

THE WHEELER PRINCIPLE EXPROPROATED FOR THE CLASSICS

Somewhere,¹ the amazing physicist John Archibald Wheeler made a comment that seems to me could be a guiding principle for classical scholarship: “*In any field, find the strangest thing and then explore it.*”

[Wheeler](#), who is sometimes described as having “revolutionized” physics, and certainly played an important role in the development of the hydrogen bomb, had a way with words. He was a veritable US mint, coining them right and left. Wikipedia lists “the term “[black hole](#)”, ... “[neutron moderator](#)”, “[quantum foam](#)”, “[wormhole](#)”, and “[it from bit](#)”, and ... the “[one-electron universe](#)”. “ But I especially like the phrasing of another comment of his:” We live on an island surrounded by a sea of ignorance. As our island of knowledge grows, so does the shore of our ignorance.”²

But for me the advice to look for what’s strangest and then explore it is a guiding principle. It works, I am convinced, because it keeps the focus on what is distinctive in our fields, and hence on what Classics’ distinctive contribution to education can be. But it also makes us less likely to follow in the wake of other fields, or to adopt presentist clichés. At the same time it provides perspective, encouraging awareness of “cultural warp,” that is, the places where Greek ways don’t match our ways. That raises the big question of cross-cultural comparison: Who’s really strange, them or us? (Often us, I suspect).

In the classroom, the principle can enrich the relationship between teacher and student. It can open the windows and let a fresh breeze blow through, the breeze of honesty. Students can be forthright about what they find genuinely puzzling in the material; the teacher can be frank about the continuing feeling of wonder, even mystery, about people like us in so many respects, yet different in often puzzling ways.

The only problem with applying the principle in Classics, as best I can see, is that among the Greeks it’s not easy to identify what is strangest. There’s too much competition for the title. But somewhere high

¹ James Gleick, [Genius: the Life and Science of Richard Feynman](#) (1993), p..

² [Scientific American](#) (1992), Vol. 267. Quoted in Clifford A. Pickover, [Wonders of Numbers](#) p. , 195.

up in the list has to be Epimenides, the legendary Cretan diviner, and his tattooed hide. Maybe I'll start with him. Stay tuned.

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