
Theological Controversies: Controversies in the République des Lettres, Technical Report 4. Edited by Marcelo Dascal, Gerd Fritz, Thomas Glöning, and Yaron Senderowicz. The German-Israeli Foundation. Giessen: Giessen University Press, 2001. 121p.

The interactive study of texts, perceived primarily as discourses, has been making important gains, continually redrawing the map of our knowledge in various fields of the humanities and improving methodologies. It is by a pragmatic understanding of discourses as communication that this comparatively new comprehension of culture has indeed made some advances. By focusing on important controversies, scholars of literature, philosophy, science and—last but not least—religion have been able to show how ideas evolve and become dominant in given periods, how they dominated the cultural core of the age and how they shaped, in a diversity of modes, the forces of historical change. There is, however, a distinctive religious denotation for the terminology of controversies and this denotation refers to the particular time of intense discussions that—in the Seventeenth century—surrounded the many attempts to reposition the ideologies of post-tridentine Catholicism and of various forms of Protestantism. With the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, a political event that triggered a widespread Protestant exodus in Western Europe, the polemical discourse of debate and confrontation between Catholics and Protestants became even more intense and oppositional, as each of the participants sought to affirm its own orthodoxy at the expense of the adversary.

At times ecumenical in their avowed intent, these debates were to lead to the prescriptive and quasi-utopian creation of the “Republic of Letters”, the first European attempt to link scholars in a network of written exchanges, involving mainly, but not exclusively, correspondence and printed pamphlets and projecting the image of a community of the learned and the bright. Thus, the world of the learned expressed a sharing of concerns in the assumptions of reasonability that had the ability not only to transcend religious discord, but also to use religious diversity as an intellectual advantage. The Republic of Letters (*res publica litterarum*), mostly conceived as an utopian gathering of the learned public in the advanced European pre-modernity, also assumed a compensatory meaning, since it arose from the violent brutality of religious wars and aimed at healing the rifts and the adversities of the times. After more than a hundred years of fighting, bloodshed and carnage, the learned and the scholarly of the West imaginatively represented itself as a structure of communicative publicity that projected a model of peaceful coexistence beyond differences, seeking a programmatic ecumenism for their *Res publica literaria et christiana*. Ideologically then, the Republic of

Letters belongs to a history of toleration through liberal democratization where great minds, preaching by example, proved that, despite all the doctrinal and institutional divisions between the Catholics and the Reformed, it was possible to find a space of exchange and negotiation. Studied comprehensively in the last few decades, the Republic of Letters represented itself as "an intellectual community transcending space and time" (Paul Dibon, "L'Université de Leyde et la République des lettres au 17^e siècle", cited by Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994, 15). This republic was based on an "international notion of intellectual cooperation" in the free search for truth: "On n'y reconnaît que l'empire de la vérité et de la raison", famously wrote Pierre Bayle.

It is then only fitting that one of the first research programs developed in a renewed and reunified Europe, bringing together scholars from various countries and fields, took as its object the study of the age of the "Republic of Letters" through its debating practices. The "technical reports" on "Controversies in the République des Lettres" is the product of a group of scholars interested in studying the development and the place of the polemical literature of Western Europe in the articulation of modernity. This project was coordinated by Gerd Fritz (Justus-Liebig University of Giessen, Germany) and Marcelo Dascal (Tel Aviv University, Israel) in 1999-2001, under the aegis of the German-Israeli Foundation, with the help of three universities (in Giessen and, respectively, in Marburg in Germany and Tel-Aviv in Israel).

The results of their work, published as four "technical reports", have a fairly diversified range, with a marked preference for issues of methodology: the first collection of essays, for example, spotlights the Hobbes-Bramhall controversy and includes seven essays of which some address questions of pragmatic format (G.Fritz), rhetoric (Sh. Frogel), epistemology (Y.Senderowicz and Y.-Ch.Zarka, D. Mishori) and history of ideas (C.Marras). The second collection of studies, titled "Controversy and Philosophy", continues the effort to distinguish and describe the place of the polemic dimension in the history of philosophy. Among those participating in this effort, the studies by Marcelo Dascal, P. Barrotta, Fr. Cossutta try to position the study of controversial structures within the larger field of reasonability and critical inquiry, while both Joseph Agassi and D. Riesenfeld Tamir examine the value of polemical debates in contemporary philosophy. The third group of papers, gathered under the title "Scientific Controversies and Theories of Controversy" deals specifically with controversies in early modernity, thus coming closer to the examination of the polemics involved by the discursive existence of the Republic of Letters. This volume is probably the best in the series because it is better focused; it is organized around specific issues: the polemical nature of the *res publica litteratorum* (M.Dascal and C. Marras), the structure of polemics in early modernity (Thomas Gloning), and the particularity of

controversies in their transition from a pre-scientific age. Three controversies, considered representative, are studied in detail: the polemic between Kepler, Röselin and Feselius (in astronomy/astrology), the one between Gehema and Geuder (in medicine) as well as the better-known epistolary polemic between Price and Monboddo (on questions of conceptualization related to the Newtonian physics). Both the case-studies of the actual controversies as well as the two methodological papers that precede them are animated by a “will to formalize” that is fairly representative for the whole research program.

The last part of the program proposes to extend the study of controversial and polemical texts developed in the other fields to the domain of religious debates, so that the fourth collection of essays is dedicated to “Theological Controversies.” After a study by Marcelo Dascal that expands to theology his pragmatic typology of polemical moves in polemical philosophical argumentation, previously developed (in volumes 2 and 3) by taking into account the diversification of reasonability as discourse games/genres, the studies signed by Gerd Fritz and Juliane Glüer examine the strategies and the stratagems involved by three representative controversial moments in the history of religious thought in Germany: the polemic between the humanist Lucas Osiander and two Jesuit opponents, the pamphlet war around Pietist ideas and practices at the end of the seventeenth century, and a controversy on the “free investigation” of the Biblical canon at the end of the eighteenth century. These three studies have also a clearer methodological orientation, seeking to show how the historical contextualization of argumentation does enrich the formal results obtained by discursive analysis and helps to gain a better understanding of the dynamic of religious ideas. As religious ideology, theology is thus perceived as being subject to the same epistemological procedures of critical reasoning and displaying similar polemical practices as the other fields of intellectual history in the Western world.

However, it is here that, in my opinion, the most problematic aspect of the German-Israeli project is to be found. The study of controversies by a thorough analysis of their argumentation follows a methodology that is basically derived from discursive analysis, itself understood as following a linguistic model. According to this theoretical foundation, most human creations are considered to be mainly language-like productions that could be better understood by classifications and by analytical descriptions, revealing contrastive features and binary oppositions. In his approach to the analysis of controversies, Marcelo Dascal does indeed articulate a typology of the texts as discursive acts and thus corrects the oversimplification associated with the classical linguistic model of the discourse by an adjustment derived from the Wittgensteinian generic theory (of language games). According to Dascal’s typology, religious controversies are to be classified in three general classes: extra-faith controversies (where the opponents

belong to different persuasions and the issues under discussion are usually foundational, sometime reaching the issue of religion itself), inter-faith controversies (between representatives of different religious systems of belief) and intra-faith controversies (developed within the same religious paradigm, probably better called inter-denominational). Furthermore, the three types of religious controversy thus defined are considered as belonging to the great sphere of polemical literature, itself classifiable—in Dascal's opinion—according to three discursive types that in fact outline a growing limitation imposed on negotiation and resolution: discussion, controversy and dispute. While these general classifications have their use in a classroom, they also need a broad historical view in order to be clearly productive. And while in a more recent publication (*Interpretation and Understanding*, John Benjamins, 2003) Dascal proposes to integrate the analysis of controversies in a general hermeneutic theory, called 'sociopragmatic', it is clear that the limit of the methodology comes from the same source as its value, namely the structuralist model of language thoroughly de-historicized.

For this reason, it is quite interesting to see the German researchers involved in this project trying another modality of corrections in the study of communication/conversation model. The basic discursive assumptions of the linguistic model of communication is formulated by Fritz and Gloning in their study of controversial texts as historically contextualized literature, or textual discourses. This allows for a better study of the forms of publicity involved and leads them to a detailed analysis of some long neglected pamphlets, ephemera and broadsides. The history of religious ideas is thus integrated into a diversified and fragmented, history of European ideas, in an enriched cultural epistemology. The "drive to historical context" in the study of both dialogue and polemic texts is also shown by a companion collection of studies edited by Fritz (with Andreas H. Jucker and Franz Lebsanft), the *Historical Dialogue Analysis* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: Benjamins, 1999). By recovering the diachronic dimension otherwise obliterated by 'orthodox' synchronic examinations, Gertz and his German colleagues also revalorize the good old philological tradition, thus easing the link with a very rich tradition of critical readings that fully deserve a renewal of attention.

The texts in the "technical reports" of "Controversies in the République des Lettres" are—in the majority—in English; the few studies in German are accompanied by extensive abstracts in English. While the whole collection of essays is highly readable, the editing of the English translations could have been improved: I guess that even German researchers in the field suffer the same constraints as we do. The reports can be obtained by writing to Professor Gerd Fritz at Giessen University.