

Commentary

**Agonistics:
Eight Controversial Propositions on Controversy**

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What follows is an application of an argument I have been making in numerous recent publications on behalf of the productive potential of controversy for academic institutions.¹ In an academic and cultural scene that is increasingly riven by deep conflicts over fundamental matters of principle and value, I argue that it is increasingly self-defeating to assume that without a consensus on these principles and values the scholarly and pedagogical enterprise must founder. On the contrary, it is the arena of disagreement, where minds can meet and discover their differences, that paradoxically must provide our model of a common conversation. Furthermore, it is at moments of controversy that academic intellectual work clarifies itself most usefully to those both inside and outside the academic fields. On these grounds, I have urged that the best way for academic institutions to respond to their conflicts of philosophy and direction is to “teach the conflicts,” using these conflicts themselves as a new way to overcome disciplinary and curricular incoherence.

Responding to these four excellent papers on key controversies in the history of classical scholarship leads me to speculate about the possibility of a field in its own right that would be devoted to the study of controversy. Lest readers consider such a notion frivolous, here are eight propositions, themselves controversial, some extrapolated from the papers, toward a possible program for such a field, hereby designated as Agonistics (Agonology? Controversy Studies?):

1. Disciplines are defined not only by their shared methods, theories, and objects of study, but by their controversies. In classical studies, as I think these papers suggest, the nature and boundaries of the object of study and the methods of studying it have perennially been controversial.

¹The argument is summed up and elaborated in my two books *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992).

As Christopher Stray argues in his paper, “disputes lie at [the] heart” of classical *Wissenschaft*. He adds that disputes in classical studies have a way of turning into disputes about the very “nature of classical scholarship itself.” Extending Stray’s point, I would argue that to understand a discipline or scholarly field is to understand its fundamental controversies or “fault lines,” a term used by Glenn Most as well as by Stray. Controversies, then, are not just potentially fruitful for a field, as the title of this forum suggests. To a large extent, controversies *constitute* the field itself.

Stray describes several nineteenth-century controversies that virtually defined classics—gentlemanly amateurs vs. rigorous professionals, humanistic generalists vs. narrow specialists, past-oriented positivists vs. present-centered hermeneuticists. Glenn W. Most writes of a controversy earlier in the century that has come to occupy center stage in today’s culture wars—the conflict between the timeless view of the classics entertained by Gottfried Hermann and the historicizing view advanced by K. O. Müller that would displace it. This rift between universalism and historicism, Most observes, lies at “the very heart” of classical study and remains still unhealed today.

2. In order to define and legitimate their identities, disciplines tend to repress or minimize the importance of such controversies, though (as I will suggest in a moment), this “collegiate avoidance” of controversy, as Stray calls it in the case of Jebb and Verrall, paradoxically impairs disciplinary identity. It is interesting that all four papers deal with controversies in classical studies that, despite their rhetorical vehemence, *did not* quite take place, or were not fully carried through. Agonistics will need to be concerned not just with controversy, but with why and how it is avoided, and with what consequences.
3. Controversies that ostensibly seem intramural to a discipline often turn on questions about its boundaries and limits, or about how what is “internal” to the discipline can be distinguished from what is properly “outside the field.”

The case of K. J. Beloch, as recounted by G. W. Bowersock, is a case in point. Though Bowersock doesn’t quite say so, the antagonism of classical scholars he describes toward Beloch’s demographic and statistical studies of the ancient world looks like an instance of the hostility to the social sciences that had already come to define the humanities even in the late nineteenth century, when humanities scholars were embracing science in order to distinguish themselves from genteel amateurs. The controversy Beloch’s work provoked reminds us how, even as the academic humanities were establishing their scientific credentials by condescending to armchair

amateur scholarship, they also were policing the border between themselves and the presumably vulgar social sciences.

Similarly, in Natalie Kampen's account of Otto Brendel's "Prolegomena" we see classical studies defining itself in the 1950s by warding off incursions from economics and sociology. Noting that conflict-avoidance is characteristic of modern liberal democracies (a suggestion that needs to be further investigated), Kampen argues that Brendel's essay on ancient Roman art reflected the anti-Communist liberal pluralism of the fifties in its failure even to mention scholars of "the social or economic context" of antiquity, like Moses Finley. In Bowersock's and Kampen's accounts, we see classics maintaining its identity through resisting contamination by other fields and then keeping a lid on the controversies that might have resulted.

4. Controversy is not only a defining element of an academic field but also central to its intelligibility. It is our conflicts that make us visible and the suppression of them that makes us invisible. Here Agonistics begins to take on pedagogical implications. A student who has no grasp of the fundamental controversies within a field or between it and other fields can only remain a stranger to that field, however correctly such a student may be able to expound the information, methods, and ideas associated with it. Indeed, one can hardly make the simplest statement within the discourse of a field unless one has a sense of which statements are likely to be controversial or non-controversial. When students perform badly, the reasons usually have to do not with lack of knowledge, intelligence, or reading ability but with their failure to acquire a sense of what is controversial or non-controversial in those fields, and of why such controversy matters. When we scholars avoid controversy, therefore, we unwittingly mask the very nature of our work from our students and the nonacademic public. Conversely, as I have suggested, it is at moments of controversy that academic intellectual issues tend to clarify themselves.
5. If these propositions are accepted, then it follows that the institutional separations that result from the avoidance of conflicts—like the separation of classical studies from other academic departments of the humanities, the social sciences, and perhaps even the physical and natural sciences—tend to render academic disciplines unintelligible. Take the institutional separation of classics from English, which effaces the fact that English gained its central place in the modern university by winning a fierce battle with the classicists at the turn of the century. Insofar as the historical conflict between English and classics defines the nature of both disciplines—as I believe it does—the effacement of this conflict that accompanies the separation of

these disciplines from one another renders them opaque. Once the bitter nineteenth century antagonism between classics and English faded and was forgotten, a good part of the meaning of these subjects was lost.

The point can be made more simply as follows: the curriculum conventionally asks students to “cover” a certain range of courses in “ancient” and “modern” fields. But since students study these ancient and modern areas in courses that are not in dialogue with one another, they rarely end up with any clear sense of the differences between ancient and modern. Indeed, the conflict between ancient and modern tends to drop out as an issue, since neither ancient nor modern courses are expected to address it. The ancients vs. moderns quarrel falls into the cracks between courses and departments. To put it another way, since understanding the terms “ancient” and “modern” depends on grasping the relations of *contrast* between these terms, when the study of ancients and moderns are separated the contrasts are rendered invisible and the subjects become opaque.

True story: About fifteen years ago, at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association convention in this very city, the famous baseball player Joe DiMaggio was observed in the lobby of the Sheraton mingling with the professors. One of the professors, gathering up his nerve, approached the Yankee Clipper and introduced himself.

DiMaggio: What’s going on here?

Professor: Joe, this is the annual convention of the Modern Language Association.

DiMaggio: (puzzled) Modern Language Association? What’s wrong with the *old* languages?

Few outside academia (and perhaps not all that many inside) now recall that “Modern Languages” were once fighting words in a battle over whether the ancient languages would continue to dominate education. Once this conflict drops out of the public memory the words lose their meaning, making it understandable that DiMaggio and other nonprofessionals would assume that a “modern” language association must be devoted to eliminating the established modern languages.

6. When conflicts between fields are erased, so are the connections between them, intensifying the isolation of fields. Of course the isolation of fields has been positively justified as a necessary condition of studying subjects with rigor and closeness. Unfortunately, the very isolation of a subject from its surrounding contexts which is seen as a precondition for making it intelligible ends up rendering the subject unintelligible.

7. This is not an argument for abolishing disciplines, disciplinary boundaries, fields, or departments, or for merging classics into modern languages or other humanities in some neomedieval synthesis. It is an argument for connecting these components, institutionalizing a conversation between ancients and moderns and other mutually isolated subjects. We cannot talk about everything all at once, and some division of labor is necessary. But a division of labor does not have to mean disconnection.
8. The assumption still persists, however, that in order to connect fields and disciplines—to connect the ancients and the moderns, say, or humanists and social scientists—it is necessary to achieve consensus among them. Yet as the university and the culture have become more diverse, this search for consensus has become increasingly futile, further deepening our antagonisms and increasing our temptation to tune each other out when we cannot agree.

Unfortunately, it does not occur to us that we have been looking for common ground in the wrong place—that it is our conflicts and differences that constitute whatever common ground we have or have had. Consider again the conflict that all four papers touch on, in one way or another: between the ancient world seen as a repository of timeless values and the ancient world seen as a product of the contingencies of history and politics. Since this conflict in some form is present in virtually every discipline today, it could bring these disciplines together and thereby help students to make sense of their disparate courses. Though we academics *act out* this conflict practically every day (sometimes in ways that justify the juvenile connotation of “act out”), we do not represent the conflict in a fashion that would enable students and other nonprofessionals to understand it, much less become articulate voices within it.

Here, then, is a program for Agonistics. If, as I have argued, it is our controversies that have always defined our academic fields, then it should be possible to rethink the nature of those fields and to bring them into a curricular dialogue by bringing controversy to the center. It is our differences that can unite us and help us make better sense of the world.