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AGAINST ADVERSARIAL DISCUSSION

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R.G. Collingwood's *An Autobiography* is an account of a thinker's intellectual maturation reconstructed as a rational development.¹ Collingwood tells the reader about his gradual disillusionment with the barren philosophical system of the 'realist' school of philosophy, prominent in the Oxford of his day. In describing the process of coming to reject the distinctive doctrine, method, and practices of his realist colleagues, however, Collingwood is not at every step explicit about his reasons. Why, for example, did he come to reject the adversarial style of philosophical discussion so popular among his Oxford peers? As with many of the specific charges against his realist colleagues, in *An Autobiography* the explicit criticism of the way they conduct philosophical discussions is only brief.

The main aim of this paper is to explain why Collingwood came to reject his colleagues' specific style of philosophical dialogue on methodological grounds, and to show how the argument against adversarial philosophical discussion is integrated with Collingwood's overall criticism of realist philosophy. I do this for two reasons. First, it is easy to miss the force of Collingwood's criticism, and miss how it integrates with the general line of methodological criticism of *An Autobiography*. On the basis of the key passage in which Collingwood explicates his criticism, it may seem that his objection is motivated just by the negative consequences of their aggressive style of philosophizing. That would make Collingwood's criticism of philosophical discussion no more than a side-remark, an off-hand negative evaluation of a practice that happened to be popular among his Oxford peers. I want to warn against any such 'non-systematic' reading of Collingwood's criticism of philosophical discussion. A second reason for bringing out that Collingwood came to reject his colleagues' specific style of philosophical discussion on methodological grounds is that his argument exploits a connection between method and practice that should be taken seriously even today.

¹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1939).

I will begin by presenting a core passage in which Collingwood expresses his criticism of philosophical discussion (§1). I then bring out how it may be tempting to read Collingwood's criticism non-systematically, as on a par with more recent objections to an adversarial style of discussion prevalent in philosophy (§2). I resist this temptation, and offer a systematic reconstruction of Collingwood's argument against *viva voce* philosophy (§3). I will bring out exactly why Collingwood accepted this argument by considering a related discussion of 'eristical' arguments in his later *The New Leviathan* (§4). This allows a more unified reading of the argument in *An Autobiography* (§5). I will close by bringing out the relevance of this reading for current critics of argumentative practice in philosophy (§6).

I. When *viva voce* philosophy becomes argument

Recovering from an illness in his family home at Lanehead in Cumbria, and with a second war with Germany imminent, Collingwood completed the manuscript of *An Autobiography* in the later half of 1938. Oxford University Press published the 167-page book the following year. Its style is one of 'conversational ease and majestic scorn', as a biographer has put it.² The work narrates Collingwood's gradual move away from Oxford Realism, the school of thought that had determined his education at Oxford, and that he in 1938 had come to see as both undermining genuine philosophical thought and as paving the way for a dangerous kind of politics.³

The heart of Collingwood's break with his realist teachers was his growing dissatisfaction with its strictly ahistorical critical method. Spearheaded by John Cook Wilson, then Wykeham Professor of Logic, the school assumed that the philosopher's exclusive task was to use the tools of *critical analysis* to determine the viability of philosophical propositions or views. The realist conceives of a philosophical view as one that, though perhaps propounded at some point in history, is itself analysable as a collection of simple propositions that are individually either true, false, or

² F. Inglis, *History Man: The Life of R.G. Collingwood* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 94. Inglis offers a solid account of the conditions under which *An Autobiography* was written.

³ For helpful introductions to the Oxford Realist philosophy, see M.E. Kalderon and C. Travis, 'Oxford Realism' in M. Beaney (ed.) *Oxford Handbook of the History of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2013) and M. Marion, 'Oxford Realism: Knowledge and Perception I' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8(2) 2000, pp. 299–338 and M. Marion, 'Oxford Realism: Knowledge and Perception II' *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 8(3) 2000, pp. 485–519.

meaningless, and jointly either contradictory or not.⁴ This specific method of critical analysis enabled the realist to subject views to a ‘strictly philosophical’ form of scrutiny. Collingwood however came to see that this method presupposes an epistemological principle that set the realists apart from their forebears. As Collingwood puts it, Cook Wilson assumed that knowing makes no difference to what is known, so that understanding a philosophical thesis is a blank apprehension; a simple matter that is not itself part of the critical activity of the philosopher.⁵ Collingwood becomes deeply dissatisfied with this view. His suspicions are fed in part by his first-hand experience in archaeological research, which led him to come up with his own historicist principle about knowledge and logic: that a philosophical proposition is only meaningful in light of the specific question to which it is an answer. This means that understanding philosophical claims is far from a simple matter, and that any supposition to the contrary will accordingly distort the claims one is criticising.⁶ He warns the realist that

Your positive doctrines about knowledge are incompatible with what happens, according to my own experience, in historical research; and your critical methods are misused on doctrines which in historical fact were never held by those to whom you ascribe them.⁷

Besides this strong resistance to the positive doctrines and critical methods of his Oxford peers, of at least equal importance in *An Autobiography* is his criticism of their academic practices. A frequently discussed example is the way Collingwood objects to the pedagogic strategies of his realist colleagues, which he thinks undermine intellectual responsibility and the social relevance of ethical theory.⁸ Here I want to focus on another practice Collingwood rejects: the way his colleagues behaved in discussing each other’s work during seminars and at conferences. Of the kind of intellectual exchanges they celebrated, Collingwood writes that ‘these discussions serve no philosophical purpose’.⁹ He briefly elaborates the point in the following key passage:

⁴ See also R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, revised edition, ed. James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005). Collingwood’s criticism of the methods of analytical philosophy has been discussed in detail in M. Beaney, ‘Collingwood’s Critique of Analytic Philosophy’, *Collingwood and British Idealism Studies*, 8 (2001), pp. 99–122.

⁵ F. Inglis, *History Man: The Life of R.G. Collingwood*, p. 296.

⁶ James Connelly and Giuseppina D'Oro bring out in their Editors’ Introduction to R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, that Collingwood may in addition have been motivated by the ‘paradox of analysis’ (p. xxx).

⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 28.

⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 74.

⁹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 54.

Viva voce philosophy is an excellent thing as between tutor and pupil; it may be valuable as between two intimate friends; it is tolerable as between a few friends who know each other very well; but in all these cases its only value is to make one party acquainted with the views of the other. Where it becomes argument, directed to refutation and conviction, it is useless, for (in my long experience, at least) no one has ever been convinced by it. Where it becomes general discussion it is an outrage. One of the company reads a paper, and the rest discuss it with a fluency directly proportional to their ignorance. To shine on such occasions one should have a rather obtuse, insensitive mind and a ready tongue. Whatever may be true of parrots, philosophers who cannot talk probably think the more, and those who think a lot certainly talk the less.¹⁰

In this passage Collingwood makes clear that there may be some value in oral philosophical discussion, as it may clarify to an audience what someone is thinking. But getting together with colleagues or students in order to ‘discuss’ whether a philosophical view is correct or not, to attempt to refute it, or determine whether it even makes sense is, he claims, useless.

What exactly is the target of Collingwood’s criticism? A first thing to observe is that he rejects a certain way in which views are discussed, not their delivery. Clearly, giving a talk is distinct from a subsequent discussion of the view you propounded. Collingwood respects this distinction. A paradigm of what Collingwood objects to is the practice people nowadays describe as the question-and-answer period after a talk—the ‘Q&A’. Further, philosophical discussions of the sort Collingwood objects to do not require large groups. He allows that they can occur between just two individuals. A tutor and her pupil may discuss whether the utilitarian is right, for example, or one person may challenge a close colleague’s views about the mind–body problem. Such one-on-one exchanges seem to get to the heart of philosophical discussion. Even in larger groups this form of discussion typically takes the form of a succession of dyadic argumentative exchanges.

Collingwood does not reject discussions as such, but only certain specific forms of philosophical discussion. In the above passage Collingwood distinguishes (i) potentially valuable discussions directed at making one party acquainted with the views of the other from (ii) ‘useless’ discussions directed at refutation and conviction. What differentiates philosophically acceptable and philosophically unacceptable

¹⁰ Ibid.

discussions? It seems that Collingwood thinks that discussions become unacceptable if they deviate from sincere attempts at understanding someone else, and instead turn sceptical or hostile.

In recent years a number of authors have objected precisely to the way philosophers engage with one another in seminars or at conferences, along similar lines. The main critical point of these recent voices is that forms of philosophical discussion that depart from sincere attempts at making sense of someone's philosophical claims, and instead focus mainly on criticism or refutation, are thought to have negative effects on the overall atmosphere of academic philosophy. When discussion turns adversarial, it is said to become counterproductive and to exclude voices from the philosophical debate. It is tempting to read Collingwood as prefiguring such objections. However, I want to urge against such a reading, because it is at its best incomplete.

II. The adversary paradigm

In the paragraphs that precede the key passage in which Collingwood criticises *viva voce* discussion, he describes an atmosphere that is still thoroughly familiar today. 'I used to meet a dozen or so of my colleagues every week', he writes, 'in order to discuss a topic or a view propounded by one of us'.¹¹ The more official 'Oxford Philosophical Society', of which Collingwood too was part, met on Sunday evenings two or three times a term. Once a year they would join other philosophical societies at a conference to listen to and discuss papers for several days.¹² The tradition of getting together with colleagues to discuss philosophical ideas is of course still strong. At the heart of all these encounters, Collingwood observes, is the practice of arguing about specific philosophical claims and positions. Many professional philosophers today would accept that critical argument is at the heart of the practice of philosophical discussion. More strongly, they may even hold that after the talk, during the Q&A, is where the real philosophical action is.

As many will be able to verify for themselves, such discussions tend to be rather formulaic. A typical way for an academic philosophical audience to respond to a paper is by objecting to its premises and arguments. It involves bringing out where a presenter's reasoning went astray, or which premises can be rejected. Someone may

¹¹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 53.

¹² It is likely that Collingwood here refers to the Joint Session of the Aristotelian Society and Mind Association, to which he made several contributions. For example, in July 1922 he attended the annual meeting in Manchester, where he read the paper 'Are History and Science Different Kinds of Knowledge?', cf. James Connelly, Peter Johnson, Stephen Leach (eds.), *R. G. Collingwood: A Research Companion* (London, Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 25.

respond by questioning an assumption, or raise a concern about the validity of the inferences. Someone else may offer counterexamples to the position a presenter advertises. The presenter, in turn, is expected to defend her view against such objections. A philosophical discussion unfolding in this way is ‘good practice’, and generally regarded a sign of healthy philosophical enquiry.¹³

Commonly the relation between the presenter and members of the audience raising questions is expected to be *adversarial*. Such an (in effect) hostile stance seems to have its source, at least partly, in the way we tend to conceive of *argument*. As many have noted, the concept of argument is shaped by a metaphor of combat or war. Philosophical papers are typically conceived as presenting an argument that from plausible premises advances a controversial conclusion—as if taking a new position, from strong ground. Daniel H. Cohen has brought out how people often speak of ‘knockdown’ or ‘killer’ arguments to certain views, describe people’s replies as ‘counterattacks’, think of certain objections as being ‘on target’ and of specific views as ‘easy to shoot down’.¹⁴ Philosophers especially seem to have a strong tendency to perpetuate and stimulate this aggressive type of discussion. Why is this?

This may have to do with a conviction that adversariality is a guide to objectivity. Janice Moulton has suggested that the explanation for the prevalence of an adversary style in philosophy is to be found in a widespread conviction that criticism and attempts at refutation make for the best way to get at the truth of the matter. She labels this conviction the ‘Adversary Paradigm’.

Under the Adversary Paradigm, it is assumed that the only, or at any rate, the best, way of evaluating work in philosophy is to subject it to the strongest or most extreme opposition. And it is assumed that the best way of presenting work in philosophy is to address it to an imagined opponent and muster all the evidence one can to support it. The justification for this method is that a position ought to be defended from, and subjected to, the criticism of the strongest opposition; that this method is the only way to get the best of both sides; that a thesis which

¹³ P. Rooney, ‘When Philosophical Argumentation Impedes Social and Political Progress’, *Journal of Social Philosophy*, 43(4), 2012, pp. 317–333, p. 320.

¹⁴ D.H. Cohen, ‘Argument is War... and War is Hell: Philosophy, Education, and Metaphors for Argumentation’, *Informal Logic*, 17(2), 1995, pp. 177–188. That our understanding of the concept is strongly determined by the ‘argument-is-war’ metaphor was brought out in G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

survives this method of evaluation is more likely to be correct than one that has not¹⁵

According to Moulton, the explanation for why contemporary philosophers retain this strong tendency to perpetuate this type of discussion, despite the fact that it is increasingly perceived as aggressive and hostile, is that it is held to be the most rigorous, if not the only, form of philosophical criticism. By trying our best to undermine the views of our colleagues, we do service to philosophy. As Brian Leiter has put it, insofar as *truth* is at stake, combat seems the right posture.¹⁶

Critics of such adversarial conduct maintain that it renders philosophizing an aggressive practice that is unwelcoming to several underrepresented groups. As many have pointed out, compared to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, philosophy continues to do poorly when it comes to the number of women in the discipline. Helen Beebee identifies the adversarial style of argumentation so common in philosophy seminars and at conferences as a likely culprit.¹⁷ And Moulton argues more generally that an aggressive approach is easily conflated with professional competence, while in fact it frequently hinders it, obstructing one from making the progress one aims for.¹⁸

By asserting that, in his long experience, no one has ever been convinced by arguments directed at refutation, Collingwood seems to be making the same kind of consequentialist point as these more recent critics. It may seem that Collingwood's negative verdict is similarly based on the poor outcomes of this way of discussing philosophy. No one is ever really convinced by it, so why even try? Furthermore, his remarks on 'general discussion' can be construed as based on his (putative) observation that such discussions are superficial. 'General discussion' is an outrage, because these discussions thrive on ignorance of the topic at issue, and so are

¹⁵ J. Moulton, 'A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method', in *Discovering Reality*, S. Harding and M.B. Hintikka (eds.) (Hingham, MA, D. Reidel, 1993), pp. 149–164, p. 153.

¹⁶ A point along these lines was made by Brian Leiter on his weblog *Leiter Reports*, <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2013/11/the-aristocracy-of-sex-in-philosophy.html> (Accessed 10 January 2016)

¹⁷ Cf. B. Lewis, 'Where are all the women?' *The Philosophers' Magazine*, 47 (2009). Available online: <https://philosophypress.co.uk/?p=615> (Accessed 14 January 2016). See also H. Beebee, 'Women and Deviance in Philosophy', in *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?*, K. Hutchinson and F. Jenkins (eds.), (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 61–80 and P. Rooney, 'When Philosophical Argumentation Impedes Social and Political Progress'.

¹⁸ J. Moulton, 'A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method', p. 151. Moulton not only thinks adversarial paradigm is bad in light of social standards, but also sees a tension internal to the practice. She thinks that a consequence of this style of discussion is that certain voices are sidelined, and this, she rightly claims, seems in direct tension with the method's aim of getting at the truth.

unlikely to deliver any real result. Read in this way, Collingwood's argument against *viva voce* philosophy can be understood as an observation based on his growing experience with 'doing' philosophy. It is an observation anyone in the profession could have made, one rooted in a realisation that, in fact, this mode of discussion serves no philosophical purpose because it rarely works. This would be a reading of Collingwood's criticism as a merely statistical observation, not as concerning a systematic, in-principle objection. I want to warn against this reading of his argument.

It is clear that Collingwood does make these observations about the lack of outcome and the superficiality of the discussion. But to take them as capturing his motivation for rejecting the argumentative practices of his colleagues would be a mistake. Precisely because of his awareness of how philosophical methodology influences the way we reason and think, Collingwood can undergird his verdict with an in-principle objection to this philosophical practice. Only this more systematic argument warrants Collingwood's strong verdict that the argumentative practices of his peers serve no philosophical purpose whatsoever. To bring this further argument to the fore, however, it is necessary to go beyond the specific passage from *An Autobiography* that I have been considering so far.

III. Systematic grounds

What does Collingwood think about adversarial discussion? The argumentative practices of his colleagues, Collingwood holds, depend on an unsound critical methodology. Collingwood's stance is part of his systematic progression away from realist philosophy. He states how, while at first 'thoroughly indoctrinated with [the] principles and methods' of his realist teachers, he came to see why both their principles and their critical methods were unsound during his war service in London, and how after the war ended he 'came back to Oxford an opponent of the 'realists'.'¹⁹ But his opposition is initially restricted to *theory*. Collingwood had not yet given up the *practical* manifestations of realist philosophy. In particular, he 'had not yet learnt the uselessness of reading papers and holding discussions on philosophical subjects'.²⁰ It would take another year or so before Collingwood came to see that *because* their methods and doctrines were unsound, the realists' *practices* were rotten. These included their pedagogical strategies in the classroom, as well as their behaviour in discussions. In a chapter titled 'The Decay of Realism', Collingwood for

¹⁹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 22, 44.

²⁰ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 22.

the first time rejects outright how realists ‘do’ philosophy. The argumentative practices they promote serve no philosophical purpose.²¹

How does Collingwood arrive at this further conclusion about how his colleagues discussed philosophy? I suggest that he resists them because he grasps that they are nothing but applications of the realist critical method that he had already rejected.

Collingwood’s rejection of realist practices exploits the idea that philosophical discussions depend on the soundness of the critical method of which they are applications. His idea is that if a philosophical method is theoretically unsound, then any practice that presupposes that method must, *qua* philosophical practice, be unsound too. The reasoning can be represented as a simple *modus tollens* inference:

1. If argumentative practice π serves a philosophical purpose, then the critical method μ on which π depends is sound
2. μ is not sound
3. π serves no philosophical purpose (1, 2)

This argument fits well with Collingwood’s preoccupation with philosophical method throughout *An Autobiography*. It exhibits Collingwood’s gradual *rapprochement* between theory and practice: the idea that much of what people do is a manifestation of their system of thinking.

Indeed, Collingwood’s negative attitude to these argumentative practices is expressed on numerous occasions in *An Autobiography*.²² It suggests a development that plays out at a deeper, methodological level. For example, Collingwood makes clear that in discussion with his realist colleagues, their natural response to his views is to try to refute them. Collingwood implies that in refuting philosophical views, the realists took themselves to be doing what they thought was the business of philosophy. Of their idealist predecessors Collingwood writes that their view

presented itself to most Oxford philosophers as something which had to be destroyed, and in destroying which they would be discharging their first duty to their subject.²³

Such passages show that both Collingwood and the realist take this form of criticism to be an application of a critical method.

²¹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 54.

²² See e.g. R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 19, 21, 55.

²³ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 19.

Collingwood captures the realist methods in various ways, but does so most explicitly in terms of their exclusive focus on analysis. As he writes,

the ‘realists’ chief, and in the last resort, it seemed to me, only method was to analyse the position criticized into various propositions, and detect contradictions between these.²⁴

According to the realist, Collingwood thinks, only analysing and assessing views in light of potential contradiction is genuine philosophy. He connects the realist’s destructive, argumentative style with this specific understanding of the critical methods of philosophy. Collingwood’s criticism in the key passage cited above is the culmination of his growing dissatisfaction with a destructive, adversarial style of reasoning. It is not some isolated, off-hand observation about a popular type of philosophical practice. Instead, Collingwood’s rejection rests on systematic grounds.²⁵

I have already said that Collingwood thinks that the critical method of the realists is unsound. Collingwood establishes this twice: once on his own historicist conception of knowledge and logic, and once on the realist’s own terms. In its first instalment the argument takes the form of a straightforward *modus tollens* inference. A philosophical method is only sound if all the principles it presupposes are sound. But, Collingwood thinks, the realist’s principle that ‘knowing makes no difference to what is known’ is unsound, as anyone who learns to think historically will be able to attest.²⁶ Hence any method relying on this principle, as the realist’s critical method does, will not be acceptable. Formally:

1. If critical method μ is sound, then doctrine δ on which μ depends is sound
2. δ is not sound
3. μ is not sound (1, 2)

²⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 42.

²⁵ A further point that supports this is that, if what is explicit in the core passage captured the full story of Collingwood’s rejection of *viva voce* discussion, his argument would not be a very good one. As an objection merely focused on the consequences of argumentative practice, it would be an exaggeration. As long as refutation and conviction could be successful in principle, there may still be at least some purpose to the practice. Moreover, conviction and refutation could be an *ideal* to the argumentative practice of the realists. As with other practices that take place in light of an ideal, arguing with the aim to refute or convince does not make striving for that ideal philosophically purposeless.

²⁶ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 42.

In its second instalment, working on the realist's own terms, Collingwood's argument can be reconstructed as a *reductio*. If the realist method were sound, then given that this method presupposes the realist doctrine, it would follow that the realist doctrine is sound. However, Collingwood maintains that the realist method can equally be used to prove that the realist doctrine is meaningless and therefore not sound.²⁷ This means that if the realist method were sound, we would be able to prove both that the realist doctrine is sound and that it is not sound. Hence assuming the soundness of the realist method results in a contradiction. Formally:

1. μ is sound (assumption, for reductio)
2. If method μ is sound, doctrine δ is sound
3. If μ is sound, δ is unsound
4. δ is sound (1, 3)
5. δ is unsound (2, 3)
6. \perp (4, 5)
7. μ is unsound

This establishes once more that the realist method is not sound, this time on terms the realist should be able to accept. That Collingwood has both these arguments available to him means that for his rejection to go through, he need neither affirm nor deny the realists' 'sole positive doctrine' that knowing makes no difference to what is known.

In *An Autobiography* Collingwood's two arguments against the realist method precede his rejection of realist argumentative practices. In other words, even before Collingwood condemned philosophical discussion as useless, he already took himself to have proven the critical method of the realist unsound. What further insight allowed him to see that the argumentative practices of his colleagues were bound up with their method? The answer is at best hinted at in *An Autobiography*; it does not receive the systematic treatment desirable for the methodological objection that Collingwood seems to have in mind. However, when in a later work Collingwood revisits the issue of philosophical discussion, he does explicate the connection in systematic terms. This later, systematic presentation confirms the picture I have sketched of Collingwood's criticism of philosophical discussion in *An Autobiography*.

IV. Academic discussions, academic problems

²⁷ He explicates this on p. 23, and recounts the actual proof, as he read it out to his colleagues in one of their seminars, on p. 44.

In *The New Leviathan* Collingwood catalogues different types of practical reason, to understand better the history and present state of European politics.²⁸ Central to Collingwood's diagnosis of the 'barbarisms' affecting European civilisation—Collingwood is writing during the Blitz—is a distinction between *eristical* and *dialectical* political processes. The distinction manifests itself historically as a distinction between the ways in which people engage in politics, and has an academic counterpart in forms of intellectual discussion. Early on in the book Collingwood refers back to Plato (*Meno*, 75c–d) to distinguish two forms of philosophical argument, *eristic* and *dialectic*.

24.58. What Plato calls an eristic discussion is one in which each party tries to prove that he was right and the other wrong.

24.59. In a dialectical discussion you aim at showing that your own view is one with which your opponent really agrees, even if at one time he denied it; or conversely that it was yourself and not your opponent who began by denying a view with which you really agree.

All eristical discussion is adversarial. Any intellectual exchange 'that aims at the victory of one disputant and the defeat of the other is an eristical discussion', Collingwood notes.²⁹ When done for pedagogic purpose, they may be useful, he writes:

men teach their offspring to use their tongues in a kind of puppy-play where all speech has to be as insignificant as a doll's teacup is empty or a boy's sword harmless; where the talk is only pretence talk or what is called *academic discussions* and the problems talked about are only pretence problems or what are called *academic problems*; where the supervisors of these childish sports set for discussion 'academic' questions such as: 'Compare the merits of Psycho-physical Parallelism and Psycho-physical Interactionism', not because they fancy them significant but because they know them for nonsense.³⁰

However, for considering actual phenomena, Collingwood maintains, eristic argument is a misguided path. Why is that? The core mistake is that, when used for serious philosophical discussion, eristic argument distorts the object under scrutiny—whether it be the state, democracy, or the relation between mind and body. When we think philosophically about an actual phenomenon, we gain clarity the more precisely

²⁸ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism*, reprinted with corrections (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1947), 14.64.

²⁹ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 43.15.

³⁰ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 2.55.

we can say what is at issue, and identify the available opposing views. In *The New Leviathan*, Collingwood calls this process ‘abstraction’, though he may as well have called it ‘analysis’. Abstraction is necessary for thought about reality, Collingwood thinks. ‘In thinking of a process of change you must think of its positive and negative elements in abstraction from the process’.³¹ However, in making one of the views a target of criticism, setting out to refute it, we presuppose that each of the opposing theses is independent; we cross a line. We now treat each view as a collection of simple propositions that are in themselves simply either true or false. This, according to Collingwood, is a false abstraction: ‘the falsehood, namely, that these two opposite elements are mutually independent and hostile entities’.³²

When discussion is founded on such falsehood, Collingwood suggests, it will inevitably collapse into an eristic dispute. The question suddenly becomes which of the opposing views is the right one. Each of the views must be conceived as an independent target of criticism, given that the envisaged outcome of discussion is to dismiss one of the positions and accept the other. This presupposes that philosophical views can be targeted and scrutinised independently. This is the critical method advocated by the realists.³³ Eristical discussions, as Collingwood describes in *The New Leviathan*, are straightforward applications of the critical method that his colleagues applied throughout their philosophical careers. They imagine opposing views as independent entities ‘for the sake of argument’.³⁴ Collingwood writes:

It is between fictitious entities like this that “eristic” discussion most loves to get up a dog-fight. The best kind of dog-fight; one in which the

³¹ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 26.19.

³² Ibid.

³³ Compare here with R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 52, where Collingwood writes that ‘no object of philosophical thought can be rightly conceived as a mere aggregate, whether of logically distinguished elements or of spatial or temporal parts; the parts or elements, however proper it may be to distinguish them, cannot be conceived as separable; and therefore it is impossible that such an object should be either put together out of parts or elements separately preexisting, or divided into parts or elements which can survive the division; for either of these would imply that the connexions between the parts are accidental, whereas they must in reality be essential’.

³⁴ Note, J. Moulton, ‘A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method’, p. 153 focuses on imagination too when she writes that the adversarial paradigm requires philosophers to conjure up ‘an imagined opponent’ and do the best they can to support their theses in light of this imagined opposition. The fiction comes in at a different point than in Collingwood’s presentation of eristical discussion. Collingwood’s problem is not with constructing an imaginary *opponent* in assessing a view. His problem is with the fact that the *views* eristical discussions gets to assess are mere fictions.

combatants, being fictitious, can never be killed and, being tied together by a dialectical bond, can never run away.³⁵

Collingwood illustrates this mistake with a discussion of the nature of a body politic. 'Is it,' he asks, 'as the Greeks believed, a society of citizens corporately ruling themselves ...? Or is it, as the Middle Ages thought, a non-social community, a human herd which strong men rule and good men would wish to rule well?'³⁶ Collingwood claims, with Hobbes, that a body politic, as an historical entity, is *both*. Yet he immediately envisages an objection: 'A body politic, he may say, must be either a society or a non-social community; it cannot be both at once'.³⁷ This objection seems motivated by a simple appeal to the principle of non-contradiction. The objector accordingly construes the debate as between two opposing views on whether the body politic is social or not. The one (the Greek) affirms that it is, the other (the Medieval) denies this. Only one of these positions can be correct. Which one? Collingwood suggests that this is a false dilemma. The objection misapplies a formal rule to a discussion about what is in part a historical phenomenon. The theoretical situation could eristically be construed as an opposition between two reasonable ways of characterising the body politic, an opposition that forces the political philosopher to make up her mind and take a stance. However, it just crystallises how two insights about the nature of a phenomenon belong together.

In philosophical discussion, each party must keep in mind that their opponent's view is just as much part of the process of coming to understand the phenomenon at issue better. Likely both views have reasons in their favour, so neither can be wholly discounted. Parties that fail to understand this are likely to be deceived about their own view too.³⁸

V. The unity of Collingwood's argument

I have shown that Collingwood has a systematic methodological argument against philosophical practices, insofar as these depend on unsound methodological

³⁵ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 26.21.

³⁶ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 24.5.

³⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *The New Leviathan*, 24.54.

³⁸ Compare this with *NL*, 27.92. A version of this idea can be found already in *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, though Collingwood does not there identify a distinctively eristical mode of discussion. He writes that 'the rejected view must seem plausible to the person who rejects it; so that, if its rejection implies controversy, it is a controversy not so much between two philosophers as within the mind of a single one: a dialogue, as Plato called it, of the soul with itself'. See R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. 110.

principles. I have also explained why Collingwood thinks that this argument applies to the argumentative practices of his realist colleagues. Several passages in *An Autobiography* in fact already contain in nascent form the point made explicitly in *The New Leviathan*.

A clear example is when Collingwood brings out how the analytical skills of his colleagues, though well developed and excellent by their own standards, were nonetheless inefficacious against Collingwood's own positive philosophical claims. He writes that

The "realists", whose critical technique was flawless and whose mastery of it was perfect, would have demolished [my views] in no time. That would not have made me give them up; for I had already analysed the principles of "realist" criticism and knew that what it so admirably demolished was not (or not necessarily) the views it ostensibly attacked, but the critic's own perversion of these views; although the "realist" could never distinguish between the perversion and the reality, because the perversion was simply the reality as seen through his distorting spectacles.³⁹

Collingwood uses 'perversion' and 'distortion', but he might have made the point just as well in terms of the 'false abstractions' elaborated in *The New Leviathan*. He continues:

If I had stated these ideas to the leaders of the "realist" school, they would have said, as I have heard them say a hundred times, "you don't mean that; what you mean is..." and then would have followed a caricature of my ideas in terms of "realist" principles, with sandbags for arms and legs; all so beautifully done that I could hardly have restrained my impulse to cheer.⁴⁰

At the time of *An Autobiography* Collingwood already conceives the discussion of his colleagues as eristical modes of engagement, which ultimately do no more than construe and attack fictional positions. Moreover, the scoffing tone of Collingwood's remarks here conveys his conviction that the realists, when sticking to their own doctrines and methods, simply can do nothing other than fight the fight in this way. It is not just that they happen to conduct their discussions in this manner. Rather, it is inevitable for them to do so, given their assumed principles.

³⁹ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, pp. 72–73.

⁴⁰ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 73.

Seeing how Collingwood's critical observations about adversarial discussion are integrated with his overall methodological argument against the realist helps us to better appreciate the unity of argument in *An Autobiography*. Collingwood is able to reconstruct his own move away from realism as a rational development, as intellectual progress, and show a growing understanding of the methodological and doctrinal flaws of the system. His realisation that the *viva voce* philosophy promoted by his colleagues has no philosophical purpose amounts to a further step in that direction. After realizing that the realist's critical method was unsound, Collingwood came to see that their oral disputes were straightforward applications of that method and that, as such, they were not justifiable on philosophical grounds.

Is this the correct way to read Collingwood's argument? Here are two objections. I have mainly emphasised Collingwood's resistance to adversarial modes of discussion. Over and over again Collingwood in *An Autobiography* identifies these modes of discussion as endemic to how his colleagues practice philosophy. Yet in the core passage I quoted early on, Collingwood equally rejects 'general discussion'. Someone might object that the reason I have attributed to Collingwood cannot capture all there is to his criticism of philosophical discussion, for it is not obvious that general discussions, as Collingwood conceives of them in his autobiography, are *eristical*.

While I admit that what Collingwood has in mind when he briefly mentions general discussion is less clear, I maintain that it is not unreasonable to also construe general discussion as potentially *eristical*. Collingwood's own focus on ignorance gives a clue: it is a kind of discussion that does not require any knowledge over and above simple apprehension of the view discussed, an assumption that the import of that view is entirely plain, and that the aim of the discussion is to draw out implications and comparisons with views in the vicinity. So understood, the starting point of such discussions may very well be *eristical*. That said, I do not suggest that my presentation has covered Collingwood's motivations exhaustively. Just as I agree that Collingwood does have another line of criticism that focuses on outcomes, I leave open whether he might have a specific reason to resist what he calls general discussion.

Another objection to what I have argued so far is that it implies that Collingwood's systematic criticism is question begging, for it relies on a rejection of the critical method that the realist surely embraces. The realist, in other words, need not be moved at all by the methodological argument I have attributed to Collingwood. In response to this, let me stress that this line of criticism is indeed only valid outside a realist framework. Seen from within the realist bubble, *eristical* discussions are the

heart of philosophical progress. Collingwood does however have something to say even on these terms. His snide remark that, at least in his experience, no one has ever been convinced by them, is an internal way of bringing out the self-deception of the realist system. This specific remark should be read as a criticism couched in the realist's own terms: even the realist must admit that what they promote as a philosophically useful practice is in fact largely ineffective.⁴¹ The additional methodological argument I have identified here indeed makes the reasoning dialectically dependent on Collingwood's prior twofold criticism of the method. However, given that Collingwood had already satisfied himself of the adequacy of that criticism, there is no problem.

Michael Beaney has suggested that in *An Autobiography* Collingwood was primarily concerned to criticise the moral implications of realist philosophy, while in his earlier *Essay on Philosophical Method* he sought to expose its methodological contradictions.⁴² The much bigger and more ambitious *Essay on Philosophical Method* was published five years before writing *An Autobiography*, in October 1933.⁴³ It is beyond question that the former contains a sustained treatment of philosophical methodology. However, I have brought out that these concerns resonate in the later autobiographical account too. In the *Autobiography* Collingwood is able to criticise the practices of his colleagues on the basis of their unsound methods. He demonstrates how actual conduct can be criticised not just for its consequences, but also, more systematically and successfully, for the method it applies.

VI. Method and practice

Collingwood's criticism has a relevance for current discussions of adversarial argumentation that does not depend on the acceptance of his historicism about knowledge and logic. This is because Collingwood's criticism is, in its very approach, different from most of the recent objections to adversarial argument.

A clear point of contrast is that recent philosophers are still willing to admit, as Helen Beebe puts it, that 'philosophy is, to some extent, adversarial in nature'.⁴⁴ Even philosophers who criticise the unwelcomingly strong adversarial character of

⁴¹ Admittedly, the 'internal' criticism of the method in terms of a reductio is much more powerful, as it is a deductively valid argument.

⁴² M. Beaney, 'Collingwood's Critique of Analytic Philosophy', p. 100.

⁴³ R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay on Philosophical Method*, p. xv.

⁴⁴ H. Beebe, 'Women and Deviance in Philosophy', p. 65. Neither does Phyllis Rooney question that argumentation is "an important *epistemic* practice, necessary to the pursuit of truth and understanding", P. Rooney, 'When Philosophical Argumentation Impedes Social and Political Progress', p. 319.

philosophy typically stick to the assumption that philosophy is ultimately the activity of determining, through critical analysis, which of a set of opposing claims should be rejected. Should we believe P or \sim P? ‘By and large’, Beebee brings out, ‘philosophers cannot prove any theorems; nor can we appeal to empirical data to justify our claim.’⁴⁵ For this reason, she thinks, the only progress to be made is by subjecting a claim to logical scrutiny and disproof by counterexample. She takes such an adversarial approach to be ‘a large, and entirely proper, part of the philosophical enterprise’.⁴⁶

Collingwood’s criticism runs deeper. And it runs deeper precisely because it is not solely motivated by the poor consequences of adversarial discussion, but by the fact that it presupposes a philosophical methodology he refuses to accept. Of course, Collingwood’s assumption here—that the method of critical analysis is unsound—is perhaps today as controversial as it was in his time. And so it may seem that current philosophers who oppose the strongly adversarial character of discussion, yet are unwilling to follow Collingwood in his critique of the realist method, can set aside his strong rejection of philosophical adversarialism. This would be too quick. The sting of Collingwood’s reasoning is that it brings out that academic practices and philosophical method are not independent. His argument implies that accepting the realist method of critical analysis more or less forces one to take an adversarial approach to philosophical discussion. If Collingwood is right, then it is much more problematic to criticise eristic argument on the one hand, while retaining the method it presupposes. The more general methodological lesson is that it would be a mistake to think that one can criticise the practices of philosophy without re-evaluating its underlying method.

To be sure, Collingwood nowhere suggests that we altogether abandon critical engagements in philosophy. He is clear that philosophical discussion may serve some purpose. What differentiates philosophically acceptable and philosophically unacceptable discussions or arguments? At least part of the answer is that exchanges of ideas that avoid eristical discussion may very well be acceptable, as they are likely to contribute to genuine understanding of the views that comprise a philosophical debate. Further, Collingwood thinks that even eristical discussion can be useful pedagogically, perhaps by training students to find the strongest reasons to support a view and to see distinctions between concepts. Of the realist legacy—which

⁴⁵ H. Beebee, ‘Women and Deviance in Philosophy’, p. 65.

⁴⁶ H. Beebee, ‘Women and Deviance in Philosophy’, p. 65. It is likely that Collingwood’s use of ‘refutation’, ‘conviction’, or ‘general discussion’ is intended to contrast dialectically with ‘making one party acquainted with the views of the other’. In that case, Collingwood would also agree that philosophical discussion is essentially adversarial. But from this it would still not follow, as Beebee and others assume, that it is an acceptable stance, ‘entirely proper’ to philosophy.

continues even today, in the twenty-first century—he writes that it, ‘with all its ingenuity and pertinacity, is only building card-houses out of a pack of lies. But I do not think that altogether a waste of time’.⁴⁷ Collingwood need not and does not deny that there is some purpose to eristic argument. But he does not think that purpose is genuinely philosophical. What his objections foremost invite is a reconsideration of the role and status of adversarial argumentation in professional philosophy.

In this article I have explained why Collingwood came to reject his colleagues’ specific style of philosophical dialogue on methodological grounds. I have shown how his argument against adversarial philosophical discussion in *An Autobiography* is integrated with his overall criticism of realist philosophy. This has brought out more clearly the force of Collingwood’s criticism. I have contrasted it with a criticism of adversarial discussion that objects to it merely for its detrimental consequences. It shows why Collingwood’s methodological criticism of the practice is relevant for current debates about how philosophers should behave.

⁴⁷ R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 52.