

### Knowledge Unified

When Vico surveyed the state of education in the universities, he saw knowledge fragmenting. Classical philosophy had unified every branch of knowledge into coherent systems. That unity of knowledge was the practical result of an educational system that had one teacher instructing his students in every field. Though Vico does not mention it, medieval Scholasticism had also tightly integrated all knowledge in its harmonization of Aristotelianism and church dogma. The Schoolmen's system was the result of Church-dominated universities studying Aristotle's writing which had been reintroduced to Europe. The Renaissance and Enlightenment, however, had no unified knowledge but instead many separate disciplines taught by adherents of different philosophies. This lack of systematized knowledge, following the trend of fragmentation during these eras, was the result of an increase in and diversification of knowledge that the brittle classical and medieval systems could not contain.

Lamenting that fragmentation and comparing it to the classical model, Vico sought a new unity of knowledge by means of rhetoric (which he calls *eloquence*). He cites a tradition of his university that the professor of eloquence would speak to the students concerning all the arts and sciences and the advice of Francis Bacon that students should study eloquence only after they had completed the rest of the curriculum. Vico required such unification because of its advantages for "public polity."

Vico's arguments are weak. A minor tradition at one university is not a precedent for all scholars. Bacon's advice is misappropriated, since other implications could be drawn from it. But most important, Vico is not aware that his attempt at a unification of knowledge, like that of the classical philosophers and the medieval Schoolmen, is a product of his time. He chooses the study of eloquence as the means to systematize knowledge because of the Renaissance and Enlightenment focus on the public sphere and, at least in part, because he was a professor of eloquence. His theory may have been timely, but it was not timeless. If one must seek for it, one must find another means to unify knowledge than rhetoric.