The Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns
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The *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes* took place at the turn of the eighteenth century. The quarrel, or Battle of the Books, as it was referred to in England, was fought on two fronts. First was an argument over philosophical knowledge and the natural sciences: did the ancients know more than the moderns? The second debate involved literature and the arts: had the ancients perfected these areas? Underlying these two questions were broader notions concerning authority, the location of knowledge, and the purpose and relative worth of imitation and original creativity. These discussions foreshadowed a revolutionary attack on authority in religion and politics. The quarrel signaled a rupture - it was an expression of the conflict between radically different pictures of the world. At the beginning of the twenty-first century we find ourselves once again struggling with the implications of a rupture in philosophy, art, science, history, and politics. The modern project has reached a period of crisis, and we are grappling with a choice between ancient authority, modern certainty, or some third way that we are as yet unable to fully define. As Leo Strauss writes: "Only in the light of the quarrel between the ancients and the moderns can modernity be understood."¹

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the group of thinkers called the Ancients, or those who aligned themselves with the authority of ancient Greek and Roman thought (especially that of Aristotle and Homer), considered Aristotle the source of all scientific and philosophical wisdom. The position of the Ancients, expressed by Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux in France and Sir William Temple in England, asserted that the “knowledge” of the Moderns was nothing but mere imitation; the modern age was one of inferiority and decadence. According to the Ancients, the Moderns saw the world through a mirror, while philosophers and poets in antiquity responded directly to nature and to their souls. Even those Ancients who acknowledged that scientific understanding was superior in the modern age due to the accumulation of information, maintained that in matters concerning the spirit it was impossible to surpass the imagination, creativity, and eloquence of ancient thinkers.

Most of the critiques of ancient learning grew out of Francis Bacon’s inductive method and Descartes’ system of “methodical doubt.”² Francis Bacon “complained that no progress in natural science, no advancement in learning of any kind, was possible when men accepted authority unquestioningly.”³ Similarly, in Descartes’ *The Passions of the Soul* (1649) he asserted, “What the ancients have taught is so scanty and for the most part so lacking in credibility that I may not hope for any kind of approach toward truth except by rejecting all the paths which they have followed.”⁴

Far more than the locus of artistic excellence and ultimate knowledge was at stake in the *Quarelle*. The debate introduced the questioning of the authority of professional scholars and the rise of public opinion as a valid arbiter. The quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns was an identity crisis between the aristocracy and the masses. Also in transition was the meaning, method, and purpose of history - the Ancients perceived history as rhetorical narrative modeled

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⁴ Aldridge, p. 1.
on Livy and Tacitus, but the Moderns proposed an alternative kind of history which used philological methods as a way to uncover the details of past eras. This new understanding of history proceeded much like the new science, with a topical accumulation of detail that produced inductive and representative truth.\(^5\)

The profound influence of modernity can be traced back to its roots with a few overarching themes: the supremacy of the subject, the control and mastery of nature, the movement toward abstraction, and the quest for unity or the 'meta-narrative.' All these concepts can be found in Descartes. In his famous \textit{Cogito, ergo sum} (I think, therefore I am), man steps outside nature, and the 'subject' becomes the basis of reality. Reality, then, is objectified and can only be accessed through representation, classification, measurement, and, finally, abstraction to universal principles - all by the human intellect. Heidegger describes this move to man as \textit{subiectum} in the following way: "Man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and its truth. Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such."\(^6\) Descartes's 'Method' is the path to control of nature through the order and abstraction of the scientific experiment which culminates in universal truth.

Modernity, as an ideological and procedural system, has been extremely productive. But toward the end of the nineteenth century, and especially by the middle of the twentieth, fractures created by the modern project began to be exposed. Nietzsche first called attention to the decay of modernism in the repudiation of values, or nihilism, that characterized the age. Nietzsche sought freedom in the radical expression of self-will and creativity. Rather than a move away from modernity, however, Nietzsche's philosophy elevates the subject to new heights. Heidegger calls Nietzsche's position the most extreme form of modern nihilism. Heidegger's critique of modernity lies at center in its concealment of Being. Through the technological control of nature and through the metaphysical 'world picture,' man is estranged from Being. Freedom, therefore, is found in opening oneself to Being and in the un-concealment, or presencing, of Being. Heidegger returns to the pre-Socratics to remember the original sense of concepts like \textit{techne}, \textit{episteme}, and \textit{physis}. Plato, for Heidegger, marks the beginning of metaphysics and the modern age by removing Being from the world of humans to the realm of ideas.

The term post-modern was first used to express an architectural reaction to the Modern style of building,\(^7\) but the term quickly gained popularity among feminist and minority groups, literary criticism, aesthetic movements, and other causes that were insufficiently represented by the modern project. Most generally, post-modern can be seen as a reaction against the political structures, technological control, and meta-narratives of modernity. Lyotard describes post-modernity as a "severe re-examination... on the thought of the Enlightenment, on the idea of a unitary end of history and of a subject."\(^8\) Lyotard sees the postmodern as putting forth the unpresentable and unattainable, that thought, those people, the contexts and experiences that were not 'presented' by modern abstraction and universality. He sees the totality of modernism as a project of terror and control, and the meta-narrative as fundamentally unreal.

In our present-day quarrel the lines between ancient and modern (and now postmodern) are not

\(^7\) \textit{Oxford English Dictionary} ...
\(^8\) Jean-Francois Lyotard, \textit{The Postmodern Condition: a Report on Knowledge} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), p. 73.
easily defined, and the factions are highly ambiguous. Postmodern thought runs in at least two directions. One stream of postmodernism, in the rejection of attempts to define reality in terms of unity, takes refuge in what Albert Borgmann (and Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco before him) terms *hyper-reality*. Hyper-reality elevates nostalgia, ersatz, and simulation, and uses technology to create substitutes for reality. Artificial realities can be superior to reality in brilliance, flexibility, and the opportunity for control. In fact, assuming that artificial reality could someday replace reality in total, it is difficult to locate a problem with such a scheme: if technology is able to create a phenomenal world that is equal, even superior, to the chaos of the everyday, is there really any difference? Borgmann's answer is yes, there is indeed a difference between the experiential force of hyperreality and reality. "To grasp that force we must think of experience not as the sum total of sensory stimulation over a certain time but as an eminent encounter of a person with the world."10

The second stream of postmodernism, what Borgmann calls *postmodern realism*, holds that "there is a symmetry between the depth of the world and our bodily incursion into it."11 Postmodern realism also rejects the abstractions of modernity in order to locate meaning in the particular rather than the universal, in the context of the every-day, in the embodiment of experience, in the practice and skill of craft and work. The quarrel between the ancients and the moderns occurs when the dominant worldview can no longer sustain meaning in the world. It occurs when we need a richer, truer understanding of our existence. It is not a cause for despair - it is surely not cause to abandon reality. Rather, it is a call for re-evaluation and re-discovery, a project which cannot take place in a world of the hyperreal.

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10 Ibid., p. 95.
11 Ibid., p. 106.