

◆ *Lincoln Douglas Debate*

A Theory of Theory in Lincoln Douglas Debate

Understanding the Basic Components of Theory Debate

By
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I. Evolutionary Trends in LD Debate

Over the past few years, the nature of Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate has rapidly evolved. At tournaments, more judges are giving oral criticisms, postmodern argumentation is being utilized more frequently, new jargon is appearing in common LD vocabulary, debaters are speaking more rapidly, more topics introduce questions of policy, pre-standard issues are proliferating, more debaters are critiquing the topic and some are experimenting with performativity. Many judges, teachers and coaches notice that several concepts and practices from cross-examination (CX) debate have appeared in LD debate rounds. Whether these changes are for the better or for the worse does not change the fact that this change is occurring. While some organizations have sought to implement rules to limit out certain practices and others openly embrace these new changes, many debaters are stuck in the middle having to adapt to the rules of different organizations and the preferences of various judges. Debaters that are accustomed to one set of rules and judging tend to have less success when attending other tournaments with different rules and a radically different type of judging.

For better or for worse, the nature of Lincoln Douglas Debate is changing. The choice we have now is how we adapt to these changes.

This can generally be attributed to the lack of adaptation to these new circumstances. Debaters accustomed to more

rules and traditional forms of debate may be overwhelmed by students who employ more modern practices. On the other hand, debaters accustomed to fewer rules and are more contemporary in their style of debate may become frustrated when attending a tournament with rules that limit their practices or encounter judges that prefer traditional LD debate. This article explores the benefits of theory argumentation and to propose a schema for advancing this argumentation in Lincoln-Douglas debates.

II. The Advantages of Theory in LD

Theory argumentation in LD debate has developed recently as the activity has evolved. Objections to the faster rates of speech, to pre-standard overviews and underviews, conditional affirmatives, and to performativity occur almost as frequently as the practices themselves. Debating theory provides several advantages to debaters in addition to the adaptability previously mentioned. Theory debates help students shape their opinions of how debate should function, which furthers efforts to maintain those valued qualities of the activity. Moreover, making arguments that operate on a theoretical level can be very strategic if utilized appropriately by putting pressure on the other debater to respond to it sufficiently. Questions of theory challenge debaters to critically evaluate the validity of their argumentation and practices. While it may seem circular, theory debates are also easy to defend on a theoretical level. Any argument the other debater could make as why “theory arguments” themselves were bad would involve making a theoretical objection to the theory debate simply

because it was theoretical argument. This would mean that arguing that theory debates should not be evaluated would be self-contradictory and further suggest that theory is essential to maintaining the important features of LD debate.

III. The Potential Drawbacks

On the other hand, there are two potential drawbacks to initiating a theory debate. First, making theory arguments (and making them correctly) can take a significant amount of time. If constructed correctly, however, theory can be a very powerful and strategic tool to win a debate given this time trade-off. Second, many judges might reject the idea of theory debates because they are not traditional or because theory is closely associated with CX. This does not mean that a skillful debater could not persuade traditional judges to vote on a theory argument; these debates occur in many rounds without the judges (and sometimes even the debaters) thinking of the argument as “theory.”

IV. The Components of Theory

This may lead one to wonder what ‘theory’ is. These debates usually involve competing interpretations of how LD debate should function and arise out of a disapproval of a practice of or a type of argument made by other debaters. If the affirmative speaker speeds through her affirmative constructive, and the negative speaker feels that this is an unfair practice, she will probably make an argument about it in the debate. In this instance, the negative speaker would argue (implicitly or explicitly) for her interpretation of how LD debate should

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be, which would exclude speaking too quickly. The affirmative speaker would want to respond to this by providing a different interpretation of what should be allowed in LD debate that would include speaking at rapid rates. In addition to an interpretation, the initiator of the theory debate should point out what the other debater did that would not correspond or fit within the parameters of that interpretation. In the previous example, the negative would want to point out that the affirmative spoke at a rate which many people, including the negative, could not understand.

The next step would be to give specific reasons why the particular debater's interpretation, if accepted, would provide for a theoretical world in which the activity would be benefited. If the theory debate were to occur accordingly, the debaters would be providing the judge with two theoretical worlds which the debaters, respectively, attempt to defend. To continue with the speed example, the negative speaker would need to argue that in a world where speaking rapidly was permitted, the activity would become undesirable because speed impedes understanding which is essential to the communicative process of the debate. In effect, the judge would be presented with choice of a world where debaters would talk only at a conversational speed and a world where debaters *could* speak at any rate they pleased.

The next step in a complete theory argument would be to tie the reasons why the interpretation is good into one or more concepts that are generally accepted as valuable. To illustrate this with the speed example, the negative could argue that a breakdown in the communicative process would hurt the education of debate since, if we cannot understand each other, we could not learn from each other's argumentation; the valuable concept being education. So far, the essential components of a theory argument include (1) an interpretation of how debate should function; (2) a reason the practice of another debater is not included under this interpretation; (3) reasons why the interpretation is good for debate; and (4)

what common value or values the interpretation promotes, as demonstrated by the reasons why the interpretation is good for debate.

The fourth and fifth components of a theory argument operate similarly to a value and criterion in an affirmative or negative case. In the speed example, an educational debate (the fourth component) would be the value achieved by the criterion of providing for an understandable communication process. The "contention" of this argument would be that the negative spoke too quickly and, since this breaks down the communication process this practice could not provide for an educational debate. Only by speaking slowly can the communication process be maintained and an educational debate ensured. Conceptualization of theory in this manner is beneficial for two reasons. First, it helps to understand this relatively new argumentation as simply a reappropriation of the existing and well-understood value/criterion structure. Second, in a debate, this would allow the debater to set aside case argumentation and 'go for' theory as the sole voting issue in the debate by maintaining a value/criterion-type structure for the judge to vote for. The "value" and "criterion" in the theory debate could be thought of as a "metavalue" and a "metacriterion" (or "metastandard") because they operate independent of the actual standards presented in the cases and in some instances transcend the importance of the value and criterion. However, debaters may want to be careful of labeling these arguments as such in a debate, as to not confuse judges. While the metavalue and metastandard would not link back to the resolution, this construct could be argued as an issue that needs to be resolved prior to affirming or negating.

The sixth component of the theory argument is an actual impact, or how the judge should weigh the argument if the debater wins it. There are two main ways to impact a theory argument. One is contending that this practice or form of persuasion is so threatening to the debate community that the other debater should lose the round for engaging in the practice. While the more offensive of the two main

Good theory debates consist of (1) an interpretation, (2) a reason the opponent's arguments or practices do not meet this interpretation, (3) reason(s) for the judge to prefer this interpretation -- the "metastandard" - (4) the unifying value that these benefits achieve - the metavalue - (5) weighing of the metavalues and (6) an actual impact that tells the judge how to evaluate the theoretical objection.

ways to impact theory, this is generally used for theory arguments that criticize a practice. However, theoretical objections to a type of argument can also be impacted in this way. The other type of actual impact is to argue that the argument itself should be rejected, and the debate should continue as usual. While usually the weaker of the two main impacts, this can be further impacted as a reason the other side should lose. If the affirmative were to run a narrative in an attempt to persuade the judge to affirm, and the negative makes a theoretical objection to running narratives and impacts the theory as a reason to reject the argument, the negative could further argue that, since the affirmative case rests solely on a narrative, rejecting the argument would mean that the affirmative speaker should lose the round because the narrative was the only method to affirm. While these two impacts tend to be more common, other actual impacts can be argued. For instance, if the affirmative debater speaks rapidly and the negative theoretically objects, the negative could impact this objection as a reason to give the negative some leeway on dropped arguments by requesting that the judge give more credibility to new arguments made in the negative rebuttal.

VI. Weighing on the Theory Debate

As a frequent judge of the activity, I have noticed that theory argumentation in

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LD tends to be shallow, under-developed, and/or poorly impacted. In CX debate, theory arguments are often labeled as “independent voting issues” for reasons of fairness, education, clash, jurisdiction, and competitive equity, to name a few. This concept easily translates into a Lincoln-Douglas debate. Take the speed example once more. If the negative argues that speed hurts communication and thus cannot provide for an educational debate, the affirmative could offer defense that speed in some ways provides for a fair debate. This would mean that the debaters might have to debate over (or the judge may have to intervene to decide) which is more important, an educational debate or a fair debate. While we would generally not like to think that an educational debate would come at the expense of a fair debate, or vice versa, the affirmative speaker could argue that education was more important because if the debate is fair and debaters learn little to nothing, then this will make debate less enjoyable because we would not learn much; but if the debate was slightly unfair, this may not even be perceived by either debater and thus would not adversely impact the activity. Conversely, the negative could argue that fairness was a prerequisite to an educational debate. The point is that, as the final component of theory, debaters should attempt to outweigh or even achieve the other debater’s metastandard as a way to access their metavalue as well.

VII. When to Theorize

When to make a theoretical objection is also important to consider. Factors that should be taken into account when determining when to initiate theory debates include when the objectionable practice first occurs, the nature of the objectionable practice, and the other arguments in the particular debate. Refutations of an opponent’s arguments usually come after the fact. This may put the affirmative in a difficult position of deciding whether or not to run theory since the first affirmative rebuttal already has substantial time constraints and other strategic choices that must be made. If the affirmative is debating

When to run theory depends on (1) when the objectionable practice occurs, (2) the nature of this practice and (3) the preferred strategy of the debater depending on the other arguments in the round.

at a tournament or in an area where a particular practice is common, another option would be to make preemptory theory arguments in the affirmative constructive. If one debater was to hit another renowned speeding through her speeches, for instance, the affirmative could preempt this by making the theoretical objection in the affirmative constructive. The issue to

consider then would be whether the time spent in the affirmative constructive on theory on the chance that the negative would still spread through the negative constructive is worth spending less time developing the case. The choice of when to run theory for the negative is much less problematic since the speeches are longer. The constructive might be preferable to the rebuttal for the negative since this would give more time to develop the argument and to make it more persuasive.

VIII. Conclusion

Theory in LD, in addition to other evolutionary trends, will continue to develop over time. Debating theory provides many opportunities for new ways of approaching Lincoln-Douglas debate as well as adding another strategic dimension to the activity. By presenting two competing interpretations of how LD should proceed and by arguing why these interpretations would provide for fair and educational rounds, this argumentation will facilitate the discussion necessary to adopt and/or maintain the practices that provide for the best world of debate. Understanding the basic components of the theory debate will remain essential to ensuring that such argumentation can realize its full potential. (*Michael J. Ritter is president of The Forensics Files and is currently a senior speech communication major at Trinity University in San Antonio. He frequently judges both CX and LD high school debate in the San Antonio and Austin areas.*)

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