

COLLECTION

Great Didactic

John Amos Comenius

5 texts

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Greetings to the Reader

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

STROMATA 60

INTRODUCTION

Written in the mid-seventeenth century by the Moravian bishop who lost wife, children, home, and country to the Thirty Years' War, these prefatory pages open the Great Didactic, the founding document of modern pedagogy, from which later traditions of universal education and graded schooling descend. Comenius proposes nothing less than an art of teaching all things to all people, grounded not in patchwork experience but in the nature of things themselves, and offered as a remedy for the disorder he saw consuming Christendom. The tone is at once practical and visionary: a reformer addressing teachers, parents, and magistrates with the conviction that schooling rightly ordered is inseparable from piety rightly formed. Expect an argumentative and programmatic reading, written with the gravity of a man who believed education might yet repair a broken world.

Let the main object of this, our Didactic, be as follows :

To seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners may learn more ; by which schools may be the scene of less noise, aversion, and useless labour, but of more leisure, enjoyment, and solid progress; and through which the Christian community may have less darkness, perplexity, and dissension, but on the other hand more light, orderliness, peace, and rest.

God be merciful unto us and bless us, and cause his face to shine upon us ; >That thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving health among all nations. Psalm 67: 1, 2

Greetings to the reader

- Didactic signifies the art of teaching. Several men of ability, taking pity on the Sisyphus-labour of schools, have lately endeavoured to find out some such Art, but with unequal skill and unequal success.
- Some merely wished to give assistance towards learning some language or other with greater ease. Others found ways of imparting this or that science or art with greater speed. Others suggested improvements of various kinds; but almost all proceeded by means of unconnected precepts, gleaned from a superficial experience, that is to say, *a posteriori*.
- We venture to promise a Great Didactic, that is to say, the whole art of teaching all things to all men, and indeed of teaching them with certainty, so that the result cannot fail to follow; further, of teaching them pleasantly, that is to say, without annoyance or aversion on the part of teacher or pupil, but rather with the greatest enjoyment for both; further of teaching them thoroughly, not

superficially and showily, but in such a manner as to lead to true knowledge, to gentle morals, and to the deepest piety. Lastly, we wish to prove all this *a priori*, that is to say, from the unalterable nature of the matter itself, drawing off, as from a living source, the constantly flowing runlets, and bringing them together again into one concentrated stream, that we may lay the foundations of the universal art of founding universal schools.

- The prospect which is here held out is indeed great and very desirable, though I can easily foresee that to many it will appear to be an idle dream rather than the exposition of a real possibility.

In the meantime let each one, whoever he may be, withhold his judgment until he knows the true nature of my proposition. He will then be at liberty not only to form his judgment, but also to make it public. For I cannot wish, and much less can I claim, to hurry along any one by persuasion so that he give his approval to an insufficiently established proposition; but rather desire that each observer should naturally bring to bear on the matter his own, and indeed his keenest senses (which should be dulled by no deceits of the imagination). This it is that I most earnestly demand and entreat.

- The matter is indeed a serious one, and, as all should earnestly wish for the result, so should all, with united effort, carefully pass judgment on the means, since the salvation of the human race is at stake.

What better or what greater service could we perform for the state than to instruct and to educate the young? Especially at the present time and in the present condition of morals, when they have sunk so low that, as Cicero says, all should join to bridle them and keep them in check. It was Philip Melanchthon who remarked that to educate the young well was a greater feat than to sack Troy; and in this connection we may note the saying of Gregory Nazianzen: "To educate man is the art of arts, for he is the most complex and the most mysterious of all creatures."

- Now to portray the art of arts is a troublesome matter, and calls for exceptional criticism; and not that of one man alone, but of many; since no individual is so keen-sighted that the greater part of any matter does not escape his observation.
- With justice therefore I demand from my readers, and adjure all who shall see this undertaking, by the salvation of mankind: firstly, not to attribute it to indiscretion if any one resolve not only to investigate so weighty a matter, but also to give promises; since this can only have the advantage of others as its object. Secondly, not to lose heart at once, if the first attempt do not succeed on the spot, and the longed-for result be not brought to full completion by us. For in any matter it is necessary that the seed should first sprout, and then raise itself gradually.

However incomplete, therefore, our essay may be, and however much it fall short of the goal at which we aim, the investigation itself will prove that it has reached a higher stage, and one lying nearer the goal than hitherto. Finally, I ask my readers to bring with them to their criticism as much attention and keenness as is befitting in matters of the greatest importance. It will be my first step to touch briefly on the circumstances that led to this essay and to enumerate the chief points that present any novelty; I can then with full confidence entrust the one to my reader's candour, the other to his further research.

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This art of teaching and of learning was in former centuries to a great extent unknown, at any rate in that degree of perfection to which it is now wished to raise it, and on that account the world of culture and the schools were so full of toil and weariness, of weakness and deceits, that only those who were gifted with parts beyond the ordinary could obtain a sound education.

- But recently it has pleased God to let the morning glow of a newly-rising age appear, in which He has inspired some sturdy men in Germany, who, weary of the errors of the present method of instruction, began to think out an easier and shorter way of teaching languages. This they did, the one after the other, and therefore some with greater, others with less success, as may be seen in the didactic works that they gave to the world.
- I here allude to men like Ratke, Lubin, Helwig, Ritter, Bodin, Glaum, Vogel, Wolfstirn, and he who deserves to be placed before them all, John Valentine Andreae (who in his golden writings has laid bare the diseases not only of the Church and the state, but also of the schools, and has pointed out the remedies). In France too they set this stone in motion, since, in the year 1629, Janus Caecilius Frey brought out a fine work on Didactic (under the title, *A new and easy way to the goodly Sciences and Arts, to Languages, and to Rhetoric*).
- It is almost incredible what pleasure I found, and how my pain over the decline of my native land and the terribly oppressed state of all Germany was lightened whenever opportunity arose and I turned over the pages of these writings. For I began to hope that it was not without purpose that the providence of the Almighty had allowed it to come to pass that the decline of the old schools and the foundation of new ones in harmony with new ideas should take place at one and the same time. For he who intends to raise a new building, invariably levels the ground beforehand and removes the less comfortable or ruined houses.
- This thought raised in me a joyful hope mingled with pleasant emotion; but I soon felt this vanish, and reflected that it would be impossible to reconstruct such an important institution from the very beginning.
- As I wished for instruction on some points, and on others wished, myself, to instruct my fellows, I applied by letter first to one then to another of the above-mentioned writers. In vain, however, partly because some guarded their ideas with great care, partly because the letters did not reach those to whom they were directed, and therefore remained unanswered.
- Only one of them (the renowned J. V. Andreae) sent the friendly answer that he wished to be of some assistance, and urged me to proceed with my efforts. Stimulated by this, my spirit began to take more daring flights, till at last my unbounded solicitude for the public good led me to take the matter thoroughly in hand.
- So, putting on one side the discoveries, thoughts, observations, and admonitions of others, I began myself to investigate the matter thoughtfully and to seek out the causes, the principles, the methods, and the objects of the art of teaching (*discentia* as they may be called after Tertullian).
- This was the origin of my treatise, which, as I trust, develops the subject more thoroughly than has hitherto been done. It was first composed in my mother tongue for the use of my people, and

afterwards on the advice of several men of standing translated into Latin, in order that, if possible, it might be of universal use.

- For, as Lubin says in his Didactic, Charity bids us not to niggardly withhold from mankind what God has intended for the use of all, but to throw it open to the whole world. For it is the nature of all true possessions that they can be shared by all; and that they advantage all more and more in proportion as they are shared by greater numbers.
 - It is also a law of human existence that if any know of assistance lying close at hand to those who are struggling he should not withhold it from them; especially in a case, as in the one before us, where the matter concerns not one but many, and not individuals merely but towns, provinces, kingdoms, and in short the whole human race.
 - Should there be any man who is such a pedant as to think that the reform of schools has nothing to do with the vocation of a Theologian, let him know that I was myself thoroughly penetrated with this idea. But I have found that the only way in which I can be freed from it is to follow God's call, and without digression to devote myself to that work to which the divine impulse directs me.
 - Christian readers, suffer me to speak with you confidentially! My more intimate friends know that I am a man of little ability and almost without literary training, but that, nevertheless, I lament the defects of the age, and make great endeavours to remedy these in any way that is possible, whether by means of my own discoveries or those of others (though this can only take place by the grace of God).
 - Therefore, if anything should find favour, it is not my work but His who is wont to win praise from the mouths of children, and who in order to prove Himself faithful, earnest, and benign, gives to those who ask, opens to those who knock, and grants Himself to those who seek Him (Luke xi.), and whose good gifts to us we ought to pass on ungrudgingly to others. As my Saviour knows, my heart is so simple that it makes no difference to me whether I teach or am taught, whether I exhort or am exhorted, whether I am the teacher of teachers, or the scholar of scholars.
 - And so, what the Lord permits me to observe, that give I forth for public use and as common property.
 - If any find anything better, let him follow my example, lest, having buried his talent in a napkin, he be accused of wantonness by our Lord, who wills that His servants put out to usury so that the talent which is given to each may win another talent (Luke xix.).
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To seek what is great is noble, was ever noble, and ever will be noble. What thou hast begun with God cannot remain without result.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/greetings-to-the-reader>

Dedicatory Letter

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

STROMATA 61

INTRODUCTION

Composed in the wake of the Thirty Years' War, which scattered the Bohemian Brethren and cost Comenius his wife, children, and library, this open letter prefaces his *Great Didactic*, the founding document of modern pedagogy. The argument here is theological before it is educational: humanity, expelled from Eden, must be cultivated back into a garden fit for God, and the work of teaching is the work of restoration. Comenius addresses magistrates, pastors, and parents alike because he holds them jointly responsible for what the human race is becoming. Read it as a lament that gathers itself, mid-sentence, into a summons.

To all superiors of human society, to the rulers of states, the pastors of Churches, the parents and guardians of children, grace and peace from God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Ghost.

God, having created man out of dust, placed him in a Paradise of desire, which he had planted in the East, not only that man might tend it and care for it, but also that he might be a garden of delight for his God.

For as Paradise was the pleasantest part of the world, so also was man the most perfect of things created. In Paradise each tree was delightful to look at, and more pleasant to enjoy than those which grew throughout the earth. In man, the whole material of the world, all the forms and the varieties of forms were, as it were, brought together into one in order to display the whole skill and wisdom of God. Paradise contained the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; man had the intellect to distinguish, and the will to choose between the good and the bad. In Paradise was the tree of life. In man was the tree of Immortality itself; that is to say, the wisdom of God, which had planted its eternal roots in man.

And so each man is, in truth, a Garden of Delights for his God, as long as he remains in the spot where he has been placed. The Church too, which is a collection of men devoted to God, is often in Holy Writ likened to a Paradise, to a garden, to a vineyard of God. But alas for our misfortune! We have at the same time lost the Paradise of bodily delight in which we were, and that of spiritual delight, which we were ourselves. We have been cast out into the deserts of the earth, and have ourselves become wild and horrible wildernesses. We were ungrateful for the gifts, both of the body and of the soul, with which God had so richly provided Paradise; with right therefore have we been deprived of them and been dowered with calamity.

But glory, praise, honour, and blessing for everlasting to our merciful God who abandoned us for a while but did not thrust us from Him for ever. ... The garden of the Church, the delight of God's heart, blooms anew.

But does this new plantation of God succeed entirely according to His wishes? Do all the shoots grow successfully? Do all the newly-planted trees bring forth spikenard, crocus, cinnamon, myrrh, spices, and costly fruits? Do we hear the voice of God calling to His Church: *I had planted thee a noble vine, wholly a right seed: how then art thou turned into the degenerate plant of a strange vine unto me?* (Jeremiah ii. 21). Here we have the complaint of God that even this new plantation of Paradise is deteriorating. . . .

He who knows not that he is ill cannot heal himself; he who feels not his pain utters no sigh; he who sees not his danger does not start back, even though he be on the brink of an abyss; and so it is not to be wondered at that he who perceives not the wave of disorder which is sweeping over the human race and over the Church, does not lament the fact. But he who sees himself and others covered with countless wounds; he who remarks that the wounds and boils, both his own and other men's, fester ever more and more; and who knows that he, with others, stands in the midst of gulfs and precipices and wanders among snares, in which he sees one man after another being caught, it is hard for him not to be terrified, not to marvel, not to perish with grief.

For what part of us or of our concerns is in good condition? None. Everything lies overturned or in shreds. With most men such a dulness of wit is predominant, instead of the understanding through which we ought to be equal to the angels, that they know no more about those things which are worthy of our attention than do the beasts. Instead of the circumspection with which those who are destined for eternity ought to prepare themselves for it, there reigns such forgetfulness, not only of eternity but also of mortality, that most men give themselves up to what is earthly and transient, yea, even to the death that stands before them. Instead of the godly wisdom through which it has been given to us to know, to honour, and to enjoy the One who is the height of all goodness, there has arisen a horrible shrinking from that God in whom we live, move, and have our being, and a foolish conjuration of His holy name. Instead of mutual love and purity, reign hatred, enmity, war, and murder. Instead of justice, we find unfairness, roguery, oppression, theft, and rapine; instead of purity, uncleanness and audacity of thought, word, and deed; instead of simplicity and truth, lying, deception, and knavery; instead of modesty, pride and haughtiness between man and man.

But in spite of all this, there remains for us a twofold comfort. First, that God keeps the eternal Paradise in readiness for His chosen ones, and that there we shall find a perfection, more complete and more durable than that first one which we lost. Into this Paradise went Christ (Luke xxiii. 43), thither was Paul caught up (2 Corinthians xii. 4), and John saw its splendour with his own eyes (Rev. i. 12; xxi. 10).

Another consolation consists in this, that here below also God continually renews the Paradise of the Church, and turns its deserts into a garden of delights. We have on several occasions seen with what grandeur this has already taken place: after the Fall, after the Flood, after the entrance of the children of Israel into the land of Canaan, under David and Solomon, after the return from Babylon and the

rebuilding of Jerusalem, after Christ's ascension into heaven and the preaching of the Gospel to all nations, under Constantine, and elsewhere. Perchance even now, after such a bloody war and after such devastation, the Father of mercy looks upon us graciously: how thankfully should we approach Him, and ourselves take care of our own interests, working by those ways and means which the most wise God, the Ordainer of all things, will show us.

The most useful thing that the Holy Scriptures teach us in this connection is this, that there is no more certain way under the sun for the raising of sunken humanity than the proper education of the young. Indeed Solomon, after he had gone through the whole labyrinth of human error and had mournfully recognised that perverseness could not be cured nor imperfections enumerated, turned at length to the young and adjured them to remember their Creator in the days of their youth, to fear Him, and to keep His commandments, for that this was the whole duty of man (Eccles. xii. 13). And in another place, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it" (Proverbs xxii. 6). David also says, "Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the Lord" (Psalm xxxiv. 11). The heavenly David himself, the true Solomon, the eternal Son of God who came down from heaven to turn us from sin, leads us on to the same path when He says, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark x. 14), and said to us besides, "Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew xviii. 3). What advice is this! Hear, all of you, and weigh carefully what the Lord and Master declares; how He announces that the little ones only are fit for the kingdom of God, that they are heirs of the kingdom and that only those who become as little children are to be admitted to share this inheritance. O dear children, may you rightly appreciate this goodly privilege! Just consider, we elders, who consider that we alone are men, but that you are apes, that we alone are wise, and that you lack sense, that we are eloquent, but you speechless "we, I say, are sent to learn our lessons from you! You are set over us as masters, you are to be our models and examples.

If any one should wish to deliberate why God prizes children so highly, he will find no weightier reason than this, that children are simpler and more susceptible to the remedy which the mercy of God grants to the lamentable condition of men. For this reason it is that Christ commands us elders to become as little children, that is, to throw off the evil that we have gained from a bad education and from the evil examples of the world, and to return to our former condition of simplicity, gentleness, modesty, purity, and obedience. But, because nothing is harder than to lay aside our habits, it comes to pass that there is no more difficult task than for a badly-trained man to return to his former state. The tree remains as it grows, high or low, with straight or with crooked branches, and when it is full grown cannot be altered. The felloe, the piece of wood which has been bent to the shape of the wheel and has become hard in this position, breaks rather than be straightened, as experience teaches us. God also says the same of men who are accustomed to evil dealing: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good that are accustomed to do evil" (Jeremiah xiii. 23). From this it necessarily follows that, if the corruption of the human race is to be remedied, this must be done by means of the careful education of the young.

But in order to educate the young carefully it is necessary to take timely precautions that their characters be guarded from the corruptions of the world, that the seed of honour sown in them be brought to a happy growth by pure and continuous teaching and examples, and, lastly, that their minds be given over to the true knowledge of God, of man, and of nature, that they may grow accustomed to see in this light the light of God, and to love and to honour the Father of Light above all things.

If this take place, the truth of the Psalmist's words will be evident, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger" (Psalm viii. 3).

For this reason has God given the little ones angels as guardians (Matthew xviii. 10), has placed their parents over them to take care of them, and bidden them to bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians vi. 4); and thus He solemnly bids all others, under penalty of eternal damnation, not to lead the young into sin through a bad example (Matthew xviii. 6, 7).

But how are we to carry this out when corruption is spreading so rapidly? In the time of the Patriarchs, since these holy men dwelt in seclusion from the world, and, in their own families, were not only fathers but priests, masters, and teachers as well, this was not such a difficult matter. For, after they had removed their children from intercourse with wicked men and had enlightened them by good and virtuous example, they brought them up by gentle admonition, encouragement, and, where necessary, by correction. God Himself is witness that Abraham did so, when He says: "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord to do justice and judgment" (Genesis xviii. 19). But now we dwell close together, the good and the bad are mingled, and the bad are many more than the good. The example of these men makes so powerful an impression on the young that the precepts for the practice of virtue, which we administer as an antidote against evil, have either no result at all or one that is inappreciable. But what must be the result if even these precepts are seldom delivered? There are few parents who are in the position to teach their children anything good, either because they have themselves never learned anything of the kind, or because their heads are full of other things; and thus education is neglected.

There are also few teachers who can bring good principles home to the young, and when one arises he is snatched up by some man in high position that he may busy himself with his children; the people get little advantage from him. Thus it comes to pass that the rest of the children grow up without the education that they need, like a forest which no one plants, waters, cuts, or keeps in order. Hence it is that we find unruly manners and customs in the world, in towns and in market-places, in houses and in men, for these both in body and soul are full of confusion. If Diogenes, Socrates, Seneca, or Solomon were to come to life again this day and visit us, they would find the world in the same state as formerly. Were God to address us from heaven He could only say as He said before: "They are all gone astray, they are altogether become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one" (Psalm xiv. 3). If, therefore, any man exist who can devise some plan, or who with tears, sighs, and entreaties can obtain from heaven a method by which some improvement may be made in the youth who are growing up, let him not hold his tongue, but rather let him advise, think, and speak. "Cursed be he that maketh the blind to wander out of the way," says God (Deuteronomy xxvii. 18). And cursed, therefore, is he who can free the blind from their error and does not do so. "Woe unto him who shall offend one of these little ones," says Christ (Matthew xviii. 6, 7). Woe also unto him who can prevent injury and does not. God wills not that the ass or the ox that strays through field and forest and sinks under its burden be deserted, but that it receive help, even if the helper do not know to whom it belongs, or if he know that it is his enemy's (Deuteronomy xxii. 1). Can it then please Him that we pass by without thought, and stretch out no helping hand, when we see the errors, not of beasts, but of intelligent beings, not of one or two, but of the whole world? Let this be far from us!

Cursed be he that doeth the work of the Lord deceitfully, and cursed be he that keepeth back his sword from blood (Jeremiah xlvi. 10). And yet we hope to remain guiltless while we thoughtlessly suffer the terrible Babylon of error that is ours! Up, let him seize his sword who is girt with one, or who knows where one lies buried in its sheath! Let him demand the destruction of Babylon, that he be blessed by the Lord!

And so fulfil this command of the Lord with eagerness, ye rulers, ye servants of the Most High, and with the sword of righteousness banish the disorder with which the world is filled.

Busy yourselves, ye governors, ye faithful servants of Jesus Christ, and utterly destroy evil with the sword that is entrusted to you, with the two-edged sword of speech! Ye have seen that early youth is the best time to attack the evils of the human race; that the tree which is to thrive for ages is best planted when quite young; that Sion is most easily raised on the site of Babylon when the living building-stones of God, the young, are early broken, shaped, and fitted for the heavenly building. If we wish to have well-ordered and prosperous Churches, states, and households, thus and in no other way can we reach our goal.

But how to take this in hand and to carry it out with the desired result, this I will place before your eyes, I whose spirit the Lord has called to the work. See, hear, and mark its nature carefully, you to whom the Lord has given eyes to see, ears to hear, and minds to judge.

If a light, unseen before, be revealed to any, let him give God the glory and not grudge the illumination to the rising generation. But if he perceive any defect, even the smallest, in this light, let him complete and perfect it, or, that it may be perfected, let him recall the saying, many eyes are better than one.

Thus we shall mutually help one another to carry out the work of God with unanimity; thus we shall escape the curse which threatens those who neglect the Lord's work; thus we shall consult the welfare of the world's most precious possession, the young, as much as is possible; thus we shall shine with the brightness granted to those that turn others to righteousness (Daniel xii. 3).

May God have mercy on us, that we see the light. Amen.

Editor's note: Following Lindner, Keatinge has slightly curtailed this Dedicatory Letter in his translation.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/dedicatory-letter>

The Use of the Art of Teaching

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Essay

STROMATA 62

INTRODUCTION

A chapter from the *Didactica Magna*, written in Latin during the 1630s by a Moravian bishop of the Unity of the Brethren who spent most of his adult life in exile after Habsburg armies destroyed his community, his library, and his manuscripts. Comenius argued, against the prevailing assumption that learning required suffering, that a properly ordered method could make schools into "places of amusement," and his vision of universal education laid the groundwork for modern pedagogy, from Pestalozzi through the common school movement. The seven-fold scheme presented here moves outward from parents to heaven itself, treating the reform of teaching as continuous with the reform of the Church and the salvation of souls. Expect a confident, system-building argument written by a man who believed pedagogy was a branch of theology.

That the art of teaching be placed on a proper foundation is to the advantage.”

- Of **parents**, who up to this time have for the most part been uncertain how much to expect from their children. They hired tutors, besought them, strove to win them over by gifts, changed them, just as often in vain as with any result. But now that the method of teaching has been reasoned out with unerring accuracy, it will, with the assistance of God, be impossible that the desired result should not follow.
- Of **schoolmasters**, the greater number of whom have been quite ignorant of their art, and who used therefore to wear themselves out when they wished to fulfil their duty, and to exhaust their strength in laborious efforts; or used to change their method, trying in turn first one plan then another—a course which involved a tedious waste of time and of energy.
- Of **students**, who may master the sciences without difficulty, tedium, complaints, or blows, as if in sport and in merriment.
- Of **schools**, which, when the method has been established, will be not only preserved continuously in full vigour, but increased without limit. For they will indeed become places of amusement, houses of delights and attractions, and since (on account of the infallibility of the method) each student, of whatever capacity, will become a doctor (of a higher or lower grade), it will never be possible for a dearth of suitable school-teachers to arise, or for learning not to flourish.

- Of **states**, according to the testimony of Cicero. With whom agrees that of Diogenes the Pythagorean. For what is the foundation of the whole state? Surely, the development of the young. Since vines that have not been well cultivated will not bear good fruit.
- Of **the Church**, since the proper organisation of schools alone can bring it about that the churches shall never lack learned doctors, and that learned doctors shall never lack suitable hearers.
- And lastly, it is to the advantage of **heaven** that schools should be reformed for the exact and universal culture of the intellect, that those whom the sound of the divine trumpet is unable to stir up may be the more easily freed from darkness by the brilliancy of the divine light. For, although the Gospel be preached everywhere (and we hope that it will be preached to the ends of the earth), still the same thing is apt to happen as takes place in any meeting-place, tavern, or other tumultuous gathering of men, that not he alone is heard or gains particular attention who brings forward the best things, but that each one occupies with his own trifles the man near whom he happens to sit or to stand. Thus it comes to pass in the world. Though the ministers of the Word fulfil their duty with great zeal; though they talk, orate, exhort, testify, they none the less remain unheard by the greater part of mankind. For many never go to religious meetings except by chance; others come with their ears and eyes closed, and, as their minds are occupied with other matters, pay little attention to what is taking place. And lastly, if they do attend and grasp the purport of the sacred exhortation, they are not so greatly affected by it as they should be, since the accustomed sluggishness of their minds, and the evil habits that they have acquired, blunt, bewitch, and harden them, so that they are unable to free themselves from their old custom. And thus they stick fast in their habitual blindness and sin, as if bound so firmly by chains that none but God Himself could free them from their ingrained perverseness. As one of the fathers has said, it is very near a miracle if an inveterate sinner be converted to repentance. Now, as in other matters, so in this; where God supplies means, to ask for a miracle is to tempt Him. Let us therefore consider it our duty to meditate on the means by which the whole Christian youth may be more fervidly stirred up to vigour of mind and love of heavenly things. If we can attain this we shall see the kingdom of heaven spread more and more, as of old.

Let none therefore withdraw his thoughts, desires, strength, or resources from such a sacred undertaking. He who has given the will, will also grant its fulfilment, and we ought without exception to demand this with good heart from the divine mercy. For the salvation of man and the glory of the Most High is at stake.

Johann Valentin Andreae

P.S. "It is inglorious to despair of progress, and wrong to despise the counsel of others."

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

Written by Johann Valentin Andreae as a foreword within the full work.

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/the-use-of-the-art-of-teaching>

Chapter I: Man is the Highest, the Most Absolute, and the Most Excellent of Things Created

John Amos Comenius

Reformed · Post-Reformation · Treatise

STROMATA 63

INTRODUCTION

The opening chapter of *The Great Didactic*, written by the Moravian bishop and educational reformer who lost his wife, children, and library to the upheavals of the Thirty Years' War, yet spent his exile arguing that universal education was a sacred obligation. Comenius begins not with pedagogy but with anthropology: before asking how to teach, he asks what a human being is, and answers with a meditation on the imago Dei and the Incarnation. The work that follows would shape the structure of modern schooling across Protestant Europe and beyond, but its foundation is laid here, in theological terms now largely forgotten by the systems it produced. Read it as a devotional preface to a practical treatise, closer in spirit to a sermon than a syllabus.

When Pittacus of old gave to the world his saying Know thyself, the sentiment was received by the wise with so much approval, that, in order to impress it on the people, they declared that it had fallen from heaven, and caused it to be written in golden letters on the temple of the Delphic Apollo, where great assemblies of men used to collect. Their action was prudent and wise; but their statement was false. It was, however, in the interests of truth, and is of great importance to us.

For what is the voice from heaven that resounds in the Scriptures butœKnow thyself, O man, and know Me. Me the source of eternity, of wisdom and of grace; thyself, My creation, My likeness, My delight.

For I have destined thee to be the companion of My eternity; for thy use I designed the heaven, the earth and all that in them is; to thee alone I gave all those things in conjunction, which to the rest of creation I gave but singly, namely, Existence, Vitality, Sense, and Reason. I have made thee to have dominion over the works of My hands. I have placed all things under thy feet, sheep and oxen and the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea, and I have crowned thee with glory and with honour (Psalm viii.). To thee, finally, lest anything should be lacking, I have given Myself in personal communion, joining My nature to thine for eternity, and in this distinguishing thee from all created things, visible and invisible. For what creature in heaven or in earth can boast that God was manifest in his flesh and was seen of angels (1 Tim. iii. 16), not, forsooth, that they might only see and marvel at Him whom they desired to see (1 Peter i. 12), but that they might adore God made manifest in the flesh, the son of God and of man (Hebrews i. 6; John i. 51; Matthew iv. 11). Know therefore that thou art the corner-stone and epitome of My works, the representative of God among them, the crown of My glory.

Would that this were inscribed, not on the doors of temples, not on the title-pages of books, not on the tongues, ears, and eyes of all men, but on their hearts! Would that this could be done to all who undertake the task of educating men, that they might learn to appreciate the dignity of the task, and of their own excellence, and might bring all means to bear on the perfect realisation of their divinity!

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

<https://www.thestromata.com/texts/chapter-i-man-is-the-highest-the-most-absolute-and-the-most-excellent-of-things-created>

Chapter II: The Ultimate End of Man is Beyond this Life

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INTRODUCTION

Drawn from the opening of the *Didactica Magna* (1632), this chapter lays the anthropological foundation on which Comenius built his lifelong project: a universal pedagogy rooted in the conviction that human formation in this world is preparation for an eternal one. A Moravian bishop scattered by the Thirty Years' War, Comenius writes here not as a schoolmaster but as a theologian of human destiny, arguing from creation, from the threefold structure of life, and from the gradient nature of all human striving. The argument unfolds in patient, accumulating steps, closer to scholastic reasoning than to devotional reflection, and rewards the reader willing to follow a careful chain of inferences toward a single conclusion about what a human being is for.

Reason itself dictates that such a perfect creature is destined to a higher end than all other creatures, that of being united with God, the culmination of all perfection, glory, and happiness, and of enjoying with Him absolute glory and happiness for ever.

Now although this is clear from Scripture, and we stedfastly believe that it is the truth, it will be no loss of time if we lightly touch on the various ways in which God has indicated that our destination lies beyond this life.

First, in the creation itself; for He did not simply command man to exist, as He did the rest of His creatures; but, after solemn consideration, He formed a body for him with His own fingers and breathed the soul into it from Himself.

Our nature shows that this life is not sufficient for us. For here we live a threefold life, the vegetative, the animal, and the intellectual or spiritual. Of these the action of the first is confined to the body, the second can extend itself to objects by the operation of the senses and of movement, while the third is able to exist separately, as is evident in the case of angels. So that, as it is evident that this, the last stage of life, is greatly overshadowed and hindered in us by the two former, it follows of necessity that there will be a future state in which it may be brought to perfection.

All our actions and affections in this life show that we do not attain our ultimate end here, but that everything connected with us, as well as we ourselves, has another destination. For whatever we are, do, think, speak, contrive, acquire, or possess, contains a principle of gradation, and, though we mount perpetually and attain higher grades, we still continue to advance and never reach the highest.

For in the beginning a man is nothing, and has been non-existent from eternity. It is from his mother's womb that he takes his origin. What then is a man in the beginning? Nothing but an unformed mass endowed with vitality. This soon assumes the outlines of a human body, but has, as yet, neither sense nor movement. Later on it begins to move and by a natural process bursts forth into the world. Gradually the eyes, ears, and other organs of sense appear. In course of time the internal senses develop and the child perceives that he sees, hears, and feels. Then the intellect comes into existence by cognising the differences between objects; while, finally, the will assumes the office of a guiding principle by displaying desire for certain objects and aversion for others.

But in all these individual points of progress we find nothing but succession. For the intelligence that underlies matter makes itself seen by degrees, like a ray of dawn shining through the darkness of night, and, as long as life remains, there is a continual access of light, unless a man become utterly brutish. Thus our actions are at first weak, unformed and confused; then the virtues of the mind unfold themselves proportionately to the forces of the body, so that as long as we live (unless the greatest lethargy take possession of us and bury us alive) we are continually exercising our faculties.

In a worthy mind all these functions tend to a higher development, nor can we find any end of the things that we desire or wish to accomplish.

In whatever direction a man turns he may perceive this experimentally. If any have an excessive desire for riches he will not find anything that can satisfy his greed, though he possess the whole world; as was evident in the case of Alexander. If any burn with desire for honour he will not be able to rest though the whole world adore him.

If any give himself over to pleasure, rivers of delight may bathe all his senses, but he becomes accustomed to them, and his appetite continues to desire one thing after another. If any apply his mind to the study of wisdom he will find no end; for the more a man knows, the more he realises his ignorance. Rightly did Solomon say that the eye could not grow tired of seeing or the ear of hearing.

Indeed, the examples of those who die teach us that death does not put the last touch to existence. For those whose life has been righteous rejoice that they are to enter on a better one; while those who are filled with love of the present life, seeing that they must leave it and migrate elsewhere, begin to tremble and to reconcile themselves with God and man, if by any chance this be still possible. And, although the body, broken down by pain, grows faint, the senses become clouded, and life itself slips away, the mind fulfils its functions more vividly than ever, as we see when a man circumspectly summons his family and heirs about his death-bed. So that he who sees a pious and wise man dying sees nothing but the structure of clay falling asunder; he who listens to him hears an angel's voice and cannot but confess that the dweller is only taking his departure while the house falls to ruin about him. Even the heathen understood this, so that the Romans, according to Festus, called death *abitio*, and with the Greeks, ἡ ἀφάνεια,¹

which signifies "to go away," is frequently used instead of "to die" and "to perish." This can only be because by "death" nothing is understood but transition to another life.

This is all the more evident to us Christians, now that Christ, the Son of the living God, has been sent from heaven to regenerate in us the image of God. For having been conceived of a woman He walked among men; then, having died, He rose again and ascended into heaven, nor had death any more dominion over Him. Now He has been called "our forerunner" (Heb. vi. 20), "the firstborn among his brethren" (Rom. viii. 30), "the head over all things" (Eph. i. 22), and the archetype of all who are to be formed in the image of God (Rom. viii. 29). As then, He did not visit this earth in order to remain on it, but that, when His course was run, He might pass to the eternal mansions; so we also, His companions, must pass on and must not make this our abiding-place.

To each of us, then, his life and his abiding-place is threefold. The mother's womb, the earth, and the heaven. From the first into the second he passes by nativity, and from the second into the third by death and resurrection. From the third he makes no move, but rests there for all eternity. In the first stage we find life in its simplicity, with the commencement of movement and of feeling. In the second we have life, motion, sense, and the elements of intellect. In the third we find the full plenitude of all.

The first life is preparatory to the second, and the second to the third, while the third exists for itself and is without end. The transition from the first into the second and from the second into the third, is narrow and accompanied by pain; and in both cases some covering or surrounding must be laid aside (in the first case the after-birth, in the second the body itself), just as the egg-shell is discarded when a chicken is hatched. Thus the first and second abiding-places are like workshops in which are formed, in the first the body, for use in the following life; in the second the rational soul, for use in the life everlasting. In the third abiding-place the perfection and fruition of both will be realised.

Thus (to use them as a type) were the Israelites born in Egypt. Thence, through the passes of the mountains and through the Red Sea, they were brought into the desert. They built temples, they learned the law, they fought with various tribes, and, at length, having with difficulty crossed the Jordan, they were made heirs of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey.

Source: The Great Didactic, trans. M. W. Keatinge (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1896)

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