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edited by
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Sommario

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Debate and Polemic as Strategies of Knowledge in Ancient Greek Culture

Editorial of Engramma no. 225

Vincenzo Damiani and Roberto Indovina

Frontal, immobile, and fully armed, Athena stands at the threshold of this volume. The cover image is *Pallas Athene* (1898, oil on panel, Museum Georg Schäfer, Schweinfurt) by Franz von Stuck—a portrayal at once austere and arresting, in which the goddess does not stride into action but confronts the viewer with silent force. Her presence is neither narrative nor decorative; rather, she embodies the very tension this issue seeks to interrogate: the dialectical power of conflict as knowledge, as exemplified by Greek culture, whose intellectual legacy provides the central field of inquiry for the volume. This is not Ares' impulsive violence, but Athena's deliberate clarity—πόλεμος not as chaos, but as a principle of differentiation, critique, and strategic thought.

That this is the sole image in a volume otherwise conceived as aniconic is no accident. The editorial decision to withhold further visual content was neither iconoclastic nor ascetic, but *metacritical*. In a dossier devoted to the grammar and ethics of polemic—to the temporality and positionality of thought in friction—image gives way to discourse. The *logos* must stand exposed—without the mediation of illustrative comfort—so that its cuts, turns, and crises may be fully registered. Aniconism, in this context, is not absence, but discipline: a method of focusing attention on what argument alone can disclose. What is at stake here is not what can be seen, but what must be *said*, *heard*, and *risked* in the field of intellectual confrontation.

It is from this visual restraint—and from Athena's steadfast gaze—that the inquiry at the heart of *Engramma* 225 begins. The inquiry that opens here takes as its case study the culture that, perhaps more than any other, placed conflict at the heart of its intellectual life: that of Ancient Greece. Can debate and polemic be understood not merely as disturbances within knowledge, but as modes of its very formation? The essays that follow respond in diverse yet convergent ways, tracing how πόλεμος—in literature, rhetoric, philosophy, and criticism—does not merely challenge understanding, but *produces* it.

Reflecting this framework, the issue unfolds in two interwoven movements. The first gathers contributions that examine ancient texts through the prism of conflict: from Hesiod's rejection of Homeric poetics, through the dialectical rigour of Plato, to the polemical pedagogies of

the Hellenistic and Neoplatonic traditions. The second movement shifts focus to modern and contemporary debates over those very texts, reading critical disputes not as secondary commentary but as continuations of the ancient polemical field by other means.

Mauro Tulli reopens Hesiod's *Theogony* by re-examining the provocative claim of the Muses to "say many false things like the true". Rather than a playful paradox, Tulli reads this as a polemical stance against Homer on three fronts: deliberate mendacity, seductive fiction, and—most pointedly—poetic amplification. Tracing these 'enemies of truth' from Homer through Pindar and into Thucydides, he shows how Hesiod constructs a poetics of didactic clarity. His reading transforms the proem into a programmatic rejection of Homeric amplification and a call to discernment.

Marianna Angela Nardi focuses on Plato's *Sophist*, showing how the dialogue transforms polemic into conceptual analysis through the method of διαίρεσις. She explores how the elenctic tradition is reworked into a classificatory tool that tames conflict into structured thought, revealing a tension between argumentative rigor and ontological ambiguity. Polemic becomes method—not a disruption of knowledge, but its matrix.

Drawing on fragments by Epicurus, Colotes, Zenon of Sidon and Philodemus, Vincenzo Damiani reconstructs the Kepos' ambivalent response to Socrates. The main accusation is εἰρωνεία—an ironic dissimulation judged incompatible with the Epicurean ideal of παρρησία—, yet certain Epicurean testimonies grudgingly admire Socratic frugality and care of the soul. By showing how Epicureans denounce and appropriate their rival in turn, the essay presents disagreement as an internal catalyst: debate over Socrates refines Epicurean views on teaching, truth-telling, and philosophical βίος.

Selene I.S. Brumana traces the fortunes of ἀκρίβεια across Peripatetic and Epicurean texts, showing that "precision" itself becomes a polemical weapon—praised as intellectual rigor, critiqued as pedantry, or strategically deployed to exclude dissent. Her analysis reveals how even a seemingly neutral ideal can function polemically, depending on its rhetorical context.

Luigi Trovato follows the proverb οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον from Hellenistic paremiography to the Neoplatonic interpretation of Olympiodorus, showing how successive commentators invert its original declaration of irrelevance into proof of tragedy's deep Dionysian affinity. His contribution traces a polemical chain from popular saying to philosophical reflection, revealing the afterlife of ἀγών in exegetical traditions.

Monica Centanni revisits Wilamowitz's thesis that the first part of *Frogs* parodies the lost *Pirithous*, here restored to Critias. Scene-by-scene parallels—Heracles' descent, the mystic chorus, the doorkeeper skit—reveal a deliberate comic echo aimed at an audience keenly aware of Critias' oligarchic ambitions in 405 BCE. The result is a double polemic: a metatheatrical send-up of tragic form and a veiled warning about the faction that would soon impose the rule of the Thirty.

Alessandro Grilli reads the ἀγών between Lysistrata and the Commissioner as a clash between two philosophies of selfhood: an essentialist model rooted in fixed roles and a performative model created in the very act of speaking. Drawing on pragmatics and conversation analysis, he shows that in Aristophanes' comedy the positional force of language—who commands, who complies—outweighs propositional logic, turning verbal sparring into a contest for authority. Costume, travesty and metatheatre expose the reversibility of social hierarchies, making the play a classical laboratory for modern theories of identity.

Paolo B. Cipolla excavates the Callimachean polemic against epic excess, not to resolve it, but to show how the critical debate surrounding that passage remains open and fertile. His analysis reveals the persistence of conflict across centuries of reception, where scholarly voices continue to argue over the values of scale, genre, and poetic economy.

Roberto Indovina reconstructs the methodological clash between Oliver Taplin and Luca Giuliani on the interpretation of Greek tragedy and visual culture. His case study becomes a reflection on *iconodramatic dissensus*—where images and words compete for primacy—and exemplifies how modern scholarship re-enacts ancient polemics by other means.

Placed in sequence, these essays do not merely describe polemic—they enact it. Each contribution stages a confrontation with received interpretations, producing knowledge through friction. To capture the full scope of debate and polemic, we set out to map a typology of conflict operative within ancient Greek culture (with echoes in modern scholarship). The levels of contention we address range from the most intimate to the most expansive. On one end are internal textual conflicts—tensions or debates that occur within a single work or author's corpus. Greek authors often contain multitudes: one can find contradictions or dialectical structures inside Plato's dialogues or in the contrasting voices of a historiographical narrative. Moving outward, we consider inter-school rivalries and debates. Classical Athens itself witnessed philosophical schools in constant debate (Stoics versus Epicureans, or Academics versus Cynics, and so on), and literary circles sparring over aesthetic principles. Then there are methodological disputes, conflicts about how one ought to study or interpret something—for example, Alexandrian scholars arguing over textual criticism methods, or modern historians disputing archaeological vs. literary evidence. Finally, at the broadest level lie ideological controversies: deep-seated conflicts of worldviews, such as the tension between pagan and Christian interpretations in Late Antiquity, or between radically different approaches to Greek Antiquity in modern times (Romanticism versus Positivism, for instance). By analysing examples of each type, this issue illustrates that polemic in Greek intellectual life was pervasive and multi-layered. A single ancient controversy might simultaneously involve personal animosity, divergent methods, and clashing ideologies at once. Our typology is not meant as a rigid schema but as a lens to appreciate the many faces of conflict—how a philosophical polemic might differ from a literary feud, or how an internal debate within a text might mirror larger societal disputes

This project finds its genesis in two open seminars held in Sicily—one in Syracuse, the other in Catania—in the spring of 2025. There, a diverse group of scholars and students convened under the auspices of *Engramma* to ask a provocative question: can conflict itself serve as an analytical lens in classical studies? The lively discussions that unfolded in those Sicilian meetings suggested that debate and polemic are not merely discordant notes in the symphony of scholarship, but driving rhythms of knowledge. As emphasized by Peppe Nanni—one of the participants in the Sicilian seminars and co-initiator of this research trajectory—understanding the boundary between destructive and generative conflict is essential to any ethical engagement with polemics. His insights helped clarify the function of καιρός in the unfolding of scholarly tension.

Far from treating conflict as something to be resolved or eliminated, the contributors to this volume approached it as a phenomenon to be understood in its own right—a productive force with its own anatomy and logic.

πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι
(22 B 53 Diels-Kranz = D 64 Laks-Most)

Heraclitus famously posited πόλεμος—'war' or 'strife'—as the father of all things, the generative motor of being and knowledge itself. For Heraclitus, oppositional tension was the wellspring of the cosmos: day and night, winter and summer, life and death each define and engender one another through contrast. This insight from the dawn of Greek thought provides a philosophical cornerstone for our inquiry. Conflict, in the Heraclitean view, is dually natured: it is creative even as it is destructive, a source of order as much as disorder. It produces the harmony of the lyre and bow through the straining of opposing forces. Such an idea urges us to reconsider the role of polemic in intellectual life. Rather than seeing scholarly controversy as a breakdown or failure, we might see it as an engine—πόλεμος as a crucible in which ideas are tested and transformed. Greek culture at large bore out this principle: from its agonistic athletic festivals and dramatic competitions to its philosophical debates, the Greeks perceived contest (ἀγών) to be integral to excellence and discovery. In short, conflict could be generative, producing new forms and understandings, while retaining the potential to burn and destroy.

Yet conflict only yields knowledge under certain conditions. A crucial theme that emerged in our seminars is the *relational* nature of knowledge. Truth, or insight, in the humanistic disciplines is seldom the product of a solitary thinker operating in isolation; rather, it arises dialectically, between minds, in dialogue and sometimes in heated dispute. Friction, not solitary observation, produces thought—or at least the kind of thought that significantly shifts perspectives. In this sense, every knower is a relational subject, defined not just by what they contemplate but by whom they engage. Greek philosophy itself is a testament to this fact: Socrates sought wisdom by interlocution, incessantly questioning others; Aristotle defined humans as political animals whose reasoning unfolds in the polis, through exchange. Our contributors likewise contend that knowledge advances when confronted, when one idea rubs up against another. A culture of debate forces each participant to articulate assumptions, defend

with evidence, refine terms, or even to yield and adapt. Through this process, understanding is co-crafted. The solitary scholar, for all their erudition, needs the sandpaper of dissent to reveal the shape of a truth. The essays in this issue therefore adopt conflict not as a lamentable background noise but as an analytical tool—a means to see how ideas sharpen one another in confrontation.

This perspective has implications for how we think about rhetoric and audience in any polemical exchange. During one of our seminars, Alessandro Grilli offered a trenchant critique of the notion of a "universal audience" as advanced by the rhetorician Chaïm Perelman. Perelman, in his *Traité de l'argumentation : la nouvelle rhétorique* (Paris 1958, with L. Olbrechts-Tyteca), imagined that arguers, to be persuasive, speak to an idealized audience embodying all rational beings—a comforting abstraction that presumes certain universals of reason. Grilli challenges this by observing that in real debates, language is inherently *positional*. A polemic always speaks from a particular position to a particular audience, whether that be a rival school, a circle of insiders, or a public faction. There is no view from nowhere, and no argument addresses everyone equally. Each utterance in a controversy stakes out a position in a landscape of discourse, locating itself against an opponent or backdrop. In classical studies, for example, a scholar defending a traditional interpretation implicitly addresses a community of like-minded readers while also reacting against another community of revisionists. Grilli's insight reframes Perelman's ideal: rather than seeking a universal vantage, effective debate recognises the situatedness of knowledge—that any claim will be received differently depending on the audience's assumptions and historical moment. In the Greek world too, we see this play out: Isocrates or Demosthenes tailored their orations keenly to the civic bodies they aimed to convince, and the success of a philosophical polemic often depended on the *ethos* it could establish with its immediate circle. By foregrounding this "positional language", we acknowledge that every polemic establishes a perspective—and it is through the clash of these situated perspectives that new understanding can emerge.

If debate is rooted in context, it is also woven in time. Classical rhetoric has a word for the opportune moment: καιρός. A well-timed intervention in a debate can utterly change its course; mistimed, the same argument might fall flat. We came to see scholarly controversies as dynamic processes that unfold with phases and turning points. In fact, one can metaphorically describe states of knowledge much like states of matter: sometimes gaseous, sometimes liquid, sometimes crystalline. There are periods in a scholarly field (or in an ancient intellectual debate) when ideas are in a gaseous state—diffuse, swirling, not yet solidified, full of possibility but also of confusion. In such moments, a bold polemic can serve as a nucleating spark, condensing scattered insights into a more liquid state of coalescence, a flowing stream of argument where contours begin to appear. As discussion continues and evidence accumulates, what was liquid may harden into a crystalline structure—a paradigm or orthodox consensus with definite shape and clarity. But the history of ideas shows that no crystal is permanent; eventually, creative friction or new data might cause a fracture. Here, a forceful polemic—delivered at just the right καιρός—can shatter a hardened orthodoxy back into flux, returning it

to a liquid or gaseous state where thought can be reconfigured. In sum, polemic is often the catalyst for phase-changes in knowledge. A controversy well engaged can crystallise emergent insights into structure, or conversely, break apart calcified dogmas to reintroduce liquidity into intellectual life. The essays in this issue also attend to this temporal dance, illustrating how timing and momentum in argument are crucial to understanding why certain debates in Greek culture (and in our field) unfolded as they did, and how they led to shifts in understanding.

Studying polemic as we do also raises questions about the ethics of criticism and the risks of truth-telling. Engaging in open debate, especially when it challenges powerful figures or entrenched ideas, has always been an act that entails risk. The Greek term παρρησία—frank, bold speech—comes to mind. Michel Foucault, in his late lectures—beginning with the course *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres I* (Paris 2008) at the Collège de France in spring 1983, continuing with the six lectures *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia* at the University of California, Berkeley, in October–November 1983, and culminating with *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres II : Le Courage de la vérité* (Paris 2009), held from February to March 1984—shed light on this concept: the parrhesiast is one who speaks truth to power, plainly and courageously, accepting the danger that comes with such honesty. As Monica Centanni has compellingly argued (*Il gioco della verità e della politica: Michel Foucault e le lezioni parigine sulla* parrhesia, "La Rivista di Engramma" 68 [dicembre 2008], 47-67), *parrhesia* is not merely the right to speak, but an agonistic and ethical act that completes the democratic *dispositif*: a citizen stands up and speaks truth, exposing their personal ἀρετή to collective judgment, and assuming political risk. In Antiquity, this could mean a philosopher risking exile by criticising a ruler, or a comic poet lampooning the city's leaders on stage. In modern scholarship, too, a junior researcher might risk career prospects by openly contesting the orthodox views of senior figures. The ethic of metacritique we espouse in this issue embraces this principle of risk. To conduct metacriticism—that is, a critique of the very frameworks and assumptions of criticism—one must be willing to question even the 'sacred cows' of one's field. We highlight throughout an understanding of criticism not as a safe, pedantic exercise, but as a venture that demands intellectual courage. The figure of the scholar emerges, in our view, as akin to the parrhesiast: a critical subject who must sometimes stake reputation, and even face censure, in order to push knowledge forward. That willingness to hazard the storm for the sake of clarity or truth is part of what makes polemic, at its best, an ethical as well as intellectual act. Several contributions explicitly reflect on this aspect: how ancient writers drew the line between productive confrontation and destructive invective, and how modern academics might navigate the same fine line. The underlying idea is that robust debate, entered into with sincerity and rigour, is a moral good in scholarly life, even if it carries personal risks, because it keeps our discourse honest and vibrant.

The stakes of this issue are theoretical as much as philological. Each essay, in its own way, tests the theoretical categories of this volume—timing, risk, precision, and position—against concrete ancient and modern texts. We offer the present collection as a *toolbox*—concepts, categories, cautionary tales—and as an *invitation* to embrace the uncertainty without which

no genuine intellectual advance is possible. For it is precisely where arguments collide, identities bristle and traditions crack that thought, in the fullest sense, comes alive. Conflict, when navigated with rigour and courage, becomes not the end of discourse, but its necessary beginning.

Abstract

Engramma no. 225 considers conflict not as a disruption of thought, but as its very precondition. The volume unfolds in two interwoven movements. The first, 'Polemics in Antiquity', investigates how ancient texts articulate knowledge through confrontation. Mauro Tulli, in *Was können die Musen Hesiod lehren? Die Wahrheit und ihre Feinde in der* Theogonie, reinterprets Hesiod's *Theogony* as a polemical stance against Homeric fiction and poetic amplification. Marianna Angela Nardi, in *Un dibattito antico sulle strategie argomentative. Platone e la* διαίρεσις *come* Begriffsspaltung, analyses how Plato's *Sophist* reframes polemic into classificatory precision through the method of διαίρεσις. Vincenzo Damiani, in *Antike Kritik an der sokratischen Pädagogik am Beispiel der Epikureer*, explores Epicurean critiques of Socratic irony and *parrhesia*. Selene I.S. Brumana, in *Con o senza* akribeia*? Su filosofia e scienza nel dibattito ellenistico*, examines *akribeia* as a philosophically contested and rhetorically volatile value. Luigi Trovato, in *Ancora sull'*οὐδὲν πρὸς τὸν Διόνυσον. *L'anomalia olimpiodorea*, traces a Dionysian proverb through late antique *scholia*, revealing how polemic survives in exegetical reactivation. The second movement, 'Modern and Contemporary Critical Debates', reconsiders ancient *agon* through the lens of modern controversies. Monica Centanni, in *Critias'* Pirithous *and Aristophanes'* Frogs*. Metatheatrical Echoes and the Critical Debate*, reads *metatheatre* as civic allegory and literary contest. Alessandro Grilli, in *Lisistrata e il Commissario. Dialettica comica e identità performativa*, reads the *agon* between Lysistrata and the Commissioner as a comic laboratory in which Aristophanes opposes essentialist and performative models of identity. Paolo B. Cipolla, in *De "magna muliere" in Callimachi* Aetiorum *prologo nonnulla disputantur*, revisits Callimachean aesthetics and its long critical reception. Roberto Indovina, in *Arqueología filológica y filología arqueológica. Interrogantes y controversias epistemológicas persistentes*, maps the methodological dispute between Oliver Taplin and Luca Giuliani on tragedy and visual culture, offering a case study in interpretive *dissensus*. This issue does not aim at synthesis but exposes the crisis at the core of every act of thought. Here, metacritique is not a posture of neutrality but a practice of risk: a situated discernment under conceptual pressure. Thought begins, as the Greeks understood, not in resolution but in tension—in the poised stillness before the blow, in the lucidity that only confrontation can yield.

keywords | Polemics; Conflict as Knowledge; Greek Thought; Metacriticism; Relational Epistemology.

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