



# Arguments for Non-adversariality are not Self-refuting

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## Abstract

In his contribution to the adversariality debate, Scott Aikin argues that non-adversarialism about arguments is self-refuting because whenever its proponents affirm it, they inevitably reject adversarialism and thus become adversarial themselves. This, Aikin suggests, follows from the idea that reasons are contrastive—always for one thing instead of another. Here, I defend the non-adversariality project against this self-refutation charge. I do this by identifying one of the core tenets of adversarialism, namely that it views arguments as zero-sum games. I then argue that Aikin’s self-refutation charge only obtains if we assume that the adversariality debate itself is zero-sum. However, whether the debate is zero-sum depends on how it is framed, and we might as well frame the debate in positive-sum terms. To illustrate, I draw on Katharina Stevens’ virtue-theoretic account, which offers such a positive-sum view by synthesizing insights from both adversarialist and non-adversarialist camps. For Stevens, a virtuous arguer is both adversarial and cooperative, guided by practical wisdom in adopting the most suitable arguing style for a given context. I contend that this approach bypasses Aikin’s challenge by shifting the question from whether arguments are inherently adversarial to when the adversarial or cooperative style is the most appropriate. I conclude by drawing a broader lesson for the adversariality debate, which is that some of the ways in which it is framed might keep our attention from other substantial research questions, such as how to counter the crowding-out of respect in our disagreements and thus mitigate the subsequent political polarization.

**Keywords** Adversariality · Argumentation · Contrastivism about reasons · Framing · Virtue theory · Scott Aikin

*I don't have to agree with you to  
like you or respect you.*

—Anthony Bourdain.

## 1 Introduction

Rampant political polarization not only erodes our democratic institutions (Arbatli and Rosenberg 2021), but also poses adverse effects on our health (Van Bavel et al. 2024). Consequently, researchers endeavor to identify and address the drivers of political polarization, with some (e.g., Eschert and Simon 2019; Jones-Fosu 2024) suggesting that what

is at issue is the decreasing level of what Darwall (1977) called recognition respect for our ideological opponents.

*Non-adversarialists* about arguments propose that this disrespectful and hostile attitude is animated by the currently dominant *adversarial* style of arguing that, among others, encourages people to treat arguments like competitions wherein either position  $p$ , or *not- $p$*  survives the rational scrutiny. According to non-adversarialists, this style of arguing incentivizes hostility between the arguers because it inadvertently promotes the goal of proving the other side wrong at the expense of other goals, such as epistemic betterment. Non-adversarialists maintain that it is preferable to approach arguing not in terms of competition (trying to defeat each other), but in terms of cooperation (trying to help each other).

Scott Aikin (2021) has recently pointed out, however, that non-adversarialism might be a self-refuting position. Aikin concedes that argumentative adversariality can promote hostility between arguers, but all we can do is keep this hostility in check with argumentative norms or virtues. Why? Because argumentation, understood as giving of

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reasons in support of a conclusion, is *intrinsically adversarial*, meaning it necessarily amounts to competition between positions. This is due to the contrastive nature of reasons: giving reasons *for* one claim necessarily implies giving reasons *against* another. It is thus logically necessary that the reasons make us accept one claim and reject another. This view of reasons, he contends, poses a challenge for the non-adversarialist project. Specifically, whenever one argues *for* non-adversarialism, one also argues *against* adversarialism, therefore becoming adversarial in the process. Based on this, Aikin concludes that non-adversarialism is self-refuting—the moment it tries to make a case for itself, it only vindicates the contrary position of adversarialism. This paper aims to defend non-adversarialism against Aikin’s self-refutation charge. The plan is as follows.

I start in Sect. 2 by reviewing what is known as *the adversariality debate*. This debate encompasses questions such as whether arguments are intrinsically adversarial or not and whether this entails rude behavior during arguments or not. My main aim in this section is to highlight that the adversariality debate is often framed as a zero-sum game, meaning that both sides cannot turn out to be right. In Sect. 3, I present Aikin’s critique of non-adversarialist views, detailing his argument, which rests on a contrastivist view of reasons. According to Aikin, providing reasons for non-adversarialism at the same time amounts to providing reasons against adversarialism, which proves that in arguing one cannot but be adversarial. I offer two interpretations of Aikin’s challenge—practical and conceptual. On the practical version, non-adversarialist is self-defeating on account of his or her argumentative behavior (e.g., by being verbally aggressive). I show, in Sect. 3.2, that the practical challenge can be countered relatively straightforwardly.

More work is needed to address the *conceptual version*, which I discuss in Sect. 4. On this version, the non-adversarialist is self-defeating whenever they give reasons for accepting non-adversarialism on the account of contrastive nature of reasons. I begin by showing that an important part of what makes up Aikin’s argument is that he accepts a widespread supposition that adversarial argumentation is necessarily a zero-sum game. As mentioned, in such a game, at most one side can be victorious. In terms of arguing, at most one thesis is proven right. Applied to the adversariality debate, non-adversarialists and adversarialists are engaged in a zero-sum game, meaning that non-adversarialism is self-refuting because it cannot but argue for itself in an adversarial manner. My rebuttal to the conceptual version of self-defeat charge consists in pointing out that some non-adversarialists are demonstrably engaged in an argument that is *positive-sum*. In other words, not all forms of non-adversarialism claim to be better than adversarialism. Instead, some accounts reject the notion that adversarialism

and non-adversarialism are mutually exclusive positions and attempt to synthesize the best tenets of both camps. In effect, they reject a zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate. I illustrate this view on the virtue-theoretic approach of Katharina Stevens in Sect. 4.3.

For Stevens, one’s style of arguing varies with context; a virtuous arguer will use practical wisdom to shift between adversarial and non-adversarial styles depending on the situation. Sometimes she will cooperate, at other times she will compete, but neither of the styles can be said to be superior or more prior without also providing the arguer’s context. This view, then, motivates the abandonment of questions such as “Are arguments intrinsically adversarial?” for the questions like “Under what circumstances is adversariality more appropriate than non-adversariality?” In other words, it motivates abandoning the zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate. If we do that, Aikin’s self-refutation charge loses traction, or so I claim.

I conclude by reminding us of an established phenomenon from cognitive sciences, namely that the way we frame things offers us different ways of seeing them. This also applies to the adversariality debate. As long as we frame it as a zero-sum game, we will continue to think of adversariality and non-adversariality as mutually exclusive positions. But this needn’t be so, and scholars writing on ethics of argumentation stand to benefit from this insight yet.

## 2 The Adversariality Debate

The adversariality debate concerns a cluster of interconnected questions with answers varying across both adversarialist and non-adversarialist camps (for a review, see Aikin and Vollbrecht 2021). A non-exhaustive list of such questions includes: (i) What is the nature of argumentative adversariality? (ii) Can we be adversarial without being hostile to each other? (iii) Is adversariality intrinsic to arguments, or can we argue in a non-adversarial manner? (iv) If we can, should we? (v) Is adversariality conducive to the objectives of argumentation, such as epistemic betterment? Although the questions are interconnected, the present paper, in virtue of addressing Scott Aikin’s argument, is primarily concerned with (iii). Other questions are touched upon only peripherally.

Regarding (iii), we can start with tentative characterization of adversarialism and non-adversarialism. Adversarialism is a view that arguing about  $p$ —i.e., exchanging reasons for and against  $p$ —necessarily involves logical opposition between the proponent and opponent of  $p$  because when proponent affirms  $p$ , she thereby denies *not-p* (Govier 1999). On the other hand, non-adversarialism is a view that arguments do not necessarily involve logical opposition between the

proponent and opponent of  $p$  because the proponent argues *with* (not against) the opponent. In effect, both proponent and opponent join forces and try to work together toward what position is best supported by reasons (Rooney 2010).

Even this tentative characterization raises problems. For notice that on Philly's Ronney's conceptualization, if a non-adversarialist wanted to defend a non-adversarial view of arguments, he or she would be forced to do that in an adversarial manner: when Rooney affirms non-adversariality, she thereby denies its opposite. This, as we shall see, is the gist of Scott Aikin's self-refutation charge. I shall try to show that Aikin's charge works only if we accept that adversariality and non-adversariality are mutually exclusive positions, which isn't a given.

I now review some of the answers to (i–v) that appear in the literature from both adversarial and non-adversarial perspectives. My primary aim is to highlight that the adversariality debate is often framed as a competition between two exclusive positions.

## 2.1 Non-adversarialism

Argumentative adversariality, “adversary paradigm” (Moulton 1983), or “dominant adversary model” (DAM) (Cohen 2015) have been criticized on a number of conceptual, epistemic, and moral grounds. One notable moral criticism maintains that DAM excludes arguers who are not comfortable with confrontational modes of communication (Gilbert 1997; Kilby 2022).

Some say that what mitigates the tendency to be overly confrontational are argumentative norms of politeness (Govier 2020). But non-adversarialists argue that this proposal overlooks the gendered nature of such norms. Simply put, being polite as a women-gendered arguer requires adherence to a much stricter set of rules than for men-gendered arguers.<sup>1</sup> As a result, insisting an arguer be polite may amount to silencing them (Hundleby 2013).

Another problem is of the epistemic type. That is, adversarialism promotes the goal of winning an argument at the expense of other goals, such as achieving epistemic betterment. According to Bailin and Battersby (2020), for example, arguments are epistemically beneficial in that they can expose our false beliefs and make our epistemic systems better. However, the desire to win an argument by proving that the other person is wrong often eclipses these epistemic benefits.

Moreover, some maintain that DAM misrepresents the very nature of arguments. The adversary model takes arguments to be intrinsically adversarial, meaning that the

arguers inevitably argue against each other. In other words, arguments are a zero-sum game, with some arguers winning and others losing. We will see momentarily that the adversariality debate itself is framed as a zero-sum game as well. But this view of things is not necessary. As we just saw, we might as well say that if the result of argumentative exchange is the removal of one's false beliefs, then one *wins* even—or especially—when one is proven wrong (Rooney 2010; Bailin and Battersby 2016). However, this point is lost when we frame the activity of arguing in adversarial, zero-sum terms.

This most often happens by excessive use of war or sports metaphors to describe the activity of arguing (Cohen 2004). We say that an arguer attacks, defends, parries, lays siege to or overwhelms her adversary's position. Research in cognitive sciences shows, however, that the kinds of metaphors we use to describe the world influence our behavior (Lakoff and Johnson 2008). All this again suggests that war metaphors promote the goal of winning arguments above others, such as epistemic betterment or building relationships.

This is especially troubling, given that there are easily accessible alternatives to the “argument-is-war” style of metaphors. As Kidd (2021) suggests, we could replace martial metaphors and think of arguments as a “dance,” wherein we play around, entertain, tango with, or explore positions. Considering the negative impacts of “argument-is-war” metaphors, we should choose the available alternatives. By changing the metaphors we use, we can emphasize cooperation instead of competition, which is more suitable for the argumentative ends of epistemic betterment, as it facilitates open-minded engagement with one's interlocutor (Bailin and Battersby 2016).

## 2.2 Adversarialism

Adversarialists have not been shy of meeting these challenges head on, however. For example, Miller (1995) has defended a version of DAM from a feminist standpoint, arguing that feminist thinking is not contrary, but consonant with adversariality because both share and value of thorough skepticism (see also Vollbrecht 2022).

Regarding the gendered nature of politeness, Godden (2021) points out that pragma-dialectical norms of argumentation (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004) are well-positioned to accomplish the same task without the risk of sexism. For instance, gendered politeness norms might be replaced with the more universal “Relevance Rule,” which prohibits nonrational means of persuasion, such as appeal to force.

Next, Aikin (2011) has challenged the proposition that we should do away with war and sport metaphors in describing arguments. He maintains that wars can be waged justly or

<sup>1</sup> For empirical evidence of this, see Sieghart (2022; esp. Chapter 7). Such oppressive dynamic needn't be only gender-based but can be also race-based (see Henning 2021).

unjustly. Likewise, sports do promote competition, but only against the backdrop of agreed upon rules that set a framework for the athletes. Aikin then extends both points to the context of arguing and claims that it is not adversariality per se that is problematic, but its abuse. This is also where he sees the value of non-adversarial metaphors – they are well positioned to temper or moderate excessive levels of adversariality that correspond to the desire to win above anything else (see also Aikin 2021). I will have more to say on this point of Aikin’s towards the conclusion.

And finally, Marc-Kevin Daoust (2021) has employed economic theory of optimization to show that if we can choose, we should prefer adversarial argumentation. Optimization involves identifying which combination of given variables best achieves a desired goal. For instance, owning a car *and* knowing how to drive is more optimal than any of the alternatives when the goal is traveling. Daoust then picks up non-adversarialists’ claim that, *ideally*, argumentation is only about improving our epistemic system, not about winning (cf. Bailin and Battersby 2016; Stevens and Cohen 2019). Through calculations, he demonstrates that being fully non-adversarial is less optimal for achieving this epistemic goal than being at least somewhat adversarial (Daoust 2021, p. 894). The takeaway here is that, if we accept Daoust’s assumptions, it is non-adversarial metaphors that misrepresent how we should argue, not adversarial ones.

As should be clear from this short review of the two camps in the adversariality debate, the way that the adversariality debate is played out follows the structure of a zero-sum game. In such a game, one’s gain is another’s loss with net-worth value remaining the same. This means that *either* adversarialism is (morally, epistemically, conceptually) better view *or* non-adversarialism is. The core of my argument is that this zero-sum framing is not necessary, and that we can frame the adversariality debate in a *positive-sum* terms, synthesizing best tenets from both camps. If correct, this will serve as a defense against a recent objection raised by adversarialist Scott Aikin (2021), to which I now turn.

### 3 Contrastivism about Reasons as Adversariality

The contribution to the adversariality debate that I shall focus on comes from Scott Aikin (2021). There, he builds on a “contrastivist” theory of reasons to argue that as long as argumentation involves exchange of reasons, it is by definition adversarial because reasons favor something and thereby disfavor something else. Then, in considering the implications of his proposal, he notices that insofar as non-adversarialists offer reasons in favor of their position, they

inadvertently offer reasons against adversarialism, thus committing a sort of “performative self-refutation” (Aikin 2021, p. 839). For the clarity of exposition, we can put Aikin’s argument in the following premise-conclusion form:

*P1: Reasons are contrastive.*

*P2: If reasons are contrastive, then reason giving or argumentation is adversarial.*

*P3: (from P1 and P2) Argumentation is adversarial.*

*P4: Non-adversarialists are engaged in argumentation when promoting non-adversarialism.*

*Self-refutation Charge: (from P3 and P4) Non-adversarialists are adversarial, which is self-refuting.*

My response to this argument shall be twofold, depending on how we interpret the conclusion. On what I call “practical” interpretation, to say that non-adversarialists are self-refuting is to say that their argumentative performance is adversarial because they attack and challenge contrary positions—i.e., they exhibit competitive, not cooperative argumentative performance. This might be so, but it doesn’t pose any serious problems for non-adversarial project per se, or so I will argue in Sect. 3.2.

On the other hand, what I call “conceptual” interpretation of the charge, if successful, is more devastating for non-adversarialism because it entails that it can never be successful, for as long as we are arguing for anything at all, we are necessarily adversarial. I argue in Sect. 4 that the success of the conceptual version of self-refutation charge turns on how we interpret “adversarial” in *P3*. I show in Sect. 4.1 that what is essential to Aikin’s understanding of argumentative adversariality is that it sees arguments as zero-sum games with winners on one side and losers on the other. But since some non-adversarialists seek to synthesize the best tenets of non-adversarialism and adversarialism, they therefore engage in a *positive-sum game*. Hence, *P3* does not obtain for them, and *Self-refutation charge* does not follow for them. I show a particular example of this in Sect. 4.3. Let me spell out Aikin’s proposal in greater detail before taking on the self-refutation charge.

As mentioned, Aikin builds his account on a contrastivist view of reasons (Aikin 2021, p. 838). Contrastivism about reasons is an epistemological theory (Snedegar 2017), which maintains that reasons *for* something are such in virtue of being reasons *against* something else at the same time. For example, if I want to get to the lecture on time, this reason favors cycling, but it does not favor walking. Note, however, that if the contrasting option to cycling is driving

and all other things are equal, things change. Particularly, my desire to be somewhere on time is no longer a reason to cycle (given the alternative of driving). This illustrates that reasons are always evaluated in relation to contrasting alternatives that they are meant to (dis)favor. Hence, if  $p$  is a reason for a position A, it is such only by virtue of being a reason for A *instead* of, say, B and C. This motivates *P1*: Reasons are contrastive (although see footnote 7).

How can contrastivist view of reasons be cashed out in the adversariality debate? For Aikin, the contrastivist nature of reasons just is what makes arguments adversarial. Aikin amends the meaning of adversariality a bit from our tentative characterization in Sect. 2. Particularly, his account highlights the dialectical aspect of arguments—i.e., that arguments happen in communication between persons. Hence, he calls it a “minimal dialectical adversariality” and characterizes it as “reason-giving [that] is done with the objective of posing or answering critical challenges among *competing* theses” (Aikin 2021, p. 839, emphasis mine). For our purposes, what is important is the theses cannot but be in competition—this is the consequence of the contrastive nature of reasons. Let me explain.

In arguing, we marshal contrary positions. When I give reasons *for* my position, these reasons are simultaneously reasons *against* your position. To illustrate, imagine that we debate what to get for dinner. I say non-vegan burger, you say vegan pizza. Also, imagine that no restaurant in town makes both (this assumption ensures that the options are exclusive). Following Snedegar (2017), on whose theory of reasons Aikin draws, we can denote our “contrastive set” as {vegan pizza, non-vegan burger}. Next, we exchange reasons for our respective preference. I say I had vegan pizza yesterday and I want to change things up today, whereas you say that you want to cut meat from your diet. Notice that the reason for my choice is simultaneously a reason against yours and vice versa (because the options are exclusive). Furthermore, notice what happens to my reason should the initial contrastive set change to {non-vegan burger, vegan pasta}. Suddenly, my having vegan pizza yesterday ceases to be a decisive reason for non-vegan burger today. Why? Because the fact that I had a vegan pizza yesterday and want to change things up today is very well compatible with me having vegan pasta today. This is so because the strength of reasons depends on the available alternatives *for/against* which we give that reason.

What this illustration shows is that in argument, the available alternatives are *competing* among themselves. This is so because the reasons we offer favor some alternative and at the same time disfavor another. And it is in virtue of this property of reasons—their being contrastive—that argumentation can’t but be adversarial. This explains the rationale behind *P2*: If reasons are contrastive, then reason

giving or argumentation is adversarial. And from *P1* and *P2* we then get *P3*: Argumentation is adversarial.

Aikin then proceeds to use this account to deal with what he calls the “winners-and-losers problem” (more on this in Sect. 4.1). What is of most interest to me now, however, is how he turns his new account of adversariality against non-adversarialists.

### 3.1 The self-refutation Charge

After introducing contrastivism and charting its connection with adversarialism, Aikin sets his sights at non-adversarialism. He points out that they “go out of their way to argue *against* the adversarialists position” by “picking out *target theses*, and *contrasting ones*. And then they argue *against* those contrasting views with reasons that show that they are wrong, and their view is right.” We have seen how this can play out in Sect. 2.1 and 2.2. This is what motivates *P4*: Non-adversarialists are engaged in argumentation when promoting non-adversarialism.

The problem is that arguments for non-adversarialism may amount to “a performative self-refutation” (Aikin 2021, p. 839). Why? Due to the contrastive nature of reasons. When non-adversarialists present reasons for their view, they necessarily provide reasons against adversarialism. In doing so, they are drawn into a competition between positions—which is precisely the kind of adversarial engagement they seek to reject (see also Casey 2020).

To see how this works, consider Bailin and Battersby’s argument that adversarialism inhibits epistemic betterment, quoted in Sect. 2.1. Aikin picks up on their claim and emphasizes that their reasons operate contrastively—they are reasons *for* non-adversarialism only because they are also reasons *against* adversarialism (Aikin 2021, p. 839, emphasis mine):

[R]easons Bailin and Battersby offer work only against the background of a contrast—they are reasons-for only because they are also reasons-against. And in the process of articulating the range of options, they cite a range of adversarialists to occupy those positions. Aren’t [Bailin and Battersby’s] arguments given with the purpose of *winning* the debate with the adversarialists?

As I understand it, Aikin’s point is this: the *for/against* structure of reason-giving is inescapable. Thus, when non-adversarialists affirm their view of arguments, the act of reason-giving itself commits them to competitive framing. They thereby reproduce what they claim to reject. If what Bailin and Battersby are giving reasons for their position, these same reasons speak also against the contrary positions.

If that is so, then their project is self-refuting because they criticize a view of arguing they themselves cannot but assume—non-adversarialists are not able to make their case in a way that would escape the *for/against* structure of reason giving. In other words, we have the inference from *P3* and *P4* to *Self-refutation charge*: Non-adversarialists are adversarial, which is self-refuting.

Now, it is important to note here that Aikin does not take this to be a final blow<sup>2</sup> to non-adversarialism. Rather, as mentioned above, his deployment of the contrastivism about reasons against non-adversarialism happens primarily to point out that it has “hard time” explaining its *opposition* to its *competitor*. The self-refutation remark happens almost peripherally with Aikin (2021, p. 840) admitting that it shows at best that there is

*something odd* about non-adversarialists coming out and arguing against a view, naming names, and not working too hard to repair those views when their criticisms come a little too easily.

After this, Aikin moves on to other familiar issues with adversariality (see Sect. 2.1) and tackles them in the light of his new account. For now, I wish to pay more attention to the self-refutation charge. More particularly, I wish to defend non-adversarialism against this charge. Doing just that will allow us to expose the unnecessary zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate.

### 3.2 Meeting the Practical Version of the self-refutation Charge

Aikin’s paper allows for at least two interpretations of the self-refutation charge—practical and conceptual. Let me start with the practical one.

Many of Aikin’s proclamations point to the fact that his self-refutation charge applies to the pragmatic dimension of non-adversarialists’ argumentative performance (cf. Aikin 2021, pp. 839, 840). The biggest giveaway of this is his footnote 4 (Aikin 2021, p. 838):

I should note that I, ironically, have witnessed those who profess non-adversarial conceptions of argument perform some surprisingly aggressive and dismissive argumentative moves, and I’ve been on the receiving end of ‘cross pollinations’ that felt plenty adversarial. It does not take too sensitive an ear to hear the words ‘let me encourage you to think more about...’ as an objection and implication that one’s not thought something relevant all the way through.

The *practical version* of the self-refutation charge, as I understand it, would obtain in the following situation. Imagine Mark, who subscribes to all the points made in Sect. 2.1, meaning he is a pure-blooded non-adversarialist. Assume now that you cross paths with Mark, eventually engaging with him in an argument on whether non-adversarialist approach to argumentation is preferable to the adversarialist one. In the argument, Mark scrutinizes, questions, probes, and attacks your position. In other words, the style of his argumentative performance is adversarial.

I think Mark—being the non-adversarialist that he is—can be said to fall prey to what Aikin called a “performative self-refutation.” A non-adversarialist is practically self-refuting, then, when he or she argues in an adversarial manner—i.e. when they rationally scrutinize competing theses to determine which is better. I think, however, that there are at least three considerations that can be raised to Mark’s defense.

First and most obvious, we can use Philip Pettit’s (1991) vocabulary and say that Mark is *promoting*, rather than honoring, his non-adversarial values. Pettit’s initial distinction appeared in a quite different context. He used the distinction of promotion/honoring a value to differentiate consequentialist moral theories from non-consequentialist ones. But I think the distinction is applicable here, too. Mark values non-adversarialism very much—so much, in fact, that he is willing to *fight* for that position with any means necessary. Surely, that might yet turn out to be ineffective. He should perhaps engage in a “propaganda by the deed,” as anarchists say (Janicka 2020), in which case he would be *honoring* his values. But this point is a much broader question of tactics, which is not particular to non-adversarialism. It is a question about the most effective means of achieving a desired goal and it touches virtually any attempt at change in a public sphere.

Second, pointing out that Mark is being inconsistent in his beliefs and his deeds might amount to a *whataboutism* fallacy. Whataboutism, when not deployed legitimately<sup>3</sup>, derails the course of the discussion by diverting the attention of the arguers to considerations that have no bearing on the issue at hand (Walton 1998; Aikin and Casey 2024). If you are a smoker lecturing me on the health risks of smoking, and I retort by pointing out that you yourself smoke, my argument is fallacious because your smoking in no way affects the truth of your claims. Similarly, asking why Mark—a non-adversarialist—is being adversarial might constitute whataboutism, as his behavior need not undermine his claim that non-adversariality is a preferable option when it comes to arguments.

<sup>2</sup> The irony of this description is not lost on me.

<sup>3</sup> And sometimes even in cases of its legitimate deployment (Kiš 2024).

A possible reply to this is that the reference to Mark's adversarial behavior *is* relevant here because it suggests that achieving his dialectical goal is better done through adversarial means. On this view, pointing out his adversarial performance would introduce potentially relevant evidence against non-adversariality.

My counter to this argument is that it is question-begging. Remember, the initial debate between you and Mark concerns which style of argument is preferable. If you argue that adversariality is superior and claim that Mark's choice to engage in it proves this, you jump to conclusions. There are other explanations for Mark's choice, which do not necessarily indicate that adversariality is a more effective persuasion style; instead, it could simply reflect Mark's personal tendency towards verbal aggressiveness. Consequently, by asking "what about your adversariality?" you risk shifting the discussion to a potentially unrelated point (i.e., why Mark chose adversariality) that does not bear on the question of whether non-adversarialism is self-refuting, which is what renders your question fallacious.

Thirdly and finally, we might explain Mark's adversariality in terms of role-playing. Drawing on the remarks of Katharina Stevens (2019, pp. 698–699), we can characterize argument roles as consisting of a cluster of goals, norms, tasks, behavioral stereotypes, and expectations that have to do with the activity of arguing. From this it follows that the "role an arguer occupies determines the kinds of work she does in the argument, and to which tasks she devotes her time and energy" (Stevens 2019, p. 699). Based on our description of Mark above, we can say that he is occupying a role of what Stevens calls an "advocate" here: he devotes his resources to arguing for a preselected conclusion and goes out of his way to defend the conclusion against possible objections.

But, as the very nature of role-playing dictates, the situation could have been entirely different. Mark might have as well opted—or might yet opt—for the role of deliberator or adjudicator, both of which are more in line with non-adversarialism (for descriptions, see Stevens 2019, footnote 40). Why has he not? Frankly, we do not know. Perhaps he simply dislikes you, or he is just not good at translating non-adversarial theory into practice. He can surely be charged with argumentative ineptitude if that is the case, but we are interested here in determining whether Mark's performance is self-refuting, not whether it is skillful.

What is important, then, is that role-playing allows a non-adversarialist to become adversarial without having any broader implications for non-adversarialism. It will be perhaps clearer what I mean if we use the same logic against adversarialism. Imagine Susan, who is a staunch adversarialist. Oddly enough, she argues in a non-adversarial manner—she takes it that her interlocutor is helping her with

epistemic betterment, she tries to incorporate the critiques into her account, she is open-minded, etc. Does this fact put adversarialism in a peculiar position? If we assume that Susan is taking on a particular argumentative role, namely that of deliberator, then the answer is no (cf. *Ibid.*).

With this objection, we are arriving at the broader point of this paper. Namely, perhaps the question of whether arguments are essentially adversarial is unnecessarily restrictive.<sup>4</sup> For the case of role-playing shows, it is possible to *switch up* the styles of arguing in the duration of an argument. If that is so, then a new interesting question arises: what style of argument might be more appropriate for a given context? Needless to say, *that* question implies that the adversariality debate has so far been grounded on a particular assumption, namely that what we are playing here is a zero-sum game. Let us take stock before turning to the *conceptual version* of Aikin's challenge.

There is something ironic about being intolerant towards intolerance, wanting peace and thus preparing for war, or feeling that nostalgia is not what it used to be. In the same manner, there is surely something ironic about non-adversarialists opting for adversarial tools in argument.<sup>5</sup> I have tried to show three independent ways that this irony can be accounted for without this meaning bad news for non-adversarialism.

However, I suspect that Aikin does not take the *practical version* of his challenge to tell the full story. What must also be addressed is the *conceptual version*. I now turn to that task.

#### 4 Meeting the Conceptual Version of the self-refutation Charge

I said that many of Aikin's remarks suggest that his self-refutation charge is aimed at the pragmatic dimension of arguing. But perhaps that is only a downstream effect that has its source at a more abstract, theoretical level.<sup>6</sup> After all, he prefixes his self-refutation challenge with an epistemological theory about the nature of reasons called contrastivism, suggesting that it is not arguers' behavior what he is primarily after. He then follows up with a section titled "Contrastivism as Dialectical Adversariality," showing that contrastivist theory of reasons *logically necessitates* that arguing, insofar as it involves reason-giving, amounts to sorting things into favorable and unfavorable groups.

All of this allows for a *conceptual* reading of Aikin's challenge. On this reading, what makes non-adversarialism

<sup>4</sup> I thank Christian Golden for helping me clarify this point.

<sup>5</sup> For Andrew Aberdein (2016, p. 4) this is ironic but not inconsistent.

<sup>6</sup> As confirmed by Scott Aikin in personal correspondence.

self-refuting is not the argumentative performance of its proponents but the simple fact that they are giving reasons, which are by their nature contrastive, rendering any argumentation adversarial. Importantly, then, even if my defense in Sect. 3.2 were successful, it nevertheless misses the mark (nay ballpark) because self-refutation challenge is concerned not with practical side of the matter, but with the conceptual one.

In this section, I endeavor to meet the *conceptual version* of self-refutation challenge. My argument targets Aikin's understanding of "adversariality" in *P3: (from P1 and P2)* Argumentation is adversarial (see Sect. 3). Particularly, I shall claim that the *conceptual version* of the challenge works if we assume that adversarial argumentation is a zero-sum game. Only under that assumption does it follow that non-adversarialists are self-refuting when they argue against adversarialists. In other words, I agree with Aikin that non-adversarialists *are* self-refuting, but only when they aim to show that their position is better than adversarialism.

However, I go on to show that some authors defending non-adversarialism do not share this aim. Instead, some non-adversarialists propose a view wherein the arguer dynamically moves between both styles depending on what the situation requires. The case in point is Katharina Stevens' (2016) virtue-theoretic account of argumentative adversariality. Given that she argues that adversariality and non-adversariality are on par—neither is superior or prior to the other—I conclude that Stevens rejects that the adversariality debate is zero-sum. For her, then, *P3* does not obtain, and she is therefore not self-refuting.<sup>7</sup> Finally, I point out that the "hybrid" accounts of adversariality show that there is much more consensus between non-adversarialists and adversarialists that meets the eye, and that this fact is overshadowed by how we frame the adversariality debate.

#### 4.1 Adversariality and Arguments as zero-sum

Let me start my argument by zooming in on what seems to be an unalienable aspect of adversarial view of arguments. Namely, the assumption that arguments are zero-sum games.

In game theory, something is a zero-sum game when the interaction between "players" results in the same net-worth

of goods with which the game started. For example, if we gamble for a hundred dollars, the total amount of money does not change when the game is finished. What changes is the owner of the money, which means that the gains of one person are necessarily the losses of another person.

Does adversarial view of arguments take arguments to be zero-sum in this sense? I believe there are independent considerations favoring a positive answer. Consider the discussion of adversarialism from Sect. 2.2. There, we have seen the clearest display of the zero-sum mindset in adversarialists' fondness for argument-as-war metaphors. These metaphors embody the idea that arguments are *fought, won, and lost*. Arguably, the reason that war and sports metaphors caught on the way they did in this context is exactly because they aptly convey the state of affairs after the argument: we have victorious positions on the one hand, and defeated ones on the other (or draws, which is in the game-theoretic terms still a zero-sum result).

Another two pieces of evidence come from Aikin himself. First, it is instructive that the strongest objection against adversarialism is according to Aikin (2021; Sect. 5; see also 2011) what he calls a "winners-and-losers problem". We have seen a version of this problem in Sect. 2.1: the idea is that being proven wrong means one has learned something, which is a gain, not a loss. I shall get to Aikin's solution of the problem momentarily. Now I just want to point out that adversarial views of arguments can suffer from the winners-and-losers problem only if we accept that there is any such thing as "winning" and "losing" an argument—i.e., only if we accept arguments are zero-sum games.

Second and connected, the zero-sum mindset underlines also Aikin's account of adversarialism under consideration here. He maintains that contrastivist nature of reason has a "sorting function" (Aikin 2021, p. 838). When we evaluate a reason, we do that by looking at options, or contrasts, of what the reason is supposed to favor. Going back to the example from Sect. 3, in evaluating the strength of my reason for getting a non-vegan burger, I contrast that option to getting a vegan pizza. If my reason for the non-vegan burger is that I had vegan pizza yesterday and want to change things up today, then given the contrast set of {vegan pizza, non-vegan burger} my reason favors non-vegan burger and disfavors vegan pizza. In other words, the reason sorts my options into two mutually exclusive categories—favorable and unfavorable (cf. Snedegar 2017, pp. 37–38). As a result, there is a hierarchy, with favorable options being at the top and unfavorable at the bottom. Or to use Aikin's own telling description: "On the adversarial notion of argument, at least with the objectives that animate it, there are *winners* and *losers*" (Aikin 2021, p. 841).

The takeaway is that when we look at adversarialism from different angles, one motive seems to repeatedly show

<sup>7</sup> Some could object that there is perhaps a more straightforward way of defending non-adversarialism. Namely, we could problematize *P1* or the contrastivist view of reasons, which is not an uncontroversial epistemological theory (Fan 2023). My goal here is more modest, however. I merely wish to show that the strength of the conceptual version of Aikin's challenge is contingent on the zero-sum *framing* the adversariality debate. I believe we can do this even under the contrastivist conception of reasons. On the final picture that I propose, what happens is that the adversariality debate simply expands the contrasting set of alternatives to {adversarialism, non-adversarialism, *hybrid of adversarialism and non-adversarialism*}.

up. Namely, its tendency to view arguments as zero-sum games. That is, the tendency of adversarial view of argumentation to see one arguer's victory as another arguer's loss (cf. Dutilh Novaes 2021).

With that said, here is the next step in my argument: I believe Aikin's charge works best if he takes the adversariality debate itself (cf. Sect. 2) to be zero-sum in this sense. Let me elaborate.

## 4.2 Self-refutation Comes only for Zero-sum Non-adversarialists

In Sect. 3.1, I have quoted several of Aikin's proclamations that paint non-adversarialists as striving to win the debate against adversarialists. To repeat (Aikin 2021, p. 839, emphasis mine):

Aren't [Bailin and Battersby's] arguments given with the purpose of *winning* the debate with the adversarialists?

According to Aikin, it follows from the contrastivist nature of reason that when Bailin and Battersby propose reasons for non-adversarialism, they at the same time propose reasons against adversarialism. Bailin and Battersby's reasons, then, sort the contrasting set of {non-adversarialism, adversarialism} into two groups: favorable and unfavorable. Notice again the hierarchy created by Bailin and Battersby: non-adversarialism is at the top, while adversarialism is at the bottom. If that is right, then Bailin and Battersby are playing a zero-sum game whether they want to or not. But treating arguments as zero-sum games is one of the primary hallmarks of adversarialism. Therefore, Bailin and Battersby's defense of non-adversarialism is adversarial, which is conceptually self-refuting.

Now, it is crucial to note that Aikin tones down his criticism of Bailin and Battersby a bit, saying that "perhaps this is all too quick." He points out that Bailin and Battersby do admit conflict of opposing views into their account and that they add a caveat that arguers explore the merits of conflicting views *collaboratively* together. As Aikin sees it, this move tries to explain away the irony behind non-adversarialism trying to win over adversarialism. He grants that this shields non-adversarialists against the self-refutation charge somewhat, but he ultimately remains steadfast in his belief that arguments are essentially adversarial and that non-adversarialism is *incoherent*<sup>8</sup> (Aikin 2021, pp. 839–840).

Aikin's backtracking here leads me to believe that his self-refutation charge is most appropriate against those non-adversarialists who unapologetically play a zero-sum game

with adversarialists. To buttress this reading, note that only moments prior to his discussion of Bailin and Battersby, Aikin levels his self-refutation charge against a famous non-adversarialist account of "invitational rhetoric" by Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin (1995). Particularly, he references a quote<sup>9</sup> which, according to Aikin, showcases that Foss and Griffin's account prohibits "protest and dissent as argumentative contribution" (Aikin 2021, p. 839). In other words, Foss and Griffin seem to downright prohibit adversariality, which makes them unapologetic zero-sum players. Aikin concludes that their account "seems clearly to prohibit its own critical program" (Ibid.), meaning that Foss and Griffin cannot affirm non-adversarialism without also rejecting adversarialism. This renders their project self-refuting.

Returning to Bailin and Battersby, whose account Aikin appraised as incoherent, but not self-refuting, I think they ultimately avoid the self-refutation charge because, as we have seen a moment ago, they do admit some level of adversariality into their account. In doing so, they show that *both* non-adversarialists and adversarialists can be said to have scored a win, meaning that the game they play is not zero-, but a positive-sum.

If I read Aikin correctly (and hopefully not in a too nit-picky way), the *conceptual version* of the self-refutation charge is most apt against those non-adversarialists who play a zero-sum game, wishing to defeat adversarialism. It is also noteworthy that I find this argument of Aikin's persuasive.

However, as foreshadowed by the discussion of Bailin and Battersby, I also think that there are non-adversarialists that sidestep the self-refutation charge by engaging not in a zero-, but in an unapologetically positive-sum game. I illustrate one such account in the last stage of my argument.

## 4.3 Some Forms of Non-adversarialism are Positive-sum

Based on the preceding discussion, I take it that a non-adversarialist case is self-refuting when it is engaged in a zero-sum argument with adversarialism. That is, when the former is trying to show that the non-adversarial style is better (whatever that might entail) than the latter. But are all

<sup>8</sup> See Sect. 3.2 of this paper for a reply to this weaker charge of incoherence.

<sup>9</sup> The quote reads: "Even discursive strategies can constitute a kind of trespassing on the personal integrity of others when they convey the rhetor's belief that the audience members have inadequacies that in some way can be corrected if they adhere to the viewpoint of the rhetor" (Foss and Griffin 1995, p. 3). I should point out that Aikin seems to misrepresent Foss and Griffin here, for two pages later they explicitly state that "[a]lthough we believe that persuasion [i.e., adversarial arguing] is often necessary, we believe an alternative exists that may be used in instances when changing and controlling others is not the rhetor's goal" (Foss and Griffin 1995, p. 5). This means that Foss and Griffin in fact exemplify a kind of positive-sum view of arguments I am defending in this paper.

non-adversarialists self-refuting in that sense? My answer is a resounding no. To get a sense of what I mean, consider first Catherine Hundleby's concluding remarks in her defense of non-adversariality (2013, p. 258):

Adversarial modes of reasoning have neither foundational nor over-riding value as means for rational persuasion. Other forms of social engagement and shared reasoning practices deserve recognition as forms of argumentation, from the most established views shared through persuasive teaching to the most daring explorations achieved through the division of cognitive labour in science.

Hundleby's conclusion is *not* that non-adversariality has won the day. Instead, she claims that adversariality should not purport to be the only style of arguing in town. Hundleby does not take non-adversarial style of argument to be above the adversarial one, but takes the two to be *on par*. Here we have a non-adversarialist, then, who is engaged in a *positive-sum* argument with adversarialists.

In my reading, many authors are like Hundleby in that regard.<sup>10</sup> Let me now illustrate my point in more detail on Katharina Stevens' (2016) account. Although she is not explicitly rebutting Aikin's conceptual version of the self-refutation challenge, I think her virtue-theoretic treatment of adversariality and non-adversariality can be used to that end. Doing that, moreover, sheds a new light on the way we tend to frame the adversariality debate and the possible direction for future research.

Building on virtue theory approach to argumentation (Aberdein and Cohen 2016), Stevens starts with a simple observation that *both* cooperation *and* adversariality have advantages and disadvantages along the lines highlighted in Sect. 2. The natural reaction to this observation is to combine the two approaches because each "seems to promote those advantages that the other one lacks" (Stevens 2016, p. 380). However, this route faces a problem because acting upon adversarial virtues will sometimes conflict with the virtues of cooperation.

To see this, Stevens asks us to imagine two arguers—one perfectly adversarial, second perfectly non-adversarial or cooperative<sup>11</sup> (Ibid., pp. 379–380). On her view, a perfect argumentative cooperator will tend to work with his interlocutor in order to improve the interlocutor's objections against the cooperator's standpoint. On the other hand,

a perfect argumentative adversarialist will focus, first and foremost, on establishing her standpoint as the right one by, say, debunking any objections raised against it. So, for instance, when faced with weak arguments, a perfect cooperator will endeavor to help improve the weak arguments of the other side, whereas a perfect adversarialist will first and foremost point out the weaknesses. Stevens concedes that such arguers are idealizations, but the point is that "the excellent adversarial arguer might not be the good cooperative one, and the other way around" (Ibid., p. 380). Why? Because argumentative adversariality and cooperation are in conflict—we cannot realize both at the same time. This leaves us, as Stevens puts it, with at least two incompatible groups of roles that one arguer could occupy during an argument. Two cooperative or non-adversarial: student and teacher; and two adversarial: knight and attacker (Ibid., p. 380).

In the adversariality debate, as we have seen in Sect. 2, the tendency has been to argue for the supremacy of the one *or* the other group. Following that route, however, opened non-adversarialists to the self-refutation charge, as persuasively showcased by Scott Aikin. Stevens, however, rejects this zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate (2016, p. 375):

I will not choose between the two approaches, nor will I claim that one set of virtues is unnecessary or disadvantageous. Instead, I will claim that an arguer should possess both sets of virtues and use practical wisdom to decide which virtues should guide her in which argumentative situation.

But how does Stevens solve the conflict that arises from arguing in accordance with both virtues of cooperation and adversariality? Like in virtue ethics, the key here is "practical wisdom", which is "the virtue of decision making" that a person cultivates throughout their life. Practical wisdom is the ability to judge what is the best thing to do in a particular situation, and the only way to cultivate it is by experiencing many such situations. When one lives through many situations of *x*, one gains insight into *x* and is hence better equipped to handle *x* the next time it comes about (Ibid., p. 380). Thus, practical wisdom guides the way in which virtues are deployed in a given context.

But what does such insight amount to in the context of arguments? Someone who has experienced a lot of arguments, Stevens maintains, knows that "sometimes we understand each other—and sometimes we do not" (Ibid., p. 381). This sounds trivial, but it is a very important reminder. Why? Because being aware of this is paramount for the judgments of when, and to what extent, (non-)adversariality is appropriate.

<sup>10</sup> Some notable mentions include Andrew Aberdein (2016), Moira Howes and Catherine Hundleby (2021), Dutilh Novaes (2021), Katharina Stevens (2019), Katharina Stevens and Daniel Cohen (2019, 2021), or Iñaki Xavier Larrauri Pertierra (2022).

<sup>11</sup> For the clarity of exposition, henceforth I adopt Steven's language and use "cooperative" and "non-adversarial" interchangeably.

For Stevens, adversariality seems to be very good for those argumentative situations, where the parties are in perfect understanding of each other's positions. When I know your position as much as you do, only then will all my attacks against your position be on point, which is a prerequisite for epistemic betterment, whether yours or mine. But one need not be too experienced with arguments to know that such a perfect understanding is virtually never in place. It is not rare, given our bounded rationality (Simon 1983), to *misunderstand oneself*, let alone others. When misunderstanding is rampant, adversariality will likely yield frustration and strained relationships which inhibit constructive argumentation (Stevens 2016, p. 381; see also Kiš 2025).

This is when cooperation is crucial. It allows us to clarify misunderstandings and learn more about each other's claims. It also allows underdeveloped claims to flourish and gain strength with the help of both interlocutors. However, here as well we should be careful not to overdo it. For instance, when legislative decisions that affect livelihoods must be made, such as during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there comes a point when learning from our interlocutors stops and advocacy begins. As Stevens puts it, non-adversarialist's "emphasis on understanding and development tends to let us search for potential where there might be none" (Stevens 2016, p. 381). This, for a change, is when adversariality is needed.

On the final picture, then, a virtuous arguer embodies both adversarial and cooperative virtues: a defender of truth and an open-minded collaborator. She fosters mutual understanding, supports others' ideas, and integrates new insights, while also identifying weaknesses and defending her claims. Crucially, she reads the situation, gauging the level of understanding and the development of arguments to adapt her approach accordingly (Ibid., p. 382).

In sum, Stevens rejects the zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate, asserting that we need not decide between non-adversarialism *or* adversarialism. Instead, we use our practical wisdom to move back and forth between the two, depending on our argumentative situation.

Now, an obvious objection that springs to mind is that Stevens does not represent non-adversarialism *per se*. She thus cannot be said to be immune to the conceptual self-refutation challenge because the challenge is not even aimed at her.

I wholeheartedly concede to this objection, provided that we also mention that Stevens is no adversarialist either. She is both—and that is exactly the point I am trying to make here. As shown in Sect. 3.2, non-adversarialism probably can withstand the *practical version* of the self-refutation charge. The *conceptual version* is admittedly more fatal, but only if we accept the zero-sum framing of the adversariality debate. However, we *need not* accept that framing. As

Katharina Stevens shows, there is a fruitful way to combine the best of both camps so that everyone wins.

## 5 Conclusion

A recent *Nature Medicine* study argues that polarization is a public health problem (Van Bavel et al. 2024). Some authors believe that a significant factor contributing to today's widespread polarization is the diminishing respect we have for each other. So how can we alleviate this and make ourselves (and our democracies) healthier? Non-adversarialists say that we ought to do away with competitive attitudes in arguments, which amounts to rejecting the adversarial view of arguments.

Scott Aikin maintains, however, that non-adversarialism faces a problem of self-refutation. This follows from the contrastivist nature of reasons, which makes argumentation inherently adversarial. In this paper, I have set out to defend the non-adversarial project against this self-refutation charge.

I distinguish between two versions of Aikin's challenge: a practical one, partaking to the arguers' behavior; and a conceptual one, which is related to the nature of reason-giving. I demonstrate that the *practical version* can be met quite easily by claiming that non-adversarialists promote but not honor their values; that charge of self-refutation might be read as argumentation fallacy of whataboutism; and that non-adversarialists are allowed to occupy argumentative roles that tend to be adversarial (e.g., advocate).

The *conceptual version* is a harder nut to crack. I deal with that version by identifying a core tenet of adversarialism, which is the assumption that arguing is always a zero-sum game. I accept Aikin's argument that when non-adversarialists unapologetically play a zero-sum game, trying to defeat adversarialism, they are self-refuting. However, not all defenders of non-adversariality play that game. Katharina Stevens, for instance, offers a *positive-sum*, virtue-theoretic account that combines adversarial and non-adversarial styles.

In some way, Scott Aikin's account is like that of Stevens'. For one, he too eventually synthesizes the two views in a way by acknowledging that we need non-adversariality to temper the excessive levels of adversariality (Aikin 2021, p. 843). However, his account ultimately reaffirms the zero-sum framing of adversariality debate because he takes adversarialism to be the more accurate conception of arguing. I submit that he cannot escape this outcome even if he wanted to as long as he approaches adversariality debate as itself being a zero-sum game.

Finally, I believe reframing this debate into positive-sum terms might redirect our focus towards other impactful

research projects, such as exploring effective methods to promote mutual respect in polarized epistemic settings.

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## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author declares that there is no conflict of interest and the paper is in full compliance with the Ethical Standards.

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