

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

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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)

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