

Katherine Nicolai: 'Eclecticism and the Quarrel between Ancients and Moderns'

The Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns was perhaps one of the most important intellectual debates that shaped the eighteenth-century mind and one of the most influential outcomes of it was the historical and philosophical methodology developed by the modern eclectics. Some of the fundamental concepts in the Quarrel were questions about the nature of intellectual authority and the role that ancient authors should play in modern thought. One result of this debate was a criticism of sectarianism because Sectarians, those who were seen as adhering to one dogmatic philosophy or religion, were viewed as being uncritical, lacking analysis, and therefore appealing to an authority without further investigation. The modern eclectics developed a philosophical methodology which could combat sectarianism with a combination of the experimental method and a belief that truth could be discerned from a variety of philosophical arguments, thus also employing the techniques of historians of philosophy, such as Johann Jakob Brucker. Modern eclecticism relied on reason and analysis to discern philosophical truths based on their observation of evidence, their experiences and a rejection of authority. By using this method the eclectics could prevent sectarianism because the use of experiments further resolved sectarian disputes, proving or disproving the arguments on either side. The eclectics, therefore, answered the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns by employing both ancient and modern thought and the experimental method to create a new, anti-sectarian and unique philosophy.

The method of using the experimental method to contest the dangers of sectarianism following from the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns can also be seen in the moral philosophy of Adam Ferguson, who maintained that the authority of any author, sect or religion should not be accepted without rigorous analysis and an active questioning of their ideas. He was highly critical of scholars whom he perceived as blindly following the system of another philosopher, regardless of the school of thought to which they adhered. This response to the Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns not only demonstrates the importance of the debate itself but also the vast influence it had on Enlightenment thought.