

Which Hero, Which Story? Descartes and Vico: Alternative Stories in the Age of Reason

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One of the problems of teaching the arts and humanities in the digital age can be traced to the very Western notion of the isolated individual in search of “truth,” apart from his or her fellow humans, a view of the individual, which is antithetical to the arts and humanities. This view dates back to Rene Descartes (1596-1650), the father of modern philosophy and the “first modern man” (Verene 15). Descartes’ story is that of a solitary enlightenment hero in quest of truth obtained by the “unaided reason,” a quest wherein Descartes pictures himself as a master-builder and a solitary traveler along life’s road. This story of the isolated individual in search of truth, coupled with Descartes’ deductive methodology, very quickly became the model for education in Europe and eventually the United States (Gianturco xxv).

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), born eighteen years after Descartes’ death, saw himself engaged in a struggle against Cartesian metaphysics and methodology, because for Vico, a publicistic, Renaissance man, Descartes had succeeded in cutting people off from their history, from each other and from a sense of corporate responsibility. In this essay I first discuss the renewed interest in narrative in a number of disciplines, then describe the different educational starting points for Vico and Descartes, then turn to the life stories told by both Rene Descartes and Giambattista Vico. As I retell these stories it is my hope that we as educators will recognize ourselves and our teaching and research methods, and begin to see that a contemporary commitment to the arts and humanities begins with a rejection of Descartes’ solipsism in favor of a more social view of the self, the view suggested by Vico.