

BOOK REVIEW

The Battle of the Classics. How a Nineteenth-Century Debate Can Save the Humanities Today. By ERIC ADLER. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. x + 256. Hardback, \$38.95. ISBN: 9780197518786. Paperback, \$21.95. ISBN: 9780197680810.

The focus of *The Battle of the Classics* (henceforth simply *Battle*) is the prolonged debate, especially in American higher education, concerning the value of studying not only the Graeco-Roman Classics in particular but also the Humanities in general. (“The Battle for the Humanities” would probably have been a more transparent title.) As *Battle*’s subtitle suggests, Adler’s goal is to propose a promising way to defend studies in the Humanities.

In his introduction to *Battle*, “The Sick Man of Higher Education,” Adler laments the increasingly unsuccessful attempts to justify the study of the Humanities (“the sick man”) in the face of increasing emphasis in the 21st century on more “practical,” especially STEM, education. In the first chapter, “Skills are the New Canon,” Adler describes the flaws he perceives in the works of scholars like Martha Nussbaum, Paul Jay and Francine Prose, who have argued, without demonstrable proof, that the Humanities’ mode of inquiry, emphasis on critical theory and fostering of critical thinking skills justify its place in the curriculum.

Chapter 2, “From the *Studia Humanitatis* to the Modern Humanities,” is the longest in *Battle*. Here Adler traces the study of the Humanities from Cicero’s reference to *studia humanitatis* in the *Pro Archaia* and from the Roman belief, developed by Cicero, Quintilian, Seneca the Younger and others, that the liberal arts fostered in students a sense of *humanitas* and *virtus*. Nodding briefly to the scholastic tradition of the medieval period, Adler then celebrates the rediscovery of the ancient classics by Renaissance humanists like Petrarch and Leonardo Bruni, who viewed classical studies as a way to build and strengthen character. He then follows the transformation of the curricula of American institutions of higher learning from the compulsory study of Latin, Greek and moral philosophy in the pre-Civil War years to a growing emphasis on professional training and the rise of the research university in the postbellum United States. It is in this later

period that the study of Latin and Greek came under increasing attack as universities abandoned prescribed curricula and replaced them with elective systems marked by more varied courses of study. In this unfavorable academic environment, Classicists and teachers of other Humanities subjects struggled to find convincing arguments to justify their disciplines.

In Chapters 3 through 5, Adler focuses on three major debates in the battle for the Humanities. The first was initiated by a Phi Beta Kappa address entitled "A College Fetich" [sic] by Charles Francis Adams, Jr. at Harvard University in 1883. Adams argued for the elimination of ancient Greek as an admission requirement for Harvard. The second was a debate between James McCosh, president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) and Charles W. Eliot, president of Harvard, in 1885. Eliot advocated a free-elective system while McCosh celebrated the study of the classical languages as a source of "mental discipline." In neither of these debates, Adler suggests, did the humanists offer successful arguments in support of the Humanities.

The third debate was the controversy surrounding the educational theories of the early 20th-century scholar Irving Babbitt and his followers. Babbitt advocated a curriculum called the New Humanism based upon the study of major works of world civilization. Adler notes Babbitt's criticism of modern Classicists' emphasis on philological trivia and praises his desire to restore a humanistic emphasis in the study of Graeco-Roman and other authors. Unfortunately, Adler notes, Babbitt's educational theory lost credibility among contemporaries because of his apparent reactionary political theories.

In his final chapter, entitled "Toward a Truly Ecumenical Wisdom," Adler argues that Babbitt's work, largely dismissed today, offers those who teach the Humanities a compelling strategy for justifying their discipline. Adler proposes that the way to "save" the Humanities in a society which values vocational education as a means towards financial success is to offer a broad Humanities-based curriculum in which students encounter great works drawn from a wide range of cultural traditions. Borrowing from the ancient Romans and Renaissance scholars, Adler suggests that such *studia humanitatis* would enable students in the 21st century to live more rewarding lives and to become better humans and members of society. According to Adler, such a program of study would distinguish the Humanities from other disciplines, such as the natural and social sciences, and convincingly demonstrate the benefits of studying the Humanities.

Adler's career teaching Classics at a variety of institutions, including Rice University, Connecticut College and, currently, the University of Maryland College

Park has certainly influenced his effort to find a way forward for the Humanities. However, his commendable attempt to justify and save a place for the Humanities in the modern university and his emphasis on content- rather than skills-based arguments for the study of Humanities are unlikely to be attractive to many students, their parents, university administrators, boards of trustees or state legislatures.

Despite this reservation, *Battle* remains valuable for its sweeping and detailed history of pedagogical theory and practice regarding the teaching of the Humanities and, especially, Greco-Roman literature, from antiquity to the present. Adler's 24-page bibliography will serve as a significant reference for scholars interested in this history.

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