precisely the subject of our discourse.

Every study method may be said to be made up of three things: instruments, complementary aids, and the aim envisaged. The instruments presuppose and include a systematic, orderly manner of proceeding; the apprentice who, after suitable training, undertakes the task of mastering a certain art or science, should approach it in an appropriate and well-ordered fashion. Instruments are antecedent to the task of learning; complementary aids and procedures are concomitant with that task. As for the aim envisaged, although its attainment is subsequent to the process of learning, it should never be lost sight of by the learner, neither at the beginning nor during the entire learning process.

We shall arrange our discourse in corresponding order, and discuss first the instruments, then the aids to our method of study. As for the aim, it should circulate, like a blood-stream, through the entire body of the learning process. Consequently, just as the blood’s pulsation may best be studied at the spot where the arterial beat is most perceptible, so the aim of our study methods shall be treated at the point where it assumes the greatest prominence.

Some of the new instruments of science are, themselves, sciences; others are arts; still others, products of either art or nature. Modern philosophical “critique” is the common instrument of all our sciences and arts. The instrument of geometry is “analysis”; that of physics, geometry, plus the geometrical method (and, in a certain sense, modern mechanics). The instrument of medicine is chemistry and its offshoot, pharmacological chemistry. The instrument of anatomy is the microscope; that of astronomy, the telescope; that of geography, the mariner’s needle.

As for “complementary aids,” I include among them the orderly reduction of systematic rules, of a number of subjects which the Ancients were wont to entrust to practical common sense. Complementary aids are also works of literature and of the fine arts whose excellence designates them as patterns of perfection; the types used in the printing; and universities as institutions of learning.

In view of the easy accessibility, usefulness, and value of the complementary aids, our study methods seem, beyond any doubt, to be better and more correct than those of the Ancients, whether in regard to facility, or to utility, or to merit.

As for the aim of all kinds of intellectual pursuits: one only is kept in view, one is pursued, one is honored by all: Truth.

II

Modern philosophical critique supplies us with a fundamental verity of which we can be certain even when assailed by doubt. That critique could rout the skepticism even of the New Academy.

In addition “analysis” (i.e., analytical geometry) empowers us to puzzle out with astonishing ease geometrical problems which the Ancients found impossible to solve.

Like us, the Ancients utilized geometry and mechanics as instrument of research in physics, but not as a constant practice. We apply them consistently, and in better form.

Let us leave aside the question whether geometry has undergone greater development by

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2 The critique is Descartes's method. (See the introduction to Part Four.) [Ed.]
3 The New Academy is the Second Platonic Academy of the third and second centuries B.C.E., noted for radical skepticism. [Ed.]
means of "analysis," and whether modern mechanics constitutes something new. What cannot be denied is the fact that leading investigators have available to them a science enriched by a number of new and extremely ingenious discoveries. Modern scientists, seeking for guidance in their exploration of the dark pathways of nature, have introduced the geometrical method into physics. Holding to this method as to Ariadne's thread, they can reach the end of their appointed journey. Do not consider them as groping practitioners of physics: they are to be viewed, instead, as the grand architects of this limitless fabric of the world: able to give a detailed account of the ensemble of principles according to which God has built this admirable structure of the cosmos.

Chemistry, of which the Ancients were totally ignorant, has made outstanding contributions to medicine. Having observed the similarity which exists between the various phenomena of the human body and those of chemistry, the healing art has been able, not only to hazard guesses concerning many physiological functions and disorders, but to make these plainly discernible to the human eye.

Pharmacology, of course, a derivate of chemistry, was among the ancients merely a desideratum. Nowadays, we have converted that desideratum into a reality. Some of our researchers have applied chemistry to physics; others, mechanics to medicine. Our physical chemistry can faithfully, and, so to speak, manually, reproduce a number of meteors and other physical phenomena. Mechanical medicine can describe, by inferences drawn from the motions of machines, the diseases of the human body, and can treat them successfully. And anatomy clearly reveals not only the circulation of the blood, but the nerves, roots, countless humors, vessels, and ducts of the human body (notice that such descriptions already constitute notable advances over ancient medicine), and moreover—thanks to the microscope—the nature of miliary glands, of the most minute internal organs, of plants, of silkworms, and of insects. To modern anatomy, furthermore, we are indebted for an insight into the process of generation, as demonstrated by the growth of the incubated egg. All these things were entirely outside of the narrow range of sight of the science of the Ancients; modern science throws a flood of light upon them.

As for astronomy, the modern telescope has brought within our ken a multitude of new stars, the variability of sun-spots, and phases of the planets. These discoveries have made us aware of several defects in the cosmological system of Ptolemy.

In the domain of geographical exploration, the Ancients guessed vaguely, in a prophetic sort of way, at the existence of transoceanic lands. By the use of the mariner's compass, the modern age has actually discovered them. As a result, a wonderful luster has been bestowed upon geography.

It seems almost unbelievable that in our days men should not only be able to circumnavigate the globe along with the sun, but to outreach the sun's march and to negotiate its full course in less time than it takes that planet to complete it.

From geometry and physics, taught by the present method, the science of mechanics has received major impulses and has rendered possible a great number of outstanding and marvelous inventions, which have vastly enriched human society. It may be said that it is from these sciences that our technique of warfare derives. Our art of war is so immeasurably superior to that of the Ancients, that, compared with our technique of fortifying and attacking cities, Minerva would condescend her own Athenian citadel and Jupiter would scorn his three-pronged lightning as a blunt and cumbersome weapon.

Such are the "instruments" employed by our modern sciences; let us now turn to the complementary aids employed in the various sectors of our culture.

Systematic treatments (artes) have been set up of certain subjects which the Ancients left to unaided common sense. Among these subjects is the law, which the Ancients, balked by the difficulty of the task, gave up hope of organizing into a systematically arranged, methodical body of theory.

In the fields of poetry, oratory, painting, sculpture, and other fine arts, based on the imitation of nature, we possess a wealth of supremely accomplished productions, on which the admiration of posterity has conferred the prestige of the archetypal exemplarity. Thanks to the guidance
offered by these masterworks, we are able to imitate, correctly and easily, Nature at her best. The invention of printing places at our disposal an enormous number of books. Hence, our scholars are not compelled to restrict their competence to the knowledge of one or another author, but can master a multiple, diversified, almost boundless domain of culture.

Finally, we have great institutions of learning, i.e., universities, which are the repositories of all our sciences and arts, and where the intellectual, spiritual, and linguistic abilities of men may be brought to perfection. Almost all of these spheres of mental activity have as their single goal the inquiry after truth. Were I to set out to extol this inquiry, I would arouse wonder at my eulogizing something that no one ever thought of disparaging.

Let us now scrutinize these advantages of our study methods, and try to ascertain whether these methods lack some of the good qualities possessed by those of antiquity: or whether, instead, they are impaired by faults from which ancient methods were exempt. Let us examine whether we can avoid our deficiencies and appropriate the good points of the ancient methods, and by what means this may be done; and let us see whether those among our deficiencies which are unavoidable may be offset by the shortcomings of antiquity.

III

Let us begin with the instruments with which modern sciences operate.

Philosophical criticism is the subject which we compel our youths to take up first. Now, such speculative criticism, the main purpose of which is to cleanse its fundamental truths not only of all falsity, but also of the mere suspicion of error, places upon the same plane of falsity not only false thinking, but also those secondary verities and ideas which are based on probability alone, and commands us to clear our minds of them. Such an approach is distinctly harmful, since training in common sense is essential to the education of adolescents, so that that faculty should be developed as early as possible; else they break into odd or arrogant behavior when adulthood is reached. It is a positive fact that, just as knowledge originates in truth and error in falsity, so common sense arises from perceptions based on verisimilitude. Probabilities stand, so to speak, midway between truth and falsity, since things which most of the time are true, are only very seldom false.

Consequently, since young people are to be educated in common sense, we should be careful to avoid that the growth of common sense be stifled in them by a habit of advanced speculative criticism. I may add that common sense, besides being the criterion of practical judgment, is also the guiding standard of eloquence. It frequently occurs, in fact, that orators in a law court have greater difficulty with a case which is based on truth, but does not seem so, than with a case that is false but plausible. There is a danger that instruction in advanced philosophical criticism may lead to an abnormal growth of abstract intellectualism, and render young people unfit for the practice of eloquence.

Our modern advocates of advanced criticism rank the unadulterated essence of “pure,” primary truth before, outside, above the gross semblances of physical bodies. But this study of primal philosophical truths takes place at the same time when young minds are too immature, too unsure, to derive benefit from it.

Just as old age is powerful in reason, so is adolescence in imagination. Since imagination has always been esteemed a most favorable omen of future development, it should in no way be dulled. Furthermore, the teacher should give the greatest care to the cultivation of the pupil’s memory, which, though not exactly the same as imagination, is almost identical with it. In adolescence, memory outstrips in vigor all other faculties, and should be intensely trained. Youth’s natural inclination to the arts in which imagination or memory (or a combination of both) is prevalent (such as painting, poetry, oratory, jurisprudence) should by no means be blunted. Nor should advanced philosophical criticism, the common instrument today of all arts and sciences, be an impediment to any of them. The Ancients knew how to avoid this drawback. In almost all their schools for youths, the role of logic was fulfilled by geometry. Following the
example of medical practitioners, who concentrate their efforts on seconding the bent of Nature, the Ancients required their youths to learn the science of geometry which cannot be grasped without a vivid capacity to form images. Thus, without doing violence to nature, but gradually and gently and in step with the mental capacities of their age, the Ancients nurtured the reasoning powers of their young men.

In our days, instead, philosophical criticism alone is honored. The art of “topics,” far from being given first place in the curriculum, is utterly disregarded. Again I say, this is harmful, since the invention of arguments is by nature prior to the judgment of their validity, so that, in teaching, that invention should be given priority over philosophical criticism. In our days, we keep away from the art of inventing arguments, and think that this skill is of no use. We hear people affirming that, if individuals are critically endowed, it is sufficient to teach them a certain subject, and they will have the capacity to discover whether there is any truth in that subject. It is claimed that, without any previous training in the *ars topica*, any person will be able to discern the probabilities which surround any ordinary topic, and to evaluate them by the same standard employed in the sifting of truth. But who can be sure that he has taken into consideration every feature of the subject on hand? The most eulogizing epithet that can be given to a speech is that it is “comprehensive”; praise is due to the speaker who has left nothing untouched, and has omitted nothing from the argument, nothing which may be missed by his listeners.

Nature and life are full of incertitude; the foremost, indeed, the only aim of our “arts” is to assure us that we have acted rightly. Criticism is the art of true speech; “ars topica,” of eloquence. Traditional “topics” is the art of finding “the medium,” i.e., the middle term: in the conventional language of scholasticism, “medium” indicates what the Latins call *argumentum*. Those who know all the *loci*, i.e., the lines of argument to be used, are able (by an operation not unlike reading the printed characters on a page) to grasp extemporaneously the elements of persuasion inherent in any question or case. Individuals who have not achieved this ability hardly deserve the name of orators. In pressing, urgent affairs, which do not admit of delay or postponement, as most frequently occurs in our law courts — especially when it is a question of criminal cases, which offer to the eloquent orator the greatest opportunity for the display of his powers — it is the orator’s business to give immediate assistance to the accused, who is usually granted only a few hours in which to plead his defense. Our experts in philosophical criticism, instead, whenever they are confronted with some dubious point, are wont to say: “Give me some time to think it over!”

I may add that in the art of oratory the relationship between speaker and listeners is of the essence. It is in tune with the opinions of the audience that we have to arrange our speech. It often happens that people unmoved by forceful and compelling reasons can be jolted from their apathy, and made to change their minds by means of some trifling line of argument. Consequently, in order to be sure of having touched all the soul-strings of his listeners, the orator, then, should run through the complete set of the *loci* which schematize the evidence. It is quite unfair to blame Cicero for having insisted on many a point of little weight. It was exactly by those points of little weight that he was able to dominate the law courts, the Senate, and (most important of all) the Assemblies of the people. It was by that method that he became the speaker most worthy of being considered a representative of Rome’s imperial greatness. Is it not significant that it is precisely the orator whose only concern is the bare truth who gets stranded in cases in which a different speaker succeeds in extricating himself, by paying attention to credibility as well as the facts? The contrast of opinion between Marcus Brutus and Cicero, regarding the manner in which each of them thought that the defense of Milo should be conducted, provides an instructive case for reflection.

Marcus Brutus, who had been trained in a kind of philosophical, rationalistic criticism closely akin to ours (for he was a Stoic), thought that Milo⁴ should be defended by throwing his case upon the judges’ mercy, and that he should

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⁴The tribune Milo was brought to trial for the murder of Clodius in 52 B.C.E. [Ed.]
seek acquittal on the ground of the distinguished services he had performed for the Republic, and on the ground of having rid Rome of Clodius, a noxious criminal.

Cicero, instead, an expert in the *ars topica*, deemed it unsafe to throw such a defendant upon the judges' indulgence, considering the conditions prevalent at that time. As a consequence, he based his defense speech entirely on conjectural reasons. Had he been given the chance of delivering that speech in court, he would certainly have brought about Milo's acquittal, as Milo himself declared.

Nevertheless, Antoine Arnauld, a man of commanding scholarship, scorns the *ars topica*, and considers it of absolutely no use.

Whom shall we believe? Arnauld, who rejects the *ars topica*, or Cicero, who asserts that his own eloquence is chiefly due to the art of skillfully arraying a set of effective lines of argument? Let others decide; as for me, I am unwilling to award to the one what I would have to take away from the other: I shall limit myself to stating that a severely intellectualistic criticism enables us to achieve truth, while *ars topica* makes us eloquent. In antiquity, the Stoics devoted themselves entirely to philosophical criticism, while the Academics cultivated topics. Similarly, today the jejune and aridly deductive reasoning in which the Stoics specialized is followed by the moderns, whereas the Aristotelians of the recent past are characterized by the varied and multiform style of their utterance... .

It is significant that the representatives of the schools of ancient philosophy became the more eloquent in proportion as they were less inclined to a strictly philosophical criticism. The advocates of Stoicism (for whom, as for our moderni, pure reason is the regulative standard of truth), were the thinnest and leanest of all philosophers. The Epicureans, according to whom the regulative standard of truth resides in sense-perception, were simple in expression, and unfolded their doctrines in more detail. The ancient Academics, instead, being disciples of Socrates who tended that he knew nothing but his own ignorance, were masters of an overflowing and lavishly embellished expression. As for the neo-Academics, who admitted that they did not even know that they did not know anything, they overwhelmed their listeners with torrential outbursts and snowdrifts of oratory.

Both Stoics and Epicureans came out in support of only one side of the argument: Plato inclined towards one or the other side, depending on which appeared to him more probable; Carneades, instead, was wont to embrace both of the sides of any given controversy. He would, for instance, affirm one day that justice exists, another day, that it does not, bringing forth equally compelling arguments for both positions and displaying an unbelievable power of argumentation. This was due to the fact that whereas truth is one, probabilities are many, and falsehoods numberless.

Each procedure, then, has its defects. The specialists in topics fall in with falsehood; the philosophical critics disdain any traffic with probability.

To avoid both defects, I think, young men should be taught the totality of sciences and arts, and their intellectual powers should be developed to the full; thus they will become familiar with the art of argument, drawn from the *ars topica*. At the very outset, their common sense should be strengthened so that they can grow in prudence and eloquence. Let their imagination and memory be fortified so that they may be effective in those arts in which fantasy and the mnemonic faculty are predominant. At a later stage let them learn criticism, so that they can apply the fullness of their personal judgment to what they have been taught. And let them develop skill in debating on either side of any proposed argument.

Were this done, young students, I think, would become exact in science, clever in practical matters, fluent in eloquence, imaginative in understanding poetry or painting, and strong in memorizing what they have learned in their legal studies.

They would not feel the impulse to step rashly

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3 Coauthor (with Pierre Nicole) of the 1662 *Port-Royal Logic*. (See the introduction to Part Four.) [Ed.]

6 A skeptical philosopher of the second century B.C.E. [Ed.]
into discussions while they are still in process of learning; nor would they, with pedestrian slavishness, refuse to accept any viewpoint unless it has been sanctioned by a teacher. In this sphere, the Ancients seem to me to be superior to us.

A five-year period of silence was enjoined upon all of Pythagoras' students. After that time, they were allowed to maintain what they had learned, but had to ground their reasons only upon the authority of their master. “He said it,” was their motto. The chief duty of a student of philosophy was to listen. Most appropriately were they called “auditors.”

Arnauld himself, although his words seem to spurn this procedure, actually confirms and professes what I am stating. His treatise on Logic is replete with far-fetched and involved illustrations, with difficult examples drawn from the deep storehouses of each discipline. Naturally, these illustrations and examples prove to be unintelligible to the young student, unless he is already more than proficient in those arts and sciences from which those supporting materials are taken, and unless his teacher devotes great efforts and a great deal of eloquent skill to the explanation of them. If logic is studied at the terminal stage of the school curriculum, these deficiencies, besides those I have mentioned before, are avoided. What Arnauld presents, though he provides useful examples, is hardly to be understood; the materials offered by the Aristotelians, instead, though perfectly intelligible, are of no use whatever. . . .

VII

But the greatest drawback of our educational methods is that we pay an excessive amount of attention to the natural sciences and not enough to ethics. Our chief fault is that we disregard that part of ethics which treats of human character, of its dispositions, its passions, and of the manner of adjusting these factors to public life and eloquence. We neglect that discipline which deals with the differential features of the virtues and vices, with good and bad behavior-patterns, with the typical characteristics of the various ages of man, of the two sexes, of social and economic class, race, and nation, and with the art of seemly conduct in life, the most difficult of all arts. As a consequence of this neglect, a noble and important branch of studies, i.e., the science of politics, lies almost abandoned and untended.

Since, in our time, the only target of our intellectual endeavors is truth, we devote all our efforts to the investigation of physical phenomena, because their nature seems unambiguous; but we fail to inquire into human nature which, because of the freedom of man's will, is difficult to determine. A serious drawback arises from the uncontrasted preponderance of our interest in the natural sciences.

Our young men, because of their training, which is focused on these studies, are unable to engage in the life of the community, to conduct themselves with sufficient wisdom and prudence; nor can they imbue into their speech a familiarity with human psychology or permeate their utterances with passion. When it comes to the matter of prudential behavior in life, it is well for us to keep in mind that human events are dominated by Chance and Choice, which are extremely subject to change and which are strongly influenced by simulation and dissimulation (both preeminently deceptive things). As a consequence, those whose only concern is abstract truth experience great difficulty in achieving their means, and greater difficulty in attaining their ends. Frustrated in their own plans, deceived by the plans of others, they often throw up the game. Since, then, the course of action in life must consider the importance of the single events and their circumstances, it may happen that many of these circumstances are extraneous and trivial, some of them bad, some even contrary to one's goal. It is therefore impossible to assess human affairs by the inflexible standard of abstract right; we must rather gauge them by the pliant Lesbic rule, which does not conform bodies to itself, but adjusts itself to their contours. 

The difference, therefore, between abstract knowledge and prudence is this: in science, the outstanding intellect is that which succeeds in reducing a large multitude of physical effects to a single cause; in the domain of prudence, excellence is accorded to those who ferret out the greatest possible number of causes which may have produced a single event, and who are able
to conjecture which of all these causes is the true one. Abstract knowledge—science—is concerned with the highest verity; common sense, instead, with the lowliest. On the basis of this, the distinguished features of the various types of men should be marked out: the fool, the astute ignoramus, the learned man destitute of prudence, and the sage. In the conduct of life the fool, for instance, pays no attention to the highest or the meanest truths; the astute ignoramus notices the meanest but is unable to perceive the highest; the man who is learned but destitute of prudence, deduces the lowest truths from the highest; the sage, instead, derives the highest truths from the unimportant ones. Abstract, or general truths are eternal; concrete or specific ones change momentarily from truths or untruths. Eternal truths stand above nature; in nature, instead, everything is unstable, mutable. But congruity exists between goodness and truth; they partake of the same essence, of the same qualities. Accordingly, the fool, who is ignorant of both general and particular truths, constantly suffers prompt penalties for his arrogance. The astute ignoramus, who is able to grasp particular truths but incapable of conceiving a general truth, finds that cleverness, which is useful to him today, may be harmful to him tomorrow. The learned but imprudent individual, traveling in a straight line from general truths to particular ones, bulls his way through the tortuous paths of life. But the sage who, through all the obliquities and uncertainties of human actions and events, keeps his eye steadily focused on eternal truth, manages to follow a roundabout way whenever he cannot travel in a straight line, and makes decisions, in the field of action, which, in the course of time, prove to be as profitable as the nature of things permits.

Therefore, it is an error to apply to the prudent conduct of life the abstract criterion of reasoning that obtains in the domain of science. A correct judgment deems that men—who are, for the most part, but fools—are ruled, not by forethought, but by whim or chance. The doctrinaires judge human actions as they ought to be, not as they actually are (i.e., performed more or less at random). Satisfied with abstract truth alone, and not being gifted with common sense, unused to following probability, those doctrinaires do not bother to find out whether their opinion is held by the generality and whether the things that are truths to them are also such to other people.

This failure to concern themselves with the opinions of others has not only been a source of blame, but has proved to be extremely prejudicial, not only to private persons but to eminent leaders and great rulers as well. Let an example which is right to the point be quoted here: While the assembly of the French Estates was in session, Henry III, King of France, ordered Duke Henry de Guise, a very popular member of the French aristocracy, to be put to death, in spite of the fact that the Duke was under the protection of a safe conduct. Although just cause underlay that order of the king, such cause was not made manifest. The case having been brought up in Rome, Cardinal Ludovico Madruzzi, a man of great judgment in public affairs, commented: “Rulers should see to it not only that their actions are true and in conformity with justice, but that they also seem to be so.”

Madruzzi’s statement was proved true by the calamities which overtook France shortly after.

The Romans, who were great experts in political matters, paid particular attention to appearances. Both their judges and their senators, on giving out an opinion, were always wont to say: “It seems.”

To summarize: It was because of their knowledge of the greatest affairs that philosophers were, by the Greeks, called “politici,” i.e., experts in matters bearing on the total life of the body politic. Subsequently, philosophers were called Peripatetics and Academicians, these names being derived from two small sections of the town of Athens, where their schools stood. Among the Ancients, the teaching of rational, physical, and ethical doctrines was entrusted to philosophers who took good care to adjust those doctrines to the practical common sense that should govern human behavior.

Today, on the contrary, we seem to have reverted to the type of physical research which was typical of pre-Socratic times.

There was an epoch when the “fourfold philosophy” (i.e., logic, physics, metaphysics, and ethics) was handed down by its teachers in a manner fitted to foster eloquence: i.e., the attempt
was made to fuse philosophy with eloquence. Demosthenes was a product of the Lyceum; Cicero, of the Academy; there is no doubt that they were the two foremost speakers of the two most splendid of languages. Today, those branches of philosophical theory are taught by such a method as to dry up every fount of convincing expression, of copious, penetrating, embellished, lucid, developed, psychologically effective, and impassionate utterance. The listeners’ minds undergo a process of constriction, so as to assume the shape of those young virgins.

... whom their mothers compel to bend their shoulders, to stoop, to bind their bosom in order to achieve slimness;
if one of the girls is fleshier, they call her “the boxer” and stint her on food;
if by nature she is healthy, they reduce her, by a special cure,
to the slenderness of a reed.

[Terence, The Eunuch II.ii.23–26]

Here some learned pundit might object that, in the conduct of life, I would have our young students become courtiers, and not philosophers; pay little attention to truth and follow not reality but appearances; and cast down morality and put on a deceitful “front” of virtue.

I have no such intention. Instead, I should like to have them act as philosophers, even at court; to care for truth that both is and has the appearance of truth, and to follow that which is morally good and which everybody approves.

As for eloquence, the same men assert that the modern study methods, far from being detrimental, are most useful to it. “How much preferable it is,” they say, “to induce persuasion by solid arguments based on truth, to produce such an effect on the mind that, once that truth coalesces with reason, it can never again be separated from it, rather than to coerce the listener’s soul by merrtrically eloquent allusions, but blazes of oratorical fire which, as soon as they are extinguished, cause him to revert to his original disposition!”

The answer is that eloquence does not address itself to the rational part of our nature, but almost entirely to our passions. The rational part in us may be taken captive by a net woven of purely intellectual reasonings, but the passionate side of our nature can never be swayed and overcome unless this is done by more sensuous and materialistic means. The role of eloquence is to persuade; an orator is persuasive when he calls forth in his hearers the mood which he desires. Wise men induce this condition in themselves by an act of volition. This volition, in perfect obedience, follows the dictates of their intellect; consequently, it is enough for the speaker to point their duty to such wise men, and they do it. But the multitude, the vulgus, are overpowered and carried along by their appetite, which is tumultuous and turbulent; their soul is tainted, having contracted a contagion from the body, so that it follows the nature of the body, and is not moved except by bodily things. Therefore, the soul must be enticed by corporeal images and impelled to love: for once it loves, it is easily taught to believe; once it believes and loves, the fire of passion must be infused into it so as to break its inertia and force it to will. Unless the speaker can compass these three things, he has not achieved the effect of persuasion; he has been powerless to convince.

Two things only are capable of turning to good use the agitations of the soul, those evils of the inward man which spring from a single source: desire. One is philosophy, which acts to mitigate passions in the soul of the sage, so that those passions are transformed into virtues; the other is eloquence, which kindles those passions in the common sort, so that they perform the duties of virtue.

It may be objected that the form of government under which we live at present no longer allows eloquence to exercise its control over free peoples. To which I answer that we ought to be thankful to our monarchs for governing us not by fist but by laws. However, even under the republican form of government, orators have gained distinction by their fluent, broad, impassioned style of delivery in the law courts, the assemblies, and the religious convocations, to the greatest advantage of the state, and to the signal enrichment of our language.

But the point. The Future, endowed