CHAPTER 27

Wordplay and Swordplay: Camillo Agrippa's Challenge of Philosophy from the Spirit of Fencing

Claus Zittel

Abstract

This essay examines the way in which the Milanese architect, engineer and mathematician Camillo Agrippa sought to establish the art of fencing as a science with reference to geometry in 1553. His treatise has been acknowledged as a milestone in the history of martial arts and its significance has also been recognised from an art-historical perspective, but there is a diffuse understanding of the philosophical programme Agrippa pursued. The aim is therefore to show how Agrippa, as a philosophical outsider, developed a method for the rational calculation of movement sequences with the help of a series of pictures that combines diagrammatic and mimetic strategies. He stages his approach in the frontispieces as a duel with philosophy and defends it in a philosophical dialogue attached to the treatise. Agrippa's attack on philosophy is radical and goes as far as dismantling its disciplinary representatives in image and text. The calculated interplay of geometry, pictorial logic and text in Agrippa's work anticipates aspects of the later methodological revolution in philosophy through its principles of formalisation, as carried out by Descartes in the seventeenth century.

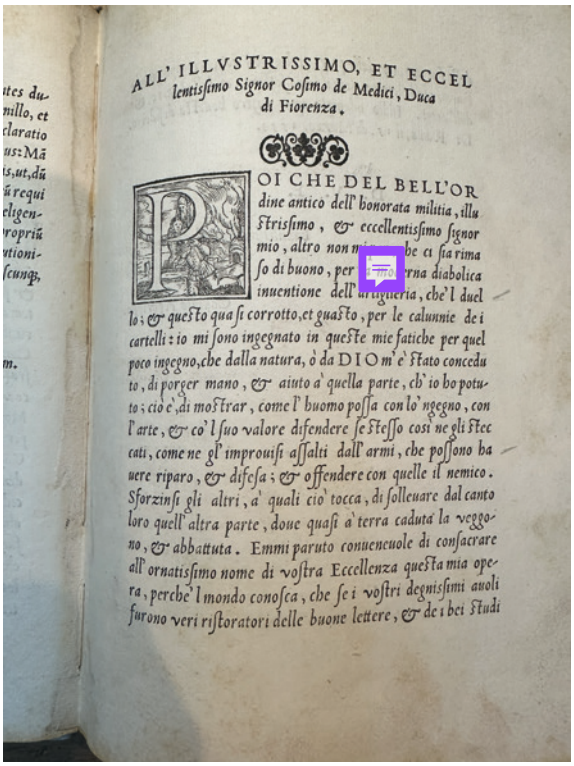
Keywords

Martial Arts – philosophical disputes – iconography of philosophy – image-text relationships – geometrical method – frontispiece – diagramms – humour – fencing

1

In 1553, the engineer, architect and mathematician Camillo Agrippa (Milan, before 1535- Rome, 1600) published his *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia* (*Treatise of the Science of Arms, with a Philosophical Dialogue*) with the papal printer Antonio Blado in Rome. The text was set in exquisite

 | DOI:10.1163/9789004712966_029


ALL' ILLVSTRISSIMO, ET ECCEL
lentissimo Signor Cosimo de Medici, Duca
di Fiorenza.

POI CHE DEL BELL'OR
dine antico dell' honorata militia, illu
strissimo, & eccellentissimo signor
mio, altro non m[illegible]be ci sia rima
so di buono, per [illegible]rna diabolica
inuentione dell' artiglieria, che'l duel
lo; & questo qua si corrotto, et guasto, per le calunnie de i
cartelli: io mi sono ingegnato in queste mie fatiche per quel
poco ingegno, che dalla natura, ò da DIO m'è stato concedu
to, di porger mano, & aiuto a' quella parte, ch' io ho potu-
to; ciò è, di mostrar, come l' huomo possa con lo' ngegno, con
l'arte, & co' l suo valore difendere se stesso cosi ne gli stec
cati, come ne gl' improuisi assalti dall' armi, che possono ha
uere riparo, & difesa; & offendere con quelle il nemico.
Sforzinsi gli altri, a' quali ciò tocca, di solleuare dal canto
loro quell' altra parte, doue quasi a' terra caduta la veggo-
no, & abbattuta. Emmi paruto conueneuole di consacrare
all' ornatissimo nome di vostra Eccellenza questa mia ope-
ra, perche' l mondo conosca, che se i vostri degnissimi auoli
furono veri ristoratori delle buone lettere, & de i bei studi

FIGURE 27.1
The dedication letter preceded by the initial P: Aneas bearing Anchises, in Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553)

Bembo Antiqua, decorated with beautiful floral or figural initials [Fig. 27.1] and provided with 56 spectacular copperplate illustrations, including a finely executed portrait of the author[1] [Fig. 27.2], two frontispieces [Fig. 27.15, Fig. 27.20] and 53 depictions of fencing figures.

The treatise is considered the first scientific fencing book and a milestone in the history of the art of fencing, as it heralded the transition from the rapier as a cutting weapon to a stabbing weapon.[2] However, its title would have been received by Agrippa's contemporaries as provocative on several counts: the art

1 On the function of author portraits in early modern prints, see Enenkel K.A.E, *Die Stiftung von Autorschaft in der neulateinischen Literatur* (*ca. 1350–ca. 1650*)*: Zur autorisierenden und wissensvermittelnden Funktion von Widmungen, Vorworttexten, Autorporträts und Dedikationsbildern* (Leiden: 2015). On Camillo Agrippa's author portraits, see Centanni M, "Velis nolisve. Anfibologia nell'anima e nel corpo di un'impresa. Sulla medaglia di Camillo Agrippa (Roma, ca. 1585)", *La Rivista di Engramma* 162 (2019) 67–112.

2 Cfr. Anglo S., *The Martial Arts of Renaissance Europe* (New Haven – London: 2000) 25; Bodemer H., *Das Fechtbuch. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der bildkünstlerischen Darstellung der Fechtkunst in den Fechtbüchern des mediterranen und westeuropäischen Raumes vom Mittelalter bis Ende des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Ph.D. dissertation, University

FIGURE 27.2
Carlo Urbino (engraver), *Portrait of Camillo Agrippa* (engraving), *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553)

of fencing was to be taught as a science and then also justified philosophically in an appended dialogue, and this by an author who was neither an instructor of the martial arts nor a philosopher. Explicating the art of fencing, Agrippa fought his real battle with philosophy.

However, how he achieved these ends has been somewhat misunderstood, partly due to tendentious translations. In what follows, therefore, we will focus less on the history of fencing or art history, nor on an analysis of the dialogue and the conventions of natural philosophy[3] upon which it draws, but rather on the question of what new idea of philosophy Agrippa was trying to convey through his methodical approach, with the help of a new visual language.[4]

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of Stuttgart: 2008) 220–233; Bascetta C., *Sporti e giuochi: Trattati e scritti dal xv al xvi secolo* (Milan: 1978) 185–208.

3 Nenci E., "Camillo Agrippa: Un ingegnere rinascimentale di fronte ai problemi della filosofia naturale", *Physis. Rivista internazionale di storia della scienza* 29 (1992) 71–119.

4 On the parallel attempt by Jerónimo Sánchez de Carranza (ca. 1534–ca. 1607) in Spain with his book *The Philosophy of Arms* [*De la Filosofía de las Armas*, Seville: 1582] to philosophically justify the art of fencing see: Curtis M.T.D., *Legitimizing Discourses: A Vindication of Swordplay Through Letters in* The Philosophy of Arms (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California: 2012).

Those who teach the art of killing have always chosen the same arguments to justify their ~~actions~~. Neither the fencing master nor the weapon kills, but the one who makes the wrong use of the weapon. But what would be the correct use? Plato had already devoted his early dialogue *Laches*, which ends aporetically, to the question of whether young people should be trained in the art of fencing. In it, Socrates demonstrates to the senior military officers present that all their attempts precisely to define the courage (ἀνδρεία) or virtue (ἀρετή) that a fighter should possess remain unsatisfactory.[5] In the end, the generals are left baffled. Agrippa is aware of ~~the~~ problem, but also that it needs to be re-examined, as recent developments in military technology have completely changed the starting conditions for assessing what constitutes brave or honourable action in battle. There is no longer a binding "Streitkultur".[6]

In his dedication letter to Cosimo I de Medici, Agrippa explains that owing to the 'diabolical modern invention of artillery', ultimately only the duel remained as the last relic of 'the good ancient ways of military honour'; but even this method of armed combat had been 'corrupted and spoiled by the calumny of *cartelli*', by reason of the frequency with which duels were now fought.[7] Although 'the science of arms [...] consists principally of justice, secondly of intelligence ('intelligentia'), and thirdly of practice ('uso')', the question of justice must be set aside given the behaviour of today's duellists:

> However, I say with utmost certainty that although reason ('ragione'), experience ('esperientia') (that small help), art and genius ('ingenio') might be accompanied by a valiant spirit ('core animosissimo'), they are not always found together with justice. Thus, the case of the miserable cavaliers who feuded solely out of pride or – as we say – arrogance, with the result being the opposite of what they had wished. In place of honor, they acquired manifest infamy.[8]

5 Plato, *Laches* 182a–185e.

6 On the 'Streitkultur' during the Renaissance see Lines D. – Laureys M. – Kraye J. (eds.), *Forms of Conflict and Rivalries in Renaissance Europe* (Bonn: 2015).

7 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fol. ii r–v.

8 Agrippa, *Fencing*: *A Renaissance Treatise* 7, emphasis mine. Agrippa's criticism stands in contrast to the results of cultural-historical studies such as: Low J., *Manhood and the Duel: Masculinity in Early Modern Drama and Culture* (New York: 2003); LaVaque-Manty M., "Dueling for Equality: Masculine Honor and the Modern Politics of Dignity," *Political Theory* 34.6 (2006) 715–740.

This has been taken to mean that the question of honour no longer played a role for Agrippa,[9] but he actually explains that anyone who continues to strive for honour in his day must both study and practise his newly invented theory of fencing:

> it is necessary for everyone who wishes for honor in whichever science and art ('Scientia et arte'), after being well apprised of the theory, makes it come alive with practice. Therefore let each curious mind ('peregrino *ingenio*') pay close attention to my new discovery ('inventione'), presented here in two separate parts.[10]

The decisive factor here was primarily to grasp the 'intelligence of arms' ('Intelligentia dell'arme').[11] The question of honour now shifts away from the violation of honour as a reason for a duel and away from justice per se, to the degree to which one is prepared to trust the new science taught here, even when it becomes life-threatening to follow it:

> If anyone thinks that this might be a risky and dangerous action that should not be taught, I say that men of honor [li homini d'honore] well understand the techniques and tactics that they need to use in a formal or an informal challenge. Therefore, no one should complain about the risk or danger.[12]
>
> Though these might seem dangerous, nonetheless a man of honor who knows the principles and how to deal with his enemy will find them valuable. Moreover, as mentioned at the beginning of this treatise, a man ought not to care a whit for any danger in pursuing his goals.[13]

So, one has to have the courage consistently to apply the new fencing principles that Agrippa recognised as correct, even if the execution is risky. Anyone who fights according to Agrippa's principles of fencing science fights with method, and thus defends the honour of science or, to put it another way, is a

9 Cf. 'Also unusual at that time for a treatise about fencing is the almost complete lack of discussion of honor, vengeance, and retribution – the slippery pretexts for any duel.' Lincoln E., *Brilliant Discourse: Pictures and Readers in Early Modern Rome* (New Haven – London: 2013) 82.

10 Agrippa, *Fencing*: *A Renaissance Treatise* 7, emphasis mine, translation changed.

11 Ibidem.

12 Agrippa, *Fencing*: *A Renaissance Treatise* 41, translation slightly changed.

13 Ibidem 83.

man of honour of science. But what characterises the new method, and how can the art of fencing become a science?

As we have seen, the treatise explicitly addresses the reader's *ingenio*, which is to be trained, and Agrippa achieves this analogously to contemporary art theory by presenting the reader with external *disegni*, which help to mould the inner *disegno*, i.e., to guide the conceptual interplay of imagination and reason.[14] In the art treatises of the Renaissance, art was thus distinguished from mere artisanal craftsmanship, and Agrippa attempts to ennoble the art of fencing in the same way. Agrippa's actual philosophical coup was therefore that he allowed a new kind of methodical thinking to take shape with the help of a series of copperplate engravings and took the offensive by defending this method with two spectacular frontispieces.

2

Agrippa's central idea was to formalise the art of fencing, and, as he demonstrates, he did not have to be a virtue ethicist or a natural philosopher to do so; rather, he anticipates an understanding of philosophy as a rational method, with which Descartes would revolutionise philosophy in the following century. As this idea was a bold novelty, Agrippa had to prepare his readership for it with the two frontispieces [Figs. 27.15 & 27.20] and then convince them with a sophisticated interplay of words and images, letters and lines. His approach, he explained, was based solely on 'points, lines, times, measures and so forth, and comes from thinking in a mathematical – which is to say, geometrical – fashion' ('in fine questa Professione si governa solamente con punti, linee, tempi, misure, & simili, et nascono in certo modo da consideration' mathematica, o sia pur sola Geometria').[15]

Descartes, who happens to be the author of a (lost) fencing treatise, would later distinguish between the methods of analysis and synthesis and suggest that complex issues should first be broken down into simple, comprehensible basic elements (analysis), which should then be organised and gradually reassembled (synthesis). The resulting deductive chain would lead to an

14 Cf. Pfisterer U., "Der Kontrakt des Zeichners. Barent Fabritius und die *disegno*-Theorien der Frühen Neuzeit", in Schulze Altcappenberg H.T. – Thimann M. (eds.) *Disegno. Der Zeichner im Bild der Frühen Neuzeit*, exh. cat., Kupferstichkabinett (Berlin – Munich: 2007) 45–53.

15 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 10, Agrippa, *Trattato Di Scientia d'Arme* (1553), Cap. II, fol. 6.

understanding of even complex issues that even the dullest minds would be able to comprehend. 'Synthesis' would be 'very suitable to deploy in geometry' and is together with analysis also 'a method of discovery'.[16] Agrippa wanted to apply simplifying, organising, combining and deducing according to the model of geometry to the art of fencing, but we must be careful not to succumb to a misunderstanding here. Although Agrippa himself repeatedly cites geometry as a model method, what happens in the treatise is not a *demonstratio more geometrico*, as some interpreters believe.[17]

Like Descartes later in his algebraisation of geometry, Agrippa already abolishes the ancient separation of geometry (the measurable) and arithmetic (the countable) by introducing an ingenious system of notation ('conoscere per termini di littere') that allows him to find formulas for the variance of geometric figures. In this way, his diagrams function on two levels: they show a real fencing scene on the surface of the book page, but at the same time they refer to an ideal mathematical plane that presents all conceivable combinations from this position to the mind's eye. Agrippa translates the geometric forms into a calculus of lines and, in turn, the rules into visible movements. At the same time, this method allows the memory to be relieved, as it is no longer necessary to memorise thousands of possible situations, but only the principle of the combination. Agrippa thus offers a model for the rationalisation of knowledge and memory. Once you have grasped this model, you do not have to keep repeating it. The later illustrations then only show the fencers without diagrams in a supposedly purely mimetic representation, but the fencer and the reader have permanently the coordination system in mind – it is always invisibly present.

Let us take a closer look at Agrippa's 'invention'. According to Agrippa, the usually confusing slashing and thrusting in swordplay can be reduced to just 4 intuitively understandable basic positions ('principal guards') [Fig. 27.3]. Starting from these, every possible situation and combination should then be systematically deduced step by step so that a fencer knows in every situation when and how to execute the appropriate fencing thrust. This revolutionised

16 Descartes René, *Meditationes* (*Second Replies*), in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. C. Adam. – P. Tannery, 11 vols. (Paris: 1964–71) AT VII 156; *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, ed. J. Cottingham – R. Stoothoff. – D. Murdoch, 2 vols. (Cambridge: 1984–5) II, 110–112. On the significance of visual demonstrations in Descartes see Zittel C., *Theatrum Philosophicum. Descartes und die Rolle ästhetischer Formen in der Wissenschaft* (Berlin: 2009).

17 Cf. Mondschein K., "The Number of Motion: Camillo Agrippa's Geometrical Fencing and the Enumeration of Body", *Journal of the Northern Renaissance* 6 (2014), http://www.northernrenaissance.org/issues/issue-6–2014/ (accessed 29 April 2024). See further: De Lapp K., "Philosophical Duelism: Fencing in Early Modern Thought", *Journal of Early Modern Studies* 7.2 (2018) 31–54, here 35–37.

FIGURE 27.3 *The four Principal Guards*, engraving, Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553), fol. iii

the history of fencing in that Agrippa's main insight was that you should not strike with the side of the sword, but rather thrust with the point. '[L]et the foils be brought', as he puts it.[18] The path to the foil was paved.

> To begin, I propose four primary guards to be used in this exercise: first, second, third, and fourth. These are shown in the following figure, each marked by a letter – the first by A, the second by B, the third by C, and the fourth by D. For the rest of the work, these letters will stand in place of saying first, second, third, and fourth guard. The reason why they are so-named is because anyone who in anger draws the sword he wears at his side, whether because of his own fury or some external provocation of word or deed, will raise his hand to form a guard. Because this is the first that can be made after clearing the sword from the scabbard, it is called 'first'. Lowering the hand a little so that the arm is at the same height as the shoulder is the second. By slightly lowering the sword-hand and moving it to the outside and closer to the knee, you will make the third.

18 Shakespeare William, *Hamlet*, v 2, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. W.J. Craig (London: 1905) 905.

FIGURE 27.4
The geometry of arm movement, in Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553), fol. iv

> Finally, moving the sword-hand inside the knee makes the fourth. These are the *principles* because from them proceed and are formed the various other guards according to the most necessary considerations and occurrence of this profession ('sono le Principali perche da loro procedono et si formano diverse altre Guardie secondo le piu necessarie considerationi & occorrentie di questo essercitio').[19]

The illustration first shows a fencer simultaneously in four different 'principal guards', which are numbered alphabetically. Agrippa then sketches two geometric models for the movements of the arms and legs [Figs. 27.4 & 27.5], from which all other positions can be constructed and determined.

19 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 8; Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fol. Iv. emphasis mine, translation of the last sentence slightly changed.

FIGURE 27.5 *The geometry of leg movement* (engraving), in Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553), fol. v

Each letter denotes a different fencing position, sword stance, movements and thrusts during attacks and defences. Each chapter is accompanied by thematically appropriate illustrations which are integrated into the text. The result is a series of successive fencing positions [Figs. 27.6–27.8], which are shown from different perspectives ('prospettive') and which guide the imagination like a film strip.[20]

20 For this illustration strategy, see Berns J.J., *Film vor dem Film. Bewegende und bewegliche Bilder als Mittel der Imaginationssteuerung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Marburg: 2000).

FIGURES 27.6–27.8
Fencer (engraving), Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)

He introduces the compass in the form of a stick [Fig. 27.9], with which the respective geometric bodies can also be constructed by the fencer in his imagination during the fight and which he identifies in the following dialogue as the main annoyance of his philosophical critics.

Lines that start from targeted points then visualise the entire range that a sword can reach during a movement [Fig. 27.10] in such a way that the fencer is able to calculate exactly which thrust to use in order to reach the desired point

FIGURE 27.9 *Geometrical calculation*, engraving, in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)

or, if he has memorised the illustrations, he can remember which action he can perform and which he cannot [Fig. 27.11].

Agrippa also deals in detail with situations where two fencers of different sizes and strengths meet and then shows how the physically inferior fencer should calculate his thrusts. Finally, he also attempts to explain more complex fencing situations:

It is crucial that the reader realises that there are not five men fighting each other here, but only two in different variations:

> One can easily make the mistake of thinking that these figures show new sorts of guards, since they show two enemies fighting with one figure

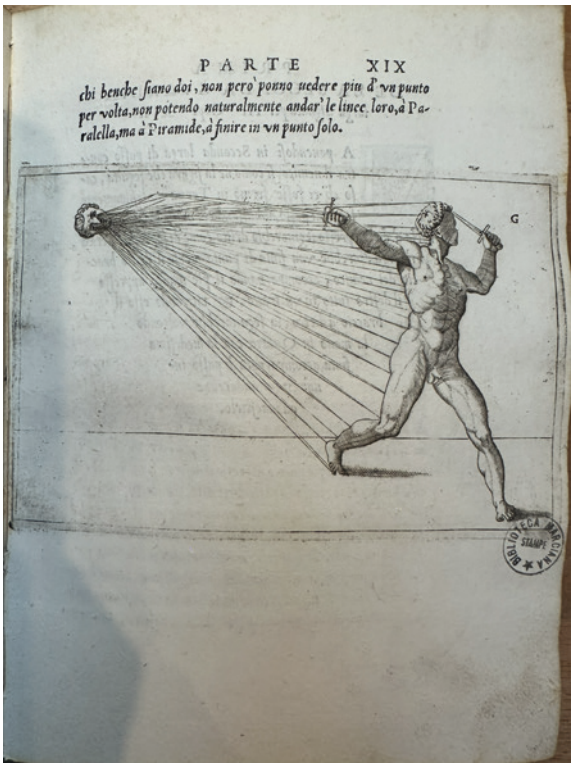


FIGURE 27.10
An Act Denoted by 'G', engraving, in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)

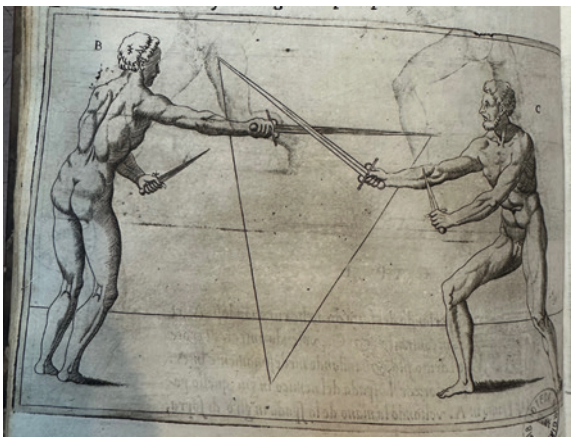
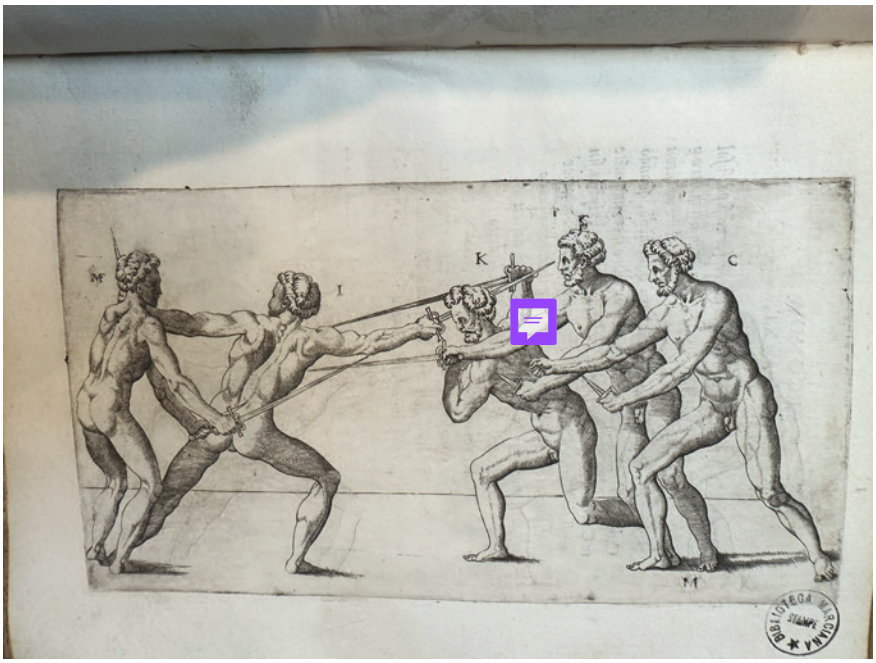
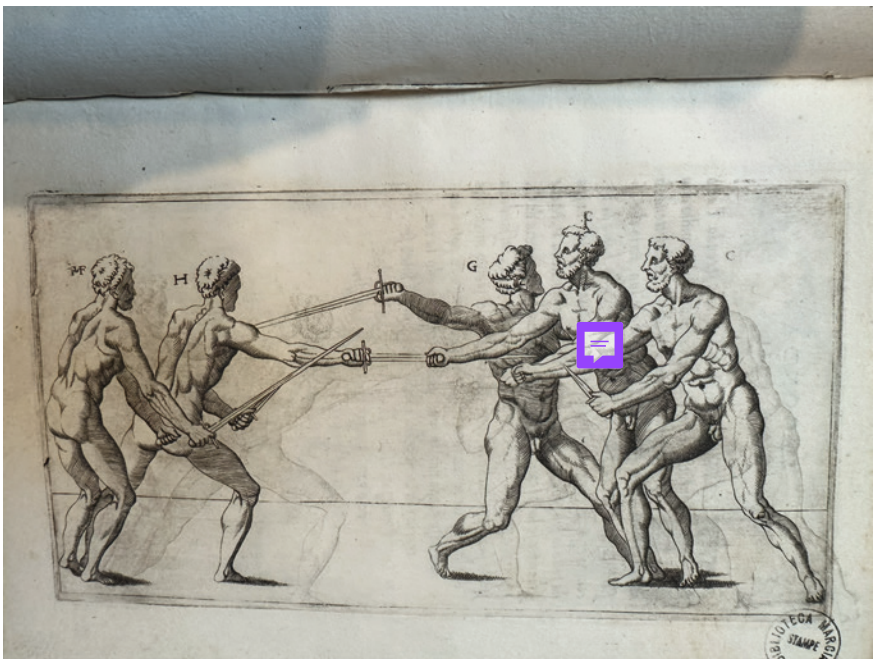


FIGURE 27.11
Geometrical calculation, engraving, in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)





FIGURES 27.12–27.13 *Fencing Figures*, engraving, in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553), fol. 47

> positioned in one sort of guard or attack in one part of the closed field (or in whatever other place they might be fighting), and the other, on the other side, performing another attack or guard. However, they are one and the same figure, defined.[21]

Agrippa attached great importance to ensuring that his system of notation and his illustration strategy were clearly understood, but it is doubtful that he was successful in this. The two later editions published in Venice were illustrated by Giulio Fontana,[22] an engraver who had previously illustrated Achille Marozzo's famous fencing treatise for the same printer, [23] so one might think that he was particularly qualified for this task. However, if we look at the later editions, we realise that Fontana obviously either did not read the text at all or did not understand it. The frontispieces, which are important for understanding the text, were replaced by a less sophisticated new allegorical frontispiece which also removes the term 'philosophy' from the title of the dialogue. Fontana often puts the illustrations in the wrong places, thus overriding the internal system of references, and above all he misinterprets the illustrations with many fencing positions as depicting several fighters, a serious error to which even the otherwise prudent Evelyn Lincoln succumbed.[24]

3

The treatise became famous above all because of its illustrations. For a long time it was not known who had made them. Leonardo, Johannes Stradanus and Baldo Perugino,[25] among others, were thought to be the engraver, and none other than Torquato Tasso had handwritten Michelangelo's name as the responsible artist in his copy of Agrippa's treatise.[26] But Paolo Lomazzo had already identified the Lombard painter Carlo Urbino as the illustrator,[27] and ever since a preparatory drawing [Fig. 27.14] made by him for the Agrippa

21 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 9.

22 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme et un dialogo in detta materia* (1568, 1604).

23 Marozzo Achille, *Arte dell'Armi* (Venice: Antonio Pinargenti, 1568/1569).

24 Cf. Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 102: 'The demonstrations in the second part of the book become increasingly complex, evolving into battles with up to four enemies at once'.

25 Barni G.L., "Camillo Agrippa", in Ghisalberti A. (ed.), *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* (Rome: 1960) 503.

26 See Mondschein K., "Introduction" in: Agrippa, *Fencing. A Renaissance Treatise* XV–XCIV, here XIV, LXX.

27 Lomazzo Giovanni Paolo, *Rime* [...] *divise in sette libri* (Milan: Paolo Gottardo Pontio, 1587), fol. 230; see Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 248 n. 3.

FIGURE 27.14
Carlo Urbino (designer), *Camillo Agrippa converses with Annibal Caro and other scholars* (1552–1553). Black pencil on white paper; 220,1 × 17,2 cm, Florence, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, inv. 5130 S

frontispiece [Fig. 27.15] was discovered in Florence, the attribution has been considered certain.[28]

Carlo Urbino probably compiled Leonardo's Codex Huyghens, and Claire Farago has convincingly demonstrated similarities in the 'cognitive style' of depicting human bodies in motion in Leonardo and Carlo Urbino's illustrations for Agrippa.[29]

The title under which Carlo Urbino's preparatory drawing has come down to us indicates that the famous poet and translator of Virgil Annibale Caro (1507–1566), who will appear as his interlocutor in the following dialogue, is already sitting opposite him in the frontispiece. But there is no evidence of this. In fact, we see Agrippa sitting at the table opposite a philosopher who turns the page of a book lying on the table, rests his right foot on another book

28 Gatti S., "Due contributi allo studio del pittore Carlo Urbino", *Arte Lombarda* 47/48 (1977) 99–107.

29 Farago C., "The Defense of Art and the Art of Defense", *Achademia Leonardi Vinci* 10 (1997) 13–22, here 16–18.

FIGURE 27.15 Carlo Urbino (engraver), Frontispiece: *Agrippa's Disputation* (engraving), in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)

and prepares to reach for another thick volume with his right hand; meanwhile, the philosophers in the background supply themselves with arguments from books, more of which await consultation on the shelftop. The place is obviously a library. Agrippa's holds an armillary sphere in his left hand, the head of a compass in his right, the instrument he will later use to construct the fencing figures. His left foot rests on a globe. The frontispiece ~~stages~~ an extremely lively confrontation that is conducted with very different weapons: the book as a weapon of scholarship versus the instruments, as weapons of science. However, the large sword at Agrippa's side dominates the scene, and the dagger lying on the table points menacingly towards the philosopher. Another dagger and a fencing glove lie just below. Agrippa is not being examined by the philosophers; rather, he has actively challenged them to a duel, and he has thrown down the gauntlet. The frontispiece stages a theatrical scene that launches an attack on a new philosophical front, a maneuver readers are given the opportunity to discern with their own eyes in the treatise that follows.

Lincoln thought that the frontispiece contrasted Agrippa with the academic scholars who relied on book knowledge; he appears in the guise of a 'gentleman scientist whose research tools are, instead, the instruments that aid in knowledge derived from observation and experience'.[30] But in the mid-sixteenth century, there was neither a mechanistic philosophy nor a Baconian empiricism that formulated hypotheses based on observations. We do indeed see Agrippa with a sword and instruments, but firstly, he propounds rather conventional cosmological positions in the subsequent dialogue, which of course come from books; secondly, the method presented in the fencing treatise is precisely not empirical,[31] but, as we have seen, is developed explicitly deductively and 'con ragione'.[32] Many a fencing master has accordingly mocked Agrippa's theory-orientated textbook.[33] Agrippa pursues a thoroughly intellectualist approach, and his insights are not the fruits of supposed 'artisanal knowledge'.[34] To put it another way, Agrippa sketches the art of fencing not just as a science, but as a science of principles.

The question of the philosophical status of both the treatise and the following dialogue therefore also depends on the accuracy of the translation of the terminology. The first sentence of the preface reads 'La Scientia del' Arme consiste principalmente in ne la Iustistia, secondariamente ne la Intelligentia,

30 Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 91.
31 Mondschein K., "Introduction" LXXII.
32 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fol. LXIIIr–v.
33 Cfr. Anglo, *Martial Arts* 48.
34 Cfr. Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 103.

terzo nel' Uso'.[35] Ken Mondschein translates: 'The science of arms consists principally of justice, secondly of knowledge, and thirdly of practice'.[36] But 'intelligentia' does not mean 'knowledge'. Moreover, Agrippa usually refers to a test using the Italian term 'prova', while Mondschein consistently translates it as 'proof'. Further, he translates the basic fencing figures as 'primary guards', but Agrippa speaks of four 'principal guards'. Crucial terms ('knowledge', 'proof') tend to be translated in such a way that they correspond to a traditional understanding of the philosophical system or, paradoxically, express Agrippa's supposed empiricism. This tends to obscure what is actually new about Agrippa's approach, which is to teach a new method for rationalising the conduct of a fencing battle and not systematic knowledge. Agrippa does not provide evidence in a philosophical sense anywhere; to do so, he would have had to declare the true natural causes from which either the movements of the celestial bodies or the respective fencing movements are causally deduced. Agrippa does refer to cosmological positions, but these are not linked to the derivation of the individual fencing positions, which is to say that they run on a different track. This also applies to the dialogue that follows, in which Camillo discusses cosmological questions with his friend Annibale Caro over the course of three days, which is obviously intended to show that he is well versed in this area, but does nothing to substantiate the treatise.

4

Carlo Urbino's involvement in Agrippa's engravings may be undisputed, but a remarkable detail in the frontispiece, which I will discuss in a moment, points to the conceptual involvement of another and far more renowned artist who is even mentioned by name in the attached *Dialogo di Camillo Agrippa / Annibale et Camillo* – Francesco Salviati (1510–1563).[37] Indeed, the dialogue ostensibly takes place in the home of the Farnese courtier Annibale Caro, and Salviati was hard at work on the Sala dei Fasti Farnesiani in those years. Salviati's involvement is also supported by the fact that he had many connections to humanist scholarly culture and was highly experienced in dealing with the possibilities of printing.[38]

35 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fol. Ix r, emphasis mine.
36 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 7.
37 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 118.
38 Nova A., "Francesco Salviati e gli editori 1. Le incisioni", in Monbeig-Goguel C. (ed.): *Francesco Salviati (1510–1563), o la Bella Maniera* (Milan 1998) 66–70.

FIGURE 27.16 Francesco Salviati, *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (between 1543 and 1547). Oil on panel transferred to canvas, 275 cm × 234 cm. Louvre, Paris. Wikimedia commons

In the later engraving, the young man in the centre rear of the drawing has disappeared. As a result, only nine instead of ten men can be seen in the background. There, as in the later engraving, a youthful figure with his nude back turned in a particular way stands out among the bearded men holding books; this figure apparently derives from Salviati. Compare it with the figure seen from behind with the same hairstyle, who stands at the left edge of Salviati's painting [Fig. 27.16], in which ten figures again (as in Carlo Urbino's drawing)

observe and discuss the scene in the foreground. Here we can also recognise that the young man carries a book.

There is much to suggest that Agrippa's interlocutors are ironically paralleled with doubting Thomas, and the philosophers with the apostles, while Agrippa appears in the role of the saviour whom the apostles of science have yet to recognise.

However, in contrast to the very carefully and finely engraved portrait of Agrippa, the frontispieces and illustrations of fencing figures were executed rather quickly and show weaknesses in detail, lack of linear differentiation and coarse hatching. One might even doubt that Carlo Urbino was the engraver, as his drawings generally display finer and more fluid lines. Since Salviati was an even more skilled engraver, his participation must have been limited; he may have advised on the pictorial invention or offered compositional ideas for the theatrical scenes in the two frontispieces.

5

Throughout the long history of philosophical iconography, philosophers have tended to be depicted as solitary thinkers, often mourning the course of the world; then again, they sometimes engage in learned contemplative dialogue for the sake of mutual instruction. Raphael's *School of Athens* and *Disputation over the Holy Sacrament*, *The Philosophers* by the Master of the Judgment of Solomon (fl. 1620–1620) or Rubens' *The Four Philosophers* are famous for depicting the calm and level-headed exchange of arguments and ideas. However, when philosophers meet representatives of other professions, they are almost always taught a lesson. One exception is the Triumph of St Catherine (painted by Pinturicchio, Paris Pordonone, Tintoretto et al.),[39] who argues with the pagan philosophers, with disastrous consequences for them. Nevertheless, this dispute is always depicted as a considered disputation [Fig. 27.17].

Even in depictions of philosophers in discussion with soldiers, the conversation is generally peaceful, as can be seen in the following drawing [Fig. 27.18], previously attributed to Raphael.

39 See: Pinturicchio, *St Catherine's Disputation*, fresco, between 1492 and 1494, Vatican Palace; Giovanni Antonio de Sacchis, known as il Pordenone, St. Catherine's Chapel, lunette; Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti (1518–1594), *St Catherine debating with the fifty philosophers of Alexandria*", *c.*1590/92. Oil on canvas, 160 × 228 cm. Venice, Palazzo Patriarcale Beheading of St. Catherine", 1530–1532. Fresco, Piacenza, Sanctuary of the Madonna della Campagna.

FIGURE 27.17 Livio Agresti (1508–1579) (designer), *St. Catherine Arguing with the Philosophers*, 1562/63. Pen and brown ink, with brush and brown wash, reinforced with white gouache, over black chalk, on cream-coloured paper, 505 × 395 mm. The Art Institute of Chicago

The abhorrence of physical confrontation is as characteristic of the philosopher as his beard. It seems that it was only at the end of the Age of Enlightenment that artists were allowed the liberty of depicting philosophers less peacefully, and then only in the realm of humour [Fig. 27.18]. But the historiography of humour is an area that is still far too unexplored, and it could lead to surprising insights, especially for the history of philosophy.[40]

40 On the history of humour in the early modern period, see Enenkel K.A.E. – Laureys M. – Renner B. (eds.), *Brill's Companion to Humour in Early Modern Europe (1400–1700)* (Leiden: 2024).

FIGURE 27.18 Anonymus, formerly attributed to a follower of Raphael (1483–1520), *Philosophers Disputing with Soldiers*, 16th century. Pencil and grey-brown ink on brown paper, 188 × 280 mm. From *Museo Nacional del Prado, Catálogo de dibujos. Dibujos italianos del siglo XVI* (*por Nicholas Turner, con la colaboración de José Manuel Matilla*), V, exh.cat., Museo Nacional del Prado (Madrid: 2004) 446

FIGURE 27.19 Johann Asmus Carstens (designer), *The Philosophers' Brawl*, 1795. Black chalk, pen and grey ink and watercolour. Klassik Stiftung Weimar

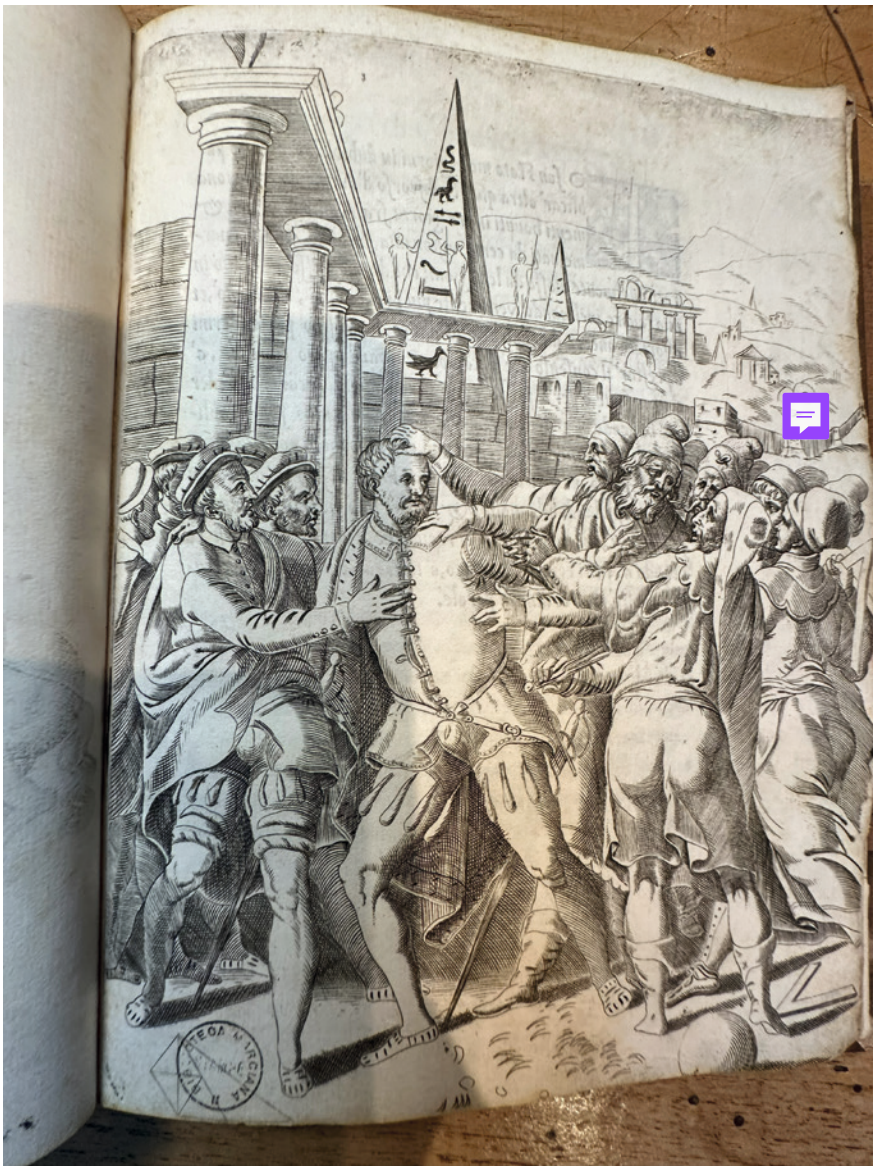


FIGURE 27.20 Carlo Urbino (engraver), *Agrippa's Vision* (engraving), second frontispiece in Camillo Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme, con un dialogo di filosofia di Camillo Agrippa Milanese* (Rome, Antonio Blado: 1553)

It is therefore all the more astonishing to see the frontispiece to Agrippa's dialogue on philosophy [Fig. 27.20].

The fact that philosophers not only argue fiercely with noblemen but that a whole horde of them pounce on a single opponent to beat him up is an extremely unusual subject in the age of Renaissance humanism and undoubtedly, perhaps comically goes beyond the permissible scope of rhetorical debate.

It also seems to be an extremely rare case of a long treatise on the art of fencing being followed by an erudite duel. Is the implication that what was previously taught via practical example must finally be justified theoretically in a philosophical dialogue? Or is it that one should first practise striking with the weapons on show before exchanging arguments? But why? So that if you are defeated in a dialogue, you can still reach for your sword? Or is it the other way round: if you lose in a fencing match, can you still win in the rhetorical arena? As a matter of fact, the frontispiece makes clear how these questions may be answered and the relation between treatise and duel should be understood.

6

At the beginning of the dialogue, Annibale Caro warns Agrippa not to publish his fencing treatise, as his illustrations could be misunderstood. Agrippa replies that he had just had a prophetic dream ('visione') the night before, and it is precisely this dream that the frontispiece visualises vividly:

> I had a vision of being attacked by certain philosophers. They were completely against my making with the stick those figures that you mentioned or talking about certain other things that I have discussed with you, Alessandro Corvino, and Francesco Siciliano many times. Rather, they thought me presumptuous for wanting to discuss such matters without having studied them. After that, it seemed to me that I defended myself with the help of many gentlemen who were friends of mine. I wasn't going to say anything else about it, but if some students of Euclid or of Aristotle want to drag my name through the mud, I will defend myself as best I can, both on my own and with the help of my patrons.[41]

> quanto ch'ista notte passata parvemi di esser' stalto assalito da certi Filosofi, li quali in ogni modo non volevano c'havessi potuto far' quelle

41 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 104.

> figure con quel legno che voi sapete, ne dire certe altre cose, le quali piu volte ho conferite con Alessandro Corvino, et Francesco Siciliano, et con voi ancora, reputandomi Presuntuoso in voler ragionare di materie simili, non havendo io studiato. Di poi mi pareva con l'aiuto di molti genti' homini amici mei, et col mio che mi diffendevo: il che non penso voglia predire altro, se non che forse alcuni allevi di Euclide, o di Aristotile, vorranno imputarmi, di quel ch'io dico, & io col mio aiuto, & altri miei Patroni mi diffenderò.[42]

As the first frontispiece had already shown, Agrippa now realizes that he is in the position of someone who must justify himself from the outset, as he is entering a profession for which he is not qualified: philosophy. He calls his book a treatise on the *Scientia d'arme*; if he had simply ~~called~~ it the *Art of Fencing*, he would have been spared many a nightmare. But as it is, he opens the book with a duel with a philosopher in front of a philosophical audience, whom he challenges with a new philosophical method. The second frontispiece shows the consequences of Agrippa's bold prank. It is hardly surprising that the philosophers are not amused by his instructions, but the way they are portrayed is revealing. Evelyn Lincoln very aptly describes the bizarre appearance of the philosophers who obviously inhabit a type of Roman forum:

> The ragtag philosophers press in, brandishing instruments they do not know how to use, ridiculous with their wild beards, Phrygian caps, floppy doctoral hoods, and distinctly unathletic movements, their rear ends prominently displayed beneath their clingy togas in obvious insulting counterpoint to the powerful codpieces of Agrippa and the cadre of sword-bearing gentlemen who try to protect him from attack.[43]

The crucial point here seems to be not only that the well-dressed courtiers come to the aid of Agrippa, who is in a fencing position, but that the philosophers beat him with the same compasses he had used to design his fencing figures. It is not geometry that annoys the 'pupils of Euclid', but Agrippa's new principles of construction, his methodological calculation and system of organisation that infuriate them.

If we look at the treatise together with the dialogue, we can see the signs of a new era in which scholars no longer draw eclectically from a reservoir of philosophical positions. Rather, a new scientific philosophy with a claim to

42 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553) fols. LXIIIr–v.

43 Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 103–104.

absoluteness emerges which no longer takes traditional philosophy seriously, but caricatures it.

Nevertheless, it is repeatedly claimed that the dialogue deals with traditional questions of natural philosophy and cosmology.[44] Interpreters such as Mondschein, De Lapp and even Lincoln have read all kinds of contradictory positions into Agrippa's dialogue rather than actually finding them there: Hermetism, empiricism, Christian Platonism, neo-Aristotelianism, cosmological natural philosophy and geometrical method.

Ultimately, however, the *Dialogo* is about nothing more than Agrippa's desire to show his readers that he can explain his method well, even though he is operating in another field, one in which he is not a specialist, with which they are far more familiar than fencing. As a consequence, he can also be trusted as a teacher in the science of fencing. Nowhere in the dialogue are analogies drawn between microcosm and macrocosm.[45] Instead, Agrippa insists that the centre of the universe and that of the earth are different.[46] The friendly instruction, which extends over three days, is an erudite conversation between courtiers that is, in contrast to the philosophical debates, free of any scientific polemics.[47] Agrippa explains to his friend how to construct circles and polyhedra with the help of a y-shaped stick, as if with a compass, which can then be used as geometric models of spheres for astronomy. He explicitly admits that he is not talking about the causes of the phenomena he describes.[48] It is therefore a matter of the construction principle of the polyhedra and not of establishing a Neoplatonic cosmology based on analogies amongst constructed bodies. Agrippa also dreams that he is attacked by followers of Euclid and Aristotle, and it would be puzzling why they should do this if he held geometry in high regard.

In short, the appendix can hardly be taken seriously as a philosophical dialogue, but the remarks on method demonstrated in the treatise can. And when Agrippa defends himself against the philosophers who accuse him of arrogance because he speaks about philosophical subjects as a non-academic, he is not arguing in favour of the primacy of empiricism. In contrast to Bernard

44 Lincoln, *Brilliant Discourse* 104; Mondschein, "The Number of Motion".

45 Agrippa's way of thinking, both astronomy and the movements of the human body are the union of number in space (that is, geometry) and number in time. Number, in other words, unites the macrocosm and the microcosm; see Mondschein K., "The Number of Motion" (without pagination).

46 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 116.

47 Cf. Baumann U. – Becker A. – Laureys M., *Polemik im Dialog des Renaissance-Humanismus: Formen, Entwicklungen* (Bonn: 2015).

48 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 118.

de Palissy, for example, who around the same time mocked the theories of philosophers in his *Discours admirables*[49] because they only read books and had no idea of nature, which he, the potter, dealt with practically on a daily basis, Agrippa declared that he spoke 'con ragione'.[50] He ultimately also demanded that one should take up a book, namely, his book, and study its programme of images and notations carefully, to arrive at a theory that engages rather than bores the mind:

> and I am telling you this so as to alienate any bad impression that anyone might have who should see these figures, and to show the world that even if I am not university educated, that naturally even I can speak logically about some things. And if you want to see the proof of this, take my book in hand, and find the figures that I made understandable using the letters of the alphabet, if, however, you are not bored by all this theory.[51]

> Si che in ogni modo voglio dicchiararle, per le var' via ogni mala impressione che potesse havere ogn'uno, chi vedesse quelle figure, & per mostrare al mondo se ben non ho studiato, che naturalmente posso parlar ancor' io di qualche cosa con ragione. & se volete vederne voi la prova, pigliate quel mio libro in mano, & ritrovate le figure, ch'adesso vi darò à conoscere per termini di littere, come si fanno: se però non vi annoia questa Theorica.[52]

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49 Palissy Bernard, *Discours admirables; de la nature des eaux & fontaines tant naturelles qu'artificielles, des métaux, des sels & salines,* [...] *le tout dressé par dialogues lesquels sont introduits la théorie & la pratique*, (Paris, Martin le Jeune: 1580).

50 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fols.lxiii r–v.

51 Agrippa, *Fencing: A Renaissance Treatise* 104, trans. revised.

52 Agrippa, *Trattato di scientia d'arme* (1553), fols. LXIIIr–v.

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