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PEACE AND MIND

Seriatim Symposium on Dispute, Conflict, and Enmity

*G. Thomas Tanselle, Frank R. Ankersmit, Randall Collins,
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INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, the first two numbers of *Common Knowledge* included several “calls for papers” as a way of suggesting some of the questions that the editors of the journal hoped to see raised. One of those calls came from me: I proposed a series of articles dealing with aspects of the large area that comprises (as I put it then) “dissent, disagreement, controversy, polemic,” and related concepts and practices. The effort to understand contention and contentiousness—and especially to inquire whether dispute is natural or manufactured—is central to what this journal exists for: *CK* was founded to provide a forum for discussion in which each participant aims for understanding rather than domination. Polemic has been shunned in these pages, for it often springs from an unwillingness to listen sympathetically, an aversion to examining positions that, if accepted, would make one’s own seem invalid. The journal has tried, over the years, to exemplify the qualities required for genuine conversation, recognizing that ideas gain support from what can be said in their favor, not from attempts to discredit what might be seen as rival points of view.

One could say, then, that my call for papers has been answered by most of

the contents of this journal since its founding. But the editors believe that the present number, which begins a new series, provides an appropriate opportunity to inaugurate a more direct treatment of the subject, in the form of a “seriatim symposium.” The word *symposium* catches the spirit of the undertaking by suggesting conversation that represents a variety of approaches, a multiplicity of angles of vision. The first contributions to this endless conversation are presented in the pages that follow, and more will appear in ensuing numbers of the journal. Some of the treatments will be abstract, and others will be case studies of episodes, old or new, intellectual or military, religious, political—but as a whole they will deal explicitly with questions that are implicit in all intellectual and (for that matter) human interchange, whether it takes place in *CK* or elsewhere.

The conversation is endless not only because there is an infinity of possible viewpoints and a glut of actual ones, but also because the situations that illustrate and help to define the issues are ubiquitous. There is scarcely a moment when each of us is not encountering such instances—and it is not just in reading reports from the world’s many battlefields that we come across them. At present, for example, I am writing a review of Nicholson Baker’s *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*, which criticizes library administrators for their tendency to accept space-saving reproductions of texts (often in microfilm or electronic form) as replacements for originals. In his preface, Baker asserts, “This isn’t an impartial piece of reporting.” Yet his book is admirably thorough in its research, and he sets forth the arguments of those he disagrees with (“I’ve tried,” he says, “not to misrepresent those whose views differ from my own”). It is the case that he finds factual errors in some of the arguments made by the library establishment, but does the act of pointing them out make him “partial”? It is also the case that he takes a stand, based on all he has learned in his research, but does that make him biased? When Baker says he is not impartial, I do not think—judging from his careful documentation—that he believes he was biased in his examination of evidence, or that he wants anyone else to think so. But by linking “impartiality” with “reporting,” his statement may seem to imply that the expression of opinions or conclusions is not consistent with objectivity.

The concept of objectivity is itself in need of serious rethinking; and a good part of the *Common Knowledge* project has been (and still is) to cast doubt on the reality of the concept while arguing for the necessity of some such idea. One can at least *attempt* to be fair in evaluating different positions, recognizing that such an attempt requires one to address what others have said on their own terms. It is a violation of this attainable kind of “objectivity” to respond to the ideas of another by changing the subject while pretending not to do so. When, for example, Baker says that the physical book plays a role in reading, and librarians reply that their budgets do not allow for preservation of originals, can the disagree-

ment be productive or enlightening, given that the reply is not directed at the hypothesis offered?

I have also just read a front-page article in the *New York Times* (March 21, 2001) about the controversy stirred up by the appearance in several college newspapers of an advertisement, paid for by David Horowitz, attacking the idea of making reparations to black Americans for slavery. According to the *Times*, Horowitz believes that “blacks do not deserve redress because white Christians ended slavery”; rather, black Americans “owe the country for the freedom and prosperity they enjoy.” The student editor of the Brown University paper printed the advertisement because (as the *Times* phrased it) Horowitz’s aim to expose “the intolerance of political correctness” is “part of an important national debate.” One of the responses to this situation was to say that newspaper editors have no obligation to publish every paid announcement offered to them—but the relation of advertising to free speech is not the basic issue here. Leon Botstein, president of Bard College, got to the point when he said (in the *Times*’s words) that colleges were “easy prey” to Horowitz because “colleges tolerate dissent poorly.” Botstein was quoted as adding, “We say we believe in dissent but we actually do not practice it well.”

We should not be surprised, since dissent often has a hard time on campuses and in the intellectual world generally, that it is so frequently conducted without intellectual rigor elsewhere. These two examples of controversy I have mentioned, which chance called to my attention in the past two days, can perhaps serve to symbolize how inundated we are not only with disagreements but with questions about how they can most usefully be pursued. A prominent thread of human history is the recurrent cycle that leads from verbal contentiousness to brawls, riots, and wars. Whether or not we will ever learn that verbalized dispute need not be a form of warfare, we can try through contrary example to suggest how unproductive the warrior mentality is. A civilian journal ought to be a place where contributors take for granted that the goal is insight, not triumph. A symposium focused on the function, practice, meaning, prevention, and resolution of dispute can play a constructive role in fostering this state of mind. The first installment follows, and we invite readers to participate in further installments, either by replying to what has already been published (including this introduction) or by moving in other directions. We hope that the result—even if some of it may be dispute about dispute—will provide an illustration of how common knowledge evolves.

Accordingly, the editors have formulated a new set of calls for papers for the new series of *CK*. We are seeking papers that

- examine covert agreements and illusory disagreements in a variety of historical periods and societies;
- document the inadequacy of terms like *disagreement* to suggest the complexity of the phenomena so described;
- dissect the attachment of contemporary scholarship to polemics and dispute;
- address enmity as a kind of human relationship—as the expression of an ambivalence *shared* by disputing parties;
- extend the critique of “beliefs” (affirmable or deniable assertions) as a category of analysis in the study of cultures;
- explore the “narcissism of minor differences” as evidenced both in history (social, cultural, intellectual, political) and in literature;
- reconsider the extent and role of generational rivalry in the production of stylistic change in the arts;
- develop strategies of peacemaking in explosively multicultural contexts; and
- redefine terms, such as *true*, *real*, and *just*, that obstruct cross-cultural understanding and may serve—by purporting to objectify the claims of adversaries—to intensify the bloodiest and least productive conflicts.

—*G. Thomas Tanselle*