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REAKCJE / REACTIONS

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Commentary on Cracovian-style debate

From the Editors

Cracovian-style debate has been characterised in the following papers:

in Polish: in the current “Res Rhetorica” issue:
J. Pruś, »Debata krakoska – pytania i odpowiedzi. Teoretyczne podstawy i miejsce wśród współczesnych formatów debat«,
https://doi.org/10.29107/rr2026.2.7

in English:
Pruś, Jakub, Piotr Sikora. 2025. “A Cracovian Debate: Cooperative Debate Format Based on the Dialectical Principle of Charity.” *Topoi* 44: 1469–88.
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11245-025-10244-x

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Commentary on Cracovian-style debate

I was very pleased to see this topic being addressed by Dr. Pruś, and am excited by the initial work that he is engaging in regarding educational debate. As someone who has often found traditional debate formats off-putting, I find this work to be especially refreshing as it contributes to an optimistic future vision of debate that is more diverse and accessible. Jakub Pruś does an excellent job of describing the problems with contemporary competitive debate. Issues such as generating and perpetuating polarization; a focus on winning at all costs, rather than generating epistemic goods for participants; and a distinct limit to, or lack of, charitability are among the main concerns Pruś has regarding traditional debate formats. The Cracovian format aims to address each of these by shifting the focus on participants from winning at all costs to a cooperative victory over ignorance and misunderstanding. Pruś suggests that such a shift in focus will not only strengthen the skills of debaters, but also lead to improved cognitive outcomes for all participants – audience included. While I look forward to the future of this debate style, I have two primary concerns about some of the fundamental practical aspects of this debate style.

The goal of improving cognitive gains through debate is certainly laudable, but I believe it may be a more complex goal than is addressed here. There are two apparent issues with centralizing 'total cognitive gains' as the goal of debate. Firstly, there is the immediate issue of quantifying and qualifying precisely what a cognitive gain is. While I think that the evaluative questionnaire involved in the debate partially succeeds in addressing this concern, especially in qualifying cognitive gain, I believe that there could be a more structured method of quantifying the outcomes. Cognitive gains are not necessarily created equally, and it seems that someone who has undergone a fundamental shift in their belief structure due to the debate will have gained something more than someone who has found a stronger argument for a belief that they already held. I understand that the current

goal of the questionnaire is expediency and determining whether or not the debate has been successful, but I would suggest that a more nuanced quantification of the responses, even if carried out after the initial scoring, will aid both the researchers and the participants. After participating in the debate format, I saw that there is a short discussion of the qualified responses that takes place after the overall score is revealed, and this is represents a positive step in addressing the concern that I am raising here, indicating that Pruś is aware of this issue. Secondly, when considering cognitive gains, or the total net cognitive gain of the group, it seems that there is an assumption that these gains will be lasting and extend beyond the debate context. While I recognize that this lasting effect is possible, and that participants may learn something new from their engagement in debate, I believe that it may be hasty to conclude that cognitive gains reported immediately following the debate will extend beyond that context. Recency bias, the effect of novelty and thrill of competition may influence the immediate results, which suggests that the cognitive gains made, at least to the degree reported, may be temporary. I recognize that this concern is difficult to control for and address, but I suggest that it is prudent to consider how this concern interacts with the stated goal of lasting epistemic gains that are supposed to translate to real-world skills.

A second concern that I have or, perhaps a cluster of concerns, regards the notion that any debate style requires uptake or 'buy-in' from potential participants, and it is not immediately clear how the Cracovian style generates this 'buy-in' for students. There is an immediate concern regarding 'buy-in,' that of socio-cultural differences, that I think the Cracovian style of debate will need to address moving forward. Socio-cultural differences, particularly whether the debate format is tested in a collectivist society versus in an individualistic society, are important factors that will need to be considered in further empirical testing. This is relevant to the uptake concern, as I believe that further testing may reveal that students in individualistic societies may be more reticent in their uptake of this type of debate, which could hinder its general applicability and broad appeal. This concern was also raised by Pruś during our training and introduction to the Cracovian debate style, where he noted that American, British and Canadian students were more resistant to engaging in this type of debate than their European counterparts. Relatedly, I worry that the reward incentives of this debate style may create a unique challenge for generating participant buy-in, especially when offered as an alternative to the more traditional debate formats. Offering the reward of 'cognitive' or 'epistemic' gains that are purported to have positive real-world applications and outcomes, though interesting, may not be as immediately enticing to most students who are inclined to participate in debate. This is made clearer when these rewards are compared to rewards like the perceived intellectual superiority over one's peers or

gain in social capital that is offered by succeeding in traditional debate formats. Understanding what the rewards represented by cognitive gains actually are may, therefore, create a unique barrier to entry for some students, educators or facilitators that could limit the general adoption of this debate style.

Despite my reservations about the practical aspects of this debate style, there is one central component of the Cracovian-style debate that I want to celebrate: a focus on argumentative quality, rather than quantity. Among the weaknesses of traditional debate formats, the fight for 'epistemic air-time,' or the goal of making as many arguments as possible in the time allotted, regardless of their veracity or the strength of their justification, stands out as one of the greatest. This is exemplified by traditional rhetorical tactics such as the 'Gish Gallop,' which has been seen as perfectly reasonable and effective means of engaging in argumentation during traditional debate. The Cracovian style's commitment to presenting one argument at a time, that is then closely and charitably examined, forces participants to actually engage with the topic, and their position, both critically and reflectively. Shifting the focus from taking up 'air time' to ensuring that arguments are clearly and effectively articulated and examined sets the Cracovian-style debate apart in a very important way. Furthermore, having this ruleset, coupled with the goal of making cognitive gains seems likely to lead to positive outcomes for all participants. I cannot think of a context where being better able to present and defend a position, or being more capable of a charitable critical examination of an opposing position, would be a net negative. Relatedly, and finally, allowing for, and centralizing, the argumentative goals of persuasion, inquiry and deliberation, while avoiding eristic goals as the main focus of debate seems likely to have immediate positive outcomes pedagogically. Students, *qua* students, who are more open to entertaining conflicting viewpoints, who are more capable of engaging in cooperative deliberation and charitable interpretations of arguments, also seem like students who will find greater value in their academic journey. While I am hesitant to claim that these goods will transcend the academic context, I am optimistic that they are capable of doing so. In light of this, I believe that the Cracovian debate format sets students up to be more successful *as students* and, therefore, achieves its initial goal of being a useful and impactful pedagogical tool that educators can employ to enrich students' learning.