

TOWARDS A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

Author

Adam F. Nelson, J.D.¹

This article is an attempt to open a dialogue within our community about how best to resolve these issues, by offering a comprehensive vision of what I hope will be a step towards a universally agreeable approach to the activity, or at least a cease-fire.

I. INTRODUCTION

Even following the admirable work of the LD Rules and Recommendations Committee, Lincoln-Douglas Debate is broken. There is a great deal of animosity between advocates of different approaches to the activity. There is a great deal of confusion amongst students and coaches about how best to adapt to those various styles. And there is a great deal of frustration resulting from the refusal of some individuals to engage in discussion about, or adapt to, those different styles. This article is an attempt to open a dialogue within our community about how best to resolve these issues, by offering a comprehensive vision of what I hope will be a step towards a universally agreeable approach to the activity, or at least a cease-fire.

II. THE ROLE OF LD

In my experience, educational enterprises are best served by specialization. And I have always been impressed by the many opportunities for specialization forensics provides. Original oratory seems a perfect vehicle for teaching students public speaking skills. Humorous, Dramatic, and Duo interpretation seem to be perfect vehicles for teaching students about the interpretation of literature. Extemporaneous speaking seems to be a perfect vehicle for teaching students analytical thinking. And the debate events seem to be perfect vehicles for teaching students logical and strategic thinking. Given this understanding, the difference between the debate events is not the skills they teach, but the medium through which they teach those skills, giving students with different academic interests the same opportunity to master those skills. And, at most tournaments, our students are able to enter several of these events, allowing them the ability to maximize their mastery of a wide range of these skills.

Many may believe the primary educational value of the debate events to be the substantive knowledge about each resolution that students gain as a result of participation in the activity. But I believe that focus to be erroneous. Our expertise as educators has never been mastery of the subject matter implicated by the resolutions our students debate. Even though I am a lawyer, I am far from a law professor, and could not possibly hope to teach legal concepts to my students to the same extent they could expect from such a professional. And I am certainly neither a philosopher nor a professor of that discipline, and would never claim to have any specialized knowledge of philosophy when compared to that of my most advanced students, especially those who study even obscure works of philosophy in their free time.

But I, like my colleagues, do know debate, its theory, strategy, and practice, better than even my most successful students. And that is the unique education with which I can provide them. Accordingly, the activity should be structured in a way that maximizes its ability to teach those skills.

III. THE ROLE OF THE RESOLUTION

And that approach has implications for our understanding of the role of the resolution. Unfortunately, it seems many coaches, students, and judges approach the resolution as though it were a truth-statement, giving the affirmative the burden of proving that claim and the negative access to any strategy that denies the truth of the affirmative's arguments.

But the NFL's new Lincoln Douglas Debate Event Description explicitly repudiates such a model by placing parallel burdens amongst one of the hallmarks of the

¹ Director of Lincoln-Douglas Debate and Mock Trial at The Harker School, San Jose, CA. I would like to thank Michael Mangus, whose writings provided the basis for many of these ideas, Ryan Lawrence, who convinced me to adopt my current view of the value/criterion model and whose late-night conversations at VBI first got me thinking about alternative approaches to LD, and to Cameron Baghai and Daniel Khalessi, whose final round at this season's CPS tournament provided the impetus for the writing of this article.

activity:

No question of values can be determined entirely true or false. This is why the resolution is desirable. Therefore neither debater should be held to a standard of absolute proof. No debater can realistically be expected to prove complete validity or invalidity of the resolution. The better debater is the one who, on the whole, proves his/her side of the resolution more valid as a general principle.²

And the truth-statement model of the resolution imposes an absolute burden of proof on the affirmative: if the resolution is a truth-claim, and the affirmative has the burden of proving that claim, in so far as intuitively we tend to disbelieve truth-claims until we are persuaded otherwise, the affirmative has the burden to prove that statement absolutely true. Indeed, one of the most common theory arguments in LD is conditionality, which argues it is inappropriate for the affirmative to claim only proving the truth of part of the resolution is sufficient to earn the ballot.

Such a model of the resolution also gives the negative access to a range of strategies that many students, coaches, and judges find ridiculous or even irrelevant to evaluation of the resolution. If the negative need only prevent the affirmative from proving the truth of the resolution, it is logically sufficient to negate to deny our ability to make truth-statements or to prove normative morality does not exist or to deny the reliability of human senses or reason. Yet, even though most coaches appear to endorse the truth-statement model of the resolution, they complain about the use of such negative strategies, even though they are a necessary consequence of that model. And, moreover, such strategies seem fundamentally unfair, as they provide the negative with functionally infinite ground, as there are a nearly infinite variety of such skeptical objections to normative claims, while continuing to bind the affirmative to a much smaller range of options: advocacy of the resolution as a whole.

Instead, it seems much more reasonable to treat the resolution as a way to equitably divide ground: the affirmative advocating the desirability of a world in which people adhere to the value judgment implied by the resolution and the negative advocating

the desirability of a world in which people adhere to a value judgment mutually exclusive to that implied by the resolution. By making the issue one of desirability of competing world-views rather than of truth, the affirmative gains access to increased flexibility regarding how he or she chooses to defend that world, while the negative retains equal flexibility while being denied access to those skeptical arguments indicted above. Our ability to make normative claims is irrelevant to a discussion of the desirability of making two such claims. Unless there is some significant harm in making such statements, some offensive reason to reject making them that can be avoided by an advocacy mutually exclusive with that of the affirmative such objections are not a reason the negative world is more desirable, and therefore not a reason to negate. Note this is precisely how things have been done in policy debate for some time: a team that runs a kritik is expected to offer some impact of the mindset they are indicting and some alternative that would solve for that impact. A team that simply argued some universal, unavoidable, problem was bad and therefore a reason to negate would not be very successful. It is about time LD started treating such arguments the same way.

Such a model of the resolution has additional benefits as well. First, it forces both debaters to offer offensive reasons to prefer their worldview, thereby further enforcing a parallel burden structure. This means debaters can no longer get away with arguing the resolution is by definition true or false. The “truth” of the particular vocabulary of the resolution is irrelevant to its desirability. Second, it is intuitive. When people evaluate the truth of ethical claims, they consider their implications in the real world. They ask themselves whether a world in which people live by that ethical rule is better than one in which they don’t. Such debates don’t happen solely in the abstract. We want to know how the various options affect us and the world we live in.

This does not, however, mean this “worldview comparison” model would necessarily remove the ability of debaters to argue values or philosophy in the abstract. We have long recognized that purely deontological arguments have offensive impacts that can be compared against other such implications. This model would

simply require debaters to more directly compare, for example, the importance of avoiding treating people as means to an end or protecting rights with the importance of saving lives or maximizing economic efficiency, for reasons I will explore shortly.

Consequently, I believe worldview comparison better adheres to the NFL’s vision of the activity while providing better, more real-world, education about how to effectively and persuasively discuss the issues implicated by LD resolutions.

IV. THE ROLE OF THE BALLOT

But this raises important questions about the appropriate role of the ballot. Yet the implications of the worldview comparison model are, for the most part, not the least bit revolutionary. Instead of focusing on whether the affirmative proved the resolution true, or even on whether the resolution was proven more likely true or false, the decision ought to be made on the basis of which world is more desirable: that of the affirmative or that of the negative.

The affirmative still has the ability to interpret the resolution as he or she sees fit. And the negative, instead of being able to either disprove the affirmative or prove the converse of the resolution, has the option of either defending the desirability of a world in which we follow an ethical rule mutually exclusive of that of the affirmative or in which the affirmative’s ethical rule simply is not followed. Either way, both debaters have to be making offensive arguments defending those claims.

As discussed briefly above, this also means neither debater has access to arguments that purport to either affirm or negate by definition, or that reject our ability to make or evaluate statements like that of the resolution. The affirmative world cannot be desirable simply because it is, or currently exists. And the negative world cannot be desirable if it is impossible to evaluate its desirability.

The most important contribution of the worldview comparison model, in my estimation, is that it makes it possible to reject the value/criterion model that many new students, coaches, and judges find counter-intuitive, and provides a coherent alternative to that approach.

² <http://www.nflonline.org/uploads/AboutNFL/distman102007.pdf>, last accessed 12/26/2007.

When first exposed to Lincoln-Douglas Debate, many believe that the value/criterion model to be an awkward method of evaluating ethical claims. They object, quite intuitively, that even the simplest questions should be decided on the basis of more than one standard. With my students, for example, I use a simple resolution, like Resolved: Macs are better than PCs, to introduce the many concepts necessary to be successful in debate. And I've found this approach to be quite successful in explaining the fundamentals of argument, such as the claim/warrant/impact structure of argumentation, and even some components of case construction. But, almost universally, students are stumped when asked to provide a value and criterion for evaluating the resolution. Certainly, the value provided by each type of computer is crucial in evaluating its desirability. But how does one measure how much of a value a computer is? Cost is certainly a factor. But cost alone is insufficient to determine value; the benefits offered by each type are equally important. Yet, to adopt a generic "cost/benefit analysis" criterion is too vague to be of any use in helping us understand the relevant factors in making out decision. Why waste time articulating a criterion when all it will ultimately be is some vague explanation that the winner should be the debater who proves they provide the most benefits for the least costs? So, when presented with these options, students remain either confused about what a criterion is supposed to be or unconvinced that such a structure is useful in their debating.

Similarly, it is impossible to construct a useful criterion for evaluating the resolutions we actually debate. Take the current resolution as an example: Resolved: It is just for the United States to use military force to prevent the acquisition of nuclear weapons by nations that pose a military threat. Presumably, one would use justice as their value. Yet, what standard could possibly be a useful mechanism for determining justice? Giving each their due? But what are people due, and how is that determined? Protection of rights? But certainly there are things people are due beyond their rights. Even if rights are the most important component of what people are due, that doesn't mean everything else is irrelevant to the evaluation

of the resolution. Our options appear to be either being unrealistically narrow-minded in our evaluation or wasting time stating the obvious, that the affirmative world is more desirable if its benefits outweigh its costs.

Instead, it seems we should accept that obvious conclusion: any reason why the affirmative or negative world is either desirable or undesirable is relevant to evaluating the resolution. It makes no sense to exclude arguments from our discussion merely because they do not link to some arbitrary standard established external to consideration of the resolution itself.

Now, that does not mean all costs and/or benefits ought to be treated equally. Indeed, there are many persuasive arguments that, as far as justice is concerned, economic efficiency is irrelevant, or at least of very little significance, to any question of justice when rights are being violated. Yet, there are also many who would advocate the need for economic stability and vitality before rights are the least bit important. And this is an issue students should be prepared to debate. But that should not end the conversation. Even if protection of rights is more important, that does not mean economic efficiency is utterly irrelevant. Yet, that is precisely the result in the status quo: if one standard is proven to be prerequisite, impacts to the other will be considered irrelevant. (This is another reason to reject the value/criterion model: we've all seen the frustrating debates where students spend much of their time arguing which standard is prerequisite to the other, in hopes of precluding their opponent's offense entirely, when, intuitively speaking, impacts to both standards are extremely important to evaluation of the resolution.)

Contextualizing this debate, by forcing debaters to directly compare the importance of their contentions, rather than their criteria, will provide a more intuitive, and more realistic, experience for our students. The current approach to the criterion debate allows debaters to avoid some of the most difficult, and important, questions posed by the resolution. When a deontological standard is employed, teleological implications of the resolution become irrelevant. When a teleological standard is

employed, deontological implications of the resolution become irrelevant. Yet, we consider both sides of that coin when we debate moral questions in our everyday lives. The debate is not about which is important, but about which is more important, and how much. We don't, to take a common example from this season's September/October resolution, say the number of innocents executed is irrelevant to the justness of capital punishment, seeing as it is a proportional punishment. We argue the execution of a small number of innocents, though regrettable, is not a reason to reject the death penalty entirely, given the need for a proportional punishment for murder. Shouldn't our students do the same? While such debate is, of course, possible under the current model, the worldview comparison model makes such clash necessary.

It seems the most likely objection to this reasoning is that there simply is not enough time to contextualize comparison of impacts in an LD round. But I think that argument is problematic for two reasons. First, I don't think contextualization of the impact debate will take significantly longer than the value/criterion debate does currently. In the examples I've given above, the contextualized comparison takes only a little more time than does the attempt to preclude one's opponent's impacts so common in the status quo. And, under the worldview comparison model, there is no need to spend time establishing and explaining a value and criterion, thereby easily making up any additional time needed to debate impacts under that model. Second, I think it's unwise to allow such a relatively minor practical concern to prevent such a significant improvement in the educational value of the activity, especially given our primary role as educators. (See how easy, and much more realistic, contextualized impact comparison is?)

V. THE ROLE OF PRESUMPTION

That leaves the thorny issue of presumption, the decision to vote consistently for either the affirmative or negative in the event of a tie or the failure of either debater to successfully generate offense.³ Presumption has always been somewhat controversial in LD, given the NFL's explicit repudiation of any prescribed

³While this issue may be too technical for some, or even most, judges and coaches, there are many in our community who struggle with this issue. And, just as importantly, I think it is an issue we are all faced with, whether we recognize it or not, and is therefore a matter we should all consider. Accordingly, I have attempted to offer an alternative to current thinking on this issue. Those uninterested in this discussion, for whatever reason, are welcome to skip to the next section, which discusses an issue I hope will be more universal.

burdens in the activity.⁴ And giving one side the burden of proof, the functional result of presumption, is clearly such a burden. But that often leaves judges in an impossible position. They are forced to make a decision in each and every round, based solely on the debaters' performance in that round. Yet, they are supposed to refrain from imposing any sort of prescribed burden upon the debaters. So, what is a judge to do in the event of a tie? Certainly some judges will vote for the debater with the better speaking skills, but not all judges are comfortable making their decision on that basis. And, more importantly, that is not always an option: a judge may at some point be faced with a round that is tied in every sense of the word, from the substance of the argumentation to the quality of delivery.

Perhaps the best option available to judges is to grant presumption to the debater who most closely advocates the status quo.

In policy debate, the negative has presumption because they defend the status quo, and there are opportunity costs associated with changing the way things are that would require some justification to endure. Thus, when the affirmative fails to effectively prove the desirability of their plan, there is no reason to spend those resources, and the judge negates. Similarly, in LD, there are risks associated with adopting a new value system. We know the problems attendant with the status quo, and, despite these problems, the world continues to function. We cannot have that same certainty regarding the consequences of some new ethical system, and the implications of particular changes could be significantly worse than the status quo.

And, at the same time, it is rarely entirely clear which side most closely represents the status quo. Even with resolutions where it may seem obvious that one side is forced to defend the way things are, that debater still has the option to advocate some other system. Take, for example, this season's November/December topic: Resolved: In the United States, plea-bargaining in exchange for testimony is unjust. At first glance, it would seem clear that the negative is forced to defend the desirability of the status quo: obviously, there is currently plea-bargaining in exchange for testimony in the US right now. Yet, remember the negative is not necessarily bound to the converse of the affirmative advocacy. The

negative could just as easily advocate the desirability of some ethical rule that is otherwise mutually exclusive with that advocated by the affirmative. So, in a round in which the affirmative argues plea-bargaining in exchange for testimony should merely be prohibited, the negative could very well advocate more sweeping reform that would solve the problems identified by the affirmative while preserving the ability of prosecutors to plea-bargain in exchange for testimony. While such a negative advocacy would obviously depend on that debater proving the use of the word "is" in the resolution does not limit the debate solely to the desirability of the way things are now, I think it is entirely feasible the negative could win that argument. And



that would leave the affirmative defending the world that most closely resembles the status quo: the number of plea-bargains in exchange for testimony are relatively small, so their elimination would not be nearly as drastic as some radical restructuring of the criminal justice system.

Therefore, status quo presumption would not give one side an inherent advantage, or impose on either debater some prescribed burden. It would simply require debaters who fear they may need to rely on presumption to engage another issue in round. And there would be strategic advantages and risks associated with arguing either you or your opponent better represents the way things are now. An affirmative, for example, might advocate changing the status quo because of his or her personal belief in, and therefore

ability to persuasively make and defend, those arguments. Yet, at the same time, that incurs the risk of needing to win some offensive reason to prefer the desirability of their advocacy in order to win. Similarly, an affirmative might choose to defend the status quo, thereby gaining the advantage of being able to win in the event of a tie, but risking a creative negative case that offers a well researched, and extremely persuasive, alternative to the way things are. And, either way, both students are forced to engage that issue, and debate just who it is that has access to defense of the status quo. Consequently, by not being necessarily tied to either side of each resolution, status quo presumption both remains true to the NFL rules and guidelines and gives judges a way to make their decision based solely on the arguments made by the debaters during the course of the round even when neither debater is able to win offensive arguments defending the desirability of their ethical statement.

Yet, there is always a possibility the issue of who is most closely associated with the status quo will remain unresolved at the end of the round. But that frequently occurs with critical issues, even given the way things are now. And, in that case, the judge would simply be forced to intervene, just as they must in such circumstances in the status quo. Under the worldview comparison model, however, the judge would merely intervene in favor of the debater he or she felt most closely defended the status quo, given the arguments that were made during the course of the round. And I expect that form of intervention to be more, or at the very least just as, predictable as that occurring in the status quo, thus alleviating concerns that this model would make judges' decisions less based on the arguments made by debaters in the round.

I also think this more closely approximates real-world ethical reasoning. Often, during debates about value judgments in a variety of contexts, we will hear participants referring to the traditional acceptance of their position as a reason to reject change. But such arguments are rarely persuasive in the face of justifications for such reform. And that is precisely how LD rounds would work out under this model.

VI. THE ROLE OF THEORY DEBATE

One effect of the current state of flux in the activity that, while not unique to my

proposals, may be exacerbated by adoption thereof, at least in the short term, is the relative proliferation of theory debate, attempts to determine the appropriate rules for LD during rounds themselves. Many students, coaches, and judges are uncomfortable with this development, either because of its misuse or the common perception that such claims are merely an excuse for “whining” about particularly good arguments made by one’s opponents.

But I firmly believe the evolution of theory debate in LD is desirable, for a number of reasons. First, it forces debaters to be even more familiar with what it takes to be logical and strategic thinkers, by making them engage in another kind of reasoning that adds another layer of strategic complexity to the activity. Second, it provides debaters with a language to persuasively force the round to return to a discussion of the substance of the resolution. Frequently, the most unfair or uneducational arguments, and therefore those that are most theoretically objectionable, also serve to prevent discussion of the central conflict posed by the resolution. And the threat of having to defend against a particularly persuasive theory argument will create an incentive to avoid making such arguments in the first place, this increasing substantive discussion of topics in the long run. Moreover, it is an intuitive form of argumentation that can level the playing field. In a world in which theory debate is discouraged, the only way to deal with complex, yet theoretically objectionable, arguments is to first lose to them and then invest a great deal of time researching the best answers to the argument. And, even then, the nature of such arguments is that one will likely continue to lose against

them regardless, unless one employs a strategy that seeks to preclude the argument without having to engage it substantively. Either way, the result is less desirable than substantive engagement of the fair and educational approaches to the resolution. Yet, anyone can make theory arguments, even those who don’t have large teams or experienced coaches who assist them in research. And, once there is the consistent threat of having to deal with an especially persuasive theory argument when one runs such strategies, the incentive will be to avoid making those arguments in the first place. Finally, it consists purely of analytical reasoning. Accordingly, even when rounds arise in which debate theory is appropriately made an issue, it allows judges to evaluate who is the better debater, which is ultimately what the round seeks to determine.

Moreover, theory debate, like all the practices I have advocated here, has clear parallels in the real world, especially the legal profession with which I am most familiar. During trials there are two obvious opportunities for attorneys to debate the rules of the proceeding. First, throughout the process, litigants will file procedural motions and make objections. While these are sometimes rote appeals to established rules, there are often issues of interpretation that need to be debated by the participants. And a skilled attorney, by successfully arguing such motions, can significantly influence the outcome of a trial. Second, when a jury is involved, the judge needs to instruct those individuals on how to make their decision. But those instructions are far from set in stone. Indeed, common practice is for the judge to ask both parties’ counsel to submit their proposals, which

are often discussed in the judge’s chambers or a more formal setting before the judge decides on the final instructions to be the read to the jury. And, once again, success at this stage of the proceeding can dramatically increase one’s chances of success in the trial as a whole. So, not only is debate about the rules of a proceeding during the course of that same event far from unique to academic debate, it is a useful skill that serves our students well in their careers.

Concordantly, I am a strong advocate of theory debate, and would like to see such arguments made more frequently and be more widely accepted by our community. For the reasons I have articulated above, I truly believe it to be a useful vehicle for addressing many of the challenges the activity currently faces.

VII. CONCLUSION

This article is far from a comprehensive proposal, and is not even the most complete defense of these ideas possible. (I wouldn’t want to bore you with all the details. It is instead intended merely to start a more open and frank discussion about the activity, and the optimal way to teach and play the game. I welcome your comments, questions, and challenges, and hope they will appear in these pages. But, in the event you would like to discuss these issues more privately, please feel free to contact me at adamn@harker.org. (Adam Nelson is currently a member of the Communication Studies faculty and the Director of Lincoln-Douglas Debate at The Harker School in San Jose, California. His students have had significant local and national success in LD, closing out the semi-finals of the 2006 Arizona 4A State Championship and reaching the elimination rounds of the Tournament of Champions.)



FT Math or French Teacher and Debate Coach

Durham Academy, a private, independent K-12 school in Durham, North Carolina, is seeking a full-time Upper School math or French teacher to serve as head speech and debate coach. Durham Academy offers small class sizes; a diverse, motivated, and successful student body; and competitive compensation. Forensics is currently an extracurricular activity. The speech and debate team has grown to 20 to 25 members over the past three years and has produced multiple national qualifiers in public forum and extemporaneous speaking. The team is financially and administratively supported by the school, and experienced assistant coaches are available to assist the head coach. Interested candidates should send cover letters and resumes to xandy.jones@da.org. EOE.