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Use Modern Tools to Teach Ancient Wisdom

by Shannon Watkins and Jenna Robinson

> "Modern philosophy emerged in express opposition to classical philosophy. Only in the light of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns can modernity be understood."—Leo Strauss.[1]

> "In this quarrel whole rivulets of ink have been exhausted."—Jonathan Swift.[2]

All learning, particularly higher learning, is premised on the notion that there is such a thing as truth and that it is eminently worth pursuing. All serious inquiries into the various branches of human knowledge have the discovery and dissemination of truth as their end goals. The humanities are no exception. In the last several decades, however, the disciplines collectively known as the humanities—philosophy, history, literature, and art—have not conducted themselves with the same seriousness as the hard sciences. A philosophical proposition may follow a certain line of logic, but it's not testable like a scientific hypothesis. It can't be comparably weighed, measured, or empirically observed. The same is true of art and literature. Historical records provide factual accounts of the past, but they also lack a theorem's methodological precision. In short, the humanities may offer interesting avenues for intellectual or creative exercise, but they ultimately have little if anything to say about what is objective or rational.

Philosopher and classicist Allan Bloom recognized this phenomenon over thirty years ago. In his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom incisively described the problem:

> The kinds of questions children ask: Is there a God? Is there freedom? Is there punishment for evil deeds? Is there certain knowledge? What is a good society? were once also the questions addressed by science and philosophy. But now the grownups are too busy at work, and the children are left in a day-care center called the humanities, in which the discussions have no echo in the adult world.[3]

Abuse of the humane disciplines, however, is not a uniquely contem-

porary problem. As Bloom reminded his readers, a very similar assault was waged in an at times acrimonious debate in the 17th and 18th centuries known as the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns.[4] Those who defended the primacy of antiquity were called the *Ancients*, while those who held that ancient thought had been improved upon and eclipsed were known as the *Moderns*. Jonathan Swift, best known as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, wrote a satiric mock epic depicting the quarrel as a literal "battle" between *Ancient* and *Modern* books in the king's library. Swift's *Battle of the Books* is a devastating critique of early modern thought, which largely discarded the inherited wisdom of the past and replaced it with new and improved scientific understanding. A similar battle is playing out in classrooms across the country, which makes the "Battle of the Books" and the larger quarrel it depicts a useful lens through which to examine current-day curricula.

Before diving into the details of the quarrel, it's important to underline that both sides of the debate, as Bloom noted, "lacked perspective."[5] Nevertheless, its significance should not be overlooked. Indeed, he asserted, "The quarrel involved the highest principles about the first causes of all things and the best way of life." The participants were engaged in "an opposition between two comprehensive systems of radically opposed thought, one finding its source in ancient philosophy, the other in modern philosophy." It marked a decisive crossroads in which much of literature, art, and philosophy lost their authority.

Notre Dame professor Patrick Deneen also maintains that a fundamental philosophical shift occurred around this time.[6] During the early modern period, previously revered works were disregarded and at times despised by intellectuals. Francis Bacon, for example, scorned Aristotle. His *Novum Organum* argued against old texts, and inspired others to take a similar position. René Descartes's *Discourse on Method* belittled the old great works and insisted on the importance of rationalistic and empirical investigation. "As soon as my age permitted me to pass from under the control of my instructors," he wrote, "I entirely abandoned the study of letters, and resolved no longer to seek any other science than the knowledge of myself, or of the great book of the world."[7]

The consequence of this philosophical shift is a canon of "Great Books" divided by two opposed visions: The first group, which largely consists of ancient works, "commends the study of great books for an education in virtue in light of a recognition of human membership in a created order to which we must conform and that we do not ultimately govern."[8] The second, marked by the philosophy of moderns like Bacon, "argues against the study of great books and asserts a form of human greatness that seeks the human mastery of nature, particularly by the emphasis of modern science." In the quarrel, the *Modern* ethos exalted the notion of "progress." The more that knowledge progressed

and accumulated over time, the greater its accuracy and value.[9]

An overview of the quarrel should start with perhaps its instigator, French author Charles Perrault. A member of the French Academy and an administrative aid under King Louis XIV, Perrault believed that the contemporary French intellectuals of his day were not only on par with the ancients but surpassed them in every field.[10] The following, which he recited at the French Academy in 1687, captured the essence of his thought and helped launch the debate:

> Fair antiquity has always been venerable, but I've never believed that it should be venerated. When I look at the ancients, I don't genuflect. They are great, it is true, but they are men like us. And we can, not unfairly, compare the century of Louis to the fair age of Augustus.[11]

Notably, these words are from the work entitled "The Age of Louis the Great." Perrault's passionate exaltation of French accomplishments was at least in part politically motivated. He believed that one only needed to look at advancements in knowledge and technology to see how the *Moderns* had surpassed the *Ancients*. Even the "Poetry and Oratory" of the *Ancients* couldn't compare to that of 17th-century France, due to new rules and methods that had since been discovered.[12] Like science, poetry could be advanced by putting it under the microscope of modern scrutiny and subjected to rationalistic principles.

Another French combatant was Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle, a friend of Perrault. Author Joseph M. Levine in his book, *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age*, notes that Fontenelle believed that "reason had been brought to perfection just lately by the greatest of the moderns, René Descartes."[13] While Fontenelle conceded that the ancients had perfected the art of "poetry and eloquence," he didn't seem to think it merited the serious scholar's attention, stating that "they are not in themselves of great Importance."[14] It was science that belonged to the realm of truth-seeking, while poetry to that of mere opinion and imagination.[15] To Fontenelle, poetry had quickly reached its apex, and there was nothing left to be improved upon.

The ideas surrounding mathematics and science, on the other hand, were "endless" in his eyes and slow to grow.

> But physics, medicine, mathematics, are composed of numberless ideas and depend upon precision of thought which improves with extreme slowness, yet is always improving ... It is obvious that all this is endless and that the last physicists or mathematicians will naturally have to be the ablest.[16]

Smith College English professor Douglas Lane Patey notes that this line of thinking, advanced by Fontenelle and Perault, laid the foundation for the nineteenth-century separation of the "arts" and "sciences" as distinct divisions of knowledge.

In England, politician and diplomat Sir William Temple, outraged by what he was reading from the French moderns—particularly Fontenelle—kicked off the British phase of the quarrel. In 1694, Temple wrote his "An Essay Upon Ancient and Modern Learning," in which

he sought to challenge the moderns' claim to an unmatched possession of the truth.[17]

The proliferation of books in a library did not indicate to Temple that the modern age had an unparalleled monopoly on wisdom. The surest way to know the value of a book, to him, was by the test of time: "For the Scribblers are infinite, that like Mushrooms or Flys are born and dye in small circles of time; whereas Books, like Proverbs, receive their Chief Values from the Stamp and Esteem of Ages through which they have passed."[18]

Temple unequivocally rejected the notion of the inevitable progress of understanding. At the time, it was commonplace to explain the advantage of the moderns by comparing them to "dwarfs" that stand on the shoulders of giants. The imagery was meant to show that the ancients, however great they were, could not "see" as far as the moderns. Temple, however, cautioned against what he perceived as modern presumption. The modern era may have had the benefit of ancient wisdom, but that did not mean they employed their advantage *well*:

> Let it come about how it will, if we are Dwarfs, we are still so, though we stand upon a Gyant's shoulders; and even so placed, yet we see less than he, if we are naturally shorter sighted, or if we do not look as much about us, or we are dazzled with the height, which often happens from weakness of Heart or Brain.[19]

Indeed, it was not guaranteed, in his eyes, that there would ever be giants equal to the ancients again.

Temple lampooned the arrogance of the moderns who prided themselves on the power of their reason to discover all that could be known.

> When he has looked about him as far as he can, he concludes there is no more to be seen; when he is at the end of his Line, he is at the bottom of the Ocean.... His own Reason is the certain measure of truth, his own Knowledge, of what is possible in Nature, though his mind and his thoughts change every seven Years.[20]

Classicist and linguist William Wotton's *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning* was his book-length response to Temple's essay. Levine describes Wotton as "judicious" in his attempt to act as a mediator between the quarreling sides. While Perault assumed, for example, that the world was constantly improving, Wotton was not confident that this was true. On the contrary, he was willing to concede that "former Ages made greater Orators and nobler Poets than these later Ages have done,"[21] and that the ancients should be esteemed and studied.

But, unlike Temple, Wotton argued that the ancients' ideas could be matched or improved upon. "Even in logic and metaphysics," writes Levine, "he was inclined to favor the moderns. Bacon, Descartes, and Locke had made some original contributions over and above anything that could be discovered in antiquity."[22]And he would not concede the cumulative disciplines of mathematics and science to the ancients. Modern scientific advancement was indisputable in his eyes.

Scientific considerations aside, the true feud between Wotton and Temple centered on the value and use of modern classical scholarship, particularly that of philology. Wotton held that modern scholarship enabled scholars to understand the ancients better than they understood themselves. Such scholarship, to Wotton, involved "more Fineness of Thought, and Happiness of Invention" than it took to compose twenty original volumes.[23] "[H]e that discerns another Man's Thoughts, is therein greater than he who thinks."

Indignant, Temple responded, "He must be a Conjurer that can make these Moderns, with their Comments and Glossaries, and Annotations, more learned than the Authors themselves."[24] The value of philology, to Temple, was blown considerably out of proportion. It was useful for accurately translating and correcting old works, but nothing more. "To trouble themselves and the World with vain Niceties and captious cavils about Words and Syllables, in the Judgement of Style; about Hours and Days, in the Account of Actions or Times." was foolhardy and pedantic in his view.[25]

Around that time, Temple and Wotton—along with others—entered into an embittered and personal dispute about the authenticity of several works, particularly *The Epistles of Phalaris* and *Aesop's Fables*. Although a great deal of ink was "spilled" over the origins of these works, the matter was tangential to the central debate. Both sides, no doubt fueled by the desire to be proven right, seemed to at times lose sight of the fundamental issues at play.

Jonathan Swift's "Battle of the Books" helped throw the central issues into focus: were the ancients unparalleled sources of wisdom who should be closely studied and imitated, or were they stepping stones to new and improved "progressed" wisdom? Did the ancients offer a compelling window to the truth, or was the bulk of their work eloquently written, but outdated, subjective opinion? Did the development of later scientific innovations indicate that the ancients had nothing valuable left to say about the truth?

Swift's short story is an account of the "terrible fight that happened on Friday last between the *Ancient* and *Modern* Books in the King's library."[26] Before turning to the battle itself, Swift described the broader context of the "quarrel," which figuratively takes place on The hill Parnassus (the mountain in Greek mythology where the Muses live). In Swift's account, Parnassus had two summits. The higher one was inhabited by the *Ancients*, and the lower one by the *Moderns*. The *Moderns* were greatly annoyed at how the *Ancients'* part of the hill obstructed their view. They approached the *Ancients* with two options: they could either surrender the upper summit to the *Moderns*, or the *Moderns* could come "with shovels and mattocks, and level the said hill as low as they shall think it convenient."

The *Ancients* were shocked by such demands. After all, they were gracious to allow the moderns to occupy space

so close to their own. They retorted that the *Moderns* should be grateful for the height of the *Ancients'* hill due to the "shade and shelter it afforded them." They added that it would be foolish to attempt to level the hill since it was made of solid rock and "would break their tools and hearts." The *Ancients* advised the *Moderns* "rather to raise their own side of the hill than dream of pulling down that of the Ancients." The *Moderns* indignantly rejected this suggestion and a "long and obstinate war" broke out.

Over time, libraries became filled with the "malignant spirit" of books written by modern authors. The proximity of *Ancient* and *Modern* books only stirred long-held animosity. Mistakenly shelved by an inept librarian, diametrically opposed texts were placed next to each other: Aristotle alongside Descartes, and Plato between Hobbes and the "Seven Wise Masters." Tensions rise when the *Moderns*, the aggressors, count their ranks in preparation for battle. The *Ancients* gather their forces in defense.

Amidst the escalating tensions in the bookshelves, the reader's attention is briefly drawn above the stacks to "the highest corner of a large window" where a plump spider had made his abode. The spider's web is both majestic and grotesque. The architecture is designed "after the modern way of fortification," and includes several courts that lead to the center where the spider resides. The spider is haughty, arrogant, and imminently pleased with what he, alone, has produced. His state of self-satisfaction, however, is disturbed by a wandering bee that accidentally damaged a part of the web. The *Modern* spider looks down on the bee and sneers that he is a vagabond, a plunderer "without stock or inheritance,"— that is, with very little accumulated knowledge. He, on the other hand, prides himself on his "native stock" and the awe-inspiring architecture of his handmade web (which demonstrates his mastery of mathematics).

Unlike the spider, the bee doesn't pride himself on his accomplishments, namely his ability to produce wax and honey. Instead of being holed up in gratuitous self-satisfaction, the bee recognizes that he isn't the originator of his greatness. He is the grateful recipient of the pollen and nectar of the multitude of flowers he's visited. "I visit, indeed, all the flowers and blossoms of the field and garden, but whatever I collect thence enriches myself without the least injury to their beauty, their smell, or their taste."

Soon after the close of this dialogue, the tensions among the books explode and the battle commences. Written in the style of a Greek epic, various deities intervene on both sides.

A "malignant deity" called Criticism is found sprawled out on "half-devoured" volumes. She is the daughter of Ignorance, her father, and Pride, her mother. Her sister is Opinion, her children are Noise and Impudence, Dullness and Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill Manners. The philologist Wotton, notably, is also her son. Criticism,

like her children, is self-obsessed with her "eyes turned inward." When news of the battle reaches her, she is enraged and exclaims, "by me children grow wiser than their parents" and brags that "coffee-house wits, instinct by me, can correct an author's style, and display his minutest errors, without understanding a syllable of his matter or his language." Here, Swift is referencing literary critics—philologists in particular—who are more concerned with "devouring" parts of books instead of considering them as a whole.

In the course of the battle, Homer "kills" Perrault and Fontenelle. Aristotle, aiming for Bacon, kills Descartes. A preeminent *Modern* classicist, Richard Bentley, comes across "a small rivulet" from the fountain Helicon. Each time he attempts to drink from the fountain, however, the water falls through his fingers. Bentley "drew up nothing but mud," Swift explains, "for so Apollo begged of Jupiter, as a punishment to those who durst attempt to taste it with unhallowed lips, and for a lesson to all not to draw too deep or far from the spring." In real life, Bentley was friends with Wotton and was himself a dedicated philologist who prided himself on detecting errors in ancient manuscripts. Bentley, Bloom noted, "accepted the superiority of modern thought to Greek thought."[27]

Temple, on the other hand, is seen drinking deeply at the fountainhead—an indication that he both revered and was well-versed in the writings of antiquity. Swift not only placed Temple on the side of the *Ancients*, but made him an esteemed general. He unequivocally classified Temple as a "bee," and Wotton and Bentley as "spiders." The "Battle of the Books" is a biting exposé of modern arrogance and rejects the notion of the inevitable progress of understanding and wisdom. It also squarely rejects the modern notion that truth is only that which can be quantified, weighed, and measured. It insists, rather, that the true seeker of wisdom must consult time-tested sources of wisdom and be open to a deeper understanding of the truth than what is merely offered by the present age.

Ancient and *Modern* factions still exist today. However, they no longer fight over Parnassus. For the most part, they inhabit new premises in distinct territories. Just as in Swift's "Battle of the Books," there are far more *Moderns* than *Ancients*. And, having no need of outdated muses, they have built man-made edifices to learning in the form of modern universities. They are well-represented at most mainstream American universities, where they pursue mere knowledge instead of truth, and the humanities departments judge themselves by the standards of scientific disciplines: research output and grant funding. The *Ancients* thrive in small outposts across the country, mostly in "Great Books" programs and religious institutions where the transmission of old ideas takes precedence over the discovery of new knowledge.

One obvious and ubiquitous application of the *Modern* philosophy is the distribution model of "general education" programs, which allows students

to sample courses across various disciplines, including mathematics, science, social science, and humanities, but with no universal requirements. Today's curriculum committees, staffed by *Moderns,* prioritize skills, expertise, and unique experiences at the expense of tradition, cohesion, and shared understanding. Like Swift's spider, they tout the practical relevance of skills, improvements, labor, and method without much concern over the "duration and matter"[28] of the finished product.

At most universities, the *Modern* way of thinking has become so pervasive that it has changed the way scholars approach teaching and learning within disciplines. In "Making General Education Meaningful," the Martin Center writes:

> Increasingly, schools began replacing coursework in specific subjects such as literature and history with coursework that emphasized pedagogy and methodology. As Alston Chase noted, 'The shift in emphasis from history to how a historian thinks can be made instantly within any course.'[29]

For Swift's combatants and today's *Moderns*, the underlying theme is progress. Education and scholarship must evolve and meet the demands of the times. While the specifics of the debates may differ, the end is the same: scholars and students should pursue the skills to perfect (rather than understand) themselves, their societies, and nature itself.

Today's *Ancients* have adopted some of the *Moderns'* innovations, but for the most part, they organize learning in the same ways advocated by Swift and Temple. Education is comprised of great works of the past, presented in a connected, holistic curriculum, the purpose of which is to understand the human condition, seek truth, and cultivate virtue.

In Great Books programs across the country, students study the works of Swift's stoutest *Ancient* combatants. Works by Plato, Homer, Virgil, and Aristotle dominate reading lists.[30] However, they are often joined by their former foes. In the "Battle of the Books," the *Ancients* "advise the *Moderns* rather to raise their own side of the hill than dream of pulling down that of the *Ancients*; to the former of which they would not only give license but also largely contribute."[31] In Great Books programs, this has happened to some extent. Judged by "the Stamp and Esteem of Ages" as worthy, such former *Moderns* as Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes are studied alongside their *Ancient* predecessors. Importantly, these works are read with an *Ancient* understanding, the purpose of which is aesthetic and intellectual rather than progressive. These programs consciously teach students to seek wisdom and virtue rather than mere information.

Using an *Ancient* lens to read *Modern* works is essential. As Patrick Deneen has pointed out: "The broader assault on the liberal arts derives much of its intellectual fuel from a number of the great books themselves."[32] He goes on to name several *Moderns* who have written "great book[s] that recommend against the lessons of previous great books," including works by Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes.

But like Swift's bee, professors in today's Great Books programs have gathered ideas from both nettles and violets. The intellectual wealth created from this nectar is perhaps spicier than that gathered from antiquity alone. Today's Great Books programs readily acknowledge that the great works are not monolithic and often refer to the content of such books as "The Great Conversation." Mortimer Adler writes,

> What binds the authors together in an intellectual community is the great conversation in which they are engaged. In the works that come later in the sequence of years, we find authors listening to what their predecessors have had to say about this idea or that, this topic or that. They not only harken to the thought of their predecessors, they also respond to it by commenting on it in a variety of ways.[33]

This is true even of *Modern* "dwarfs" who grudgingly acknowledge the giants that came before. (Wotten and Bentley, for example, were trained as classicists and had a deep understanding of the works of antiquity.) Ultimately, today's Great Books programs have embraced this idea as well as Deneen's advice: "Only by understanding the competing teachings of the great books can we reconsider the lessons that our age has embraced."

However, the divorce between wisdom and progress—with Great Books programs often cloistered away from the mainstream college experience—is ultimately unhealthy for the "Intellectual State or Commonwealth of Learning," to use Swift's words. More schools should aim for synergy instead of separation.

For a model of higher education, we should take the bee. Both Swift (in his clear partisanship for the *Ancients*) and the spider (unwilling to concede to the bee any *Modern* virtues) fail to recognize that the bee collects nectar not only to make honey but also a *honeycomb*. Without the honeycomb, a tool to store pollen and honey and to house bee larvae, the bee colony would collapse.

Like the bee, fully-formed human beings need both food and useful tools to thrive. The human mind needs both intellectual nourishment and useful occupation. More universities should acknowledge this balanced nature of human flourishing as they create educational programs, incorporating the wisdom of the *Ancients* with the *Modern* appetite for the application of knowledge. At the same time, these purposes should be allowed to remain distinct, each with its separate contribution toward the end of human flourishing. Humanities should not be forced into a modern scientific mold. Neither should occupations be treated as an afterthought.

Truth-seeking and the desire to put knowledge to good use are not mutually opposed goals. But they should not be treated interchangeably. Ours is a vision of balance rather than amalgamation. Universities can and should train students to be skilled professionals. Empiricism, specialization, and technological progress have their place in the university. They are means, however, and not ends to higher education's ultimate purpose: human flourishing. Students must be grounded in wisdom that offers a unifying vision of the *kind*

of professionals they should aspire to be. In short, universities need to restore the cultivation of wisdom to its central place and put modern tools in the service of ancient wisdom.

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