

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DEBATING NON-POLICY PROPOSITIONS

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C. Wright Mills spoke of what must eventually occur when advocates ultimately disagree about values: "In the end, if the end comes, we just have to beat those who disagree with us over the head; let us hope the end comes seldom. In the meantime, being as reasonable as we are able to be, we ought all to argue." (Mills, 77)

Debating non-policy propositions is a time worn topic. Two members of this panel addressed themselves to this subject in last year's Western Speech Communication Association convention. Indeed, we panelists are time-worn. Three of us were on a panel at this year's WSCA, and I have worked for more years than either of us would care to remember with the other panelist. However, since the prospects of our actually debating non-policy propositions seem to be increasingly yearly, the subject should be discussed.

This paper makes certain preliminary observations, treats three probable theoretical implications which would result from debating a non-policy proposition, and closes with several suggestions.

PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

The proposition selected for debate by our colleges and universities in 1977-78 is a non-policy proposition. The same statement could be made about any proposition, as all of you realize. Giving greater freedom in the investigation and/or prosecution of felony crime to our law enforcement agencies is

interpreted by our debaters and judges as a policy question. Clearly, the framers of this proposition intended that it be a policy question, for "our parameters tell us so." But were we to focus on the values entailed, and argue about them, rather than the implimentation of the policy, we would have a non-policy proposition.

To illustrate the above assertion, I would ask you to consider a few of the ultimate questions we are asked to resolve this year. Consider first: Which is more important, individual privacy or fair trial (in cases relating to rape)? Consider second: Which is most valued, familial or child rights (in cases relating to child abuse)? Consider third: Which is a more basic right, the Fifth Amendment or the Sixth Amendment (in cases relating to polygraphs and police brutality)? Clearly, each represents an ultimate appeal to a basic value as being superior to other values.

The resolution of the subordinate issues leading to the ultimate question posed by a debate resolution frequently rests upon the viewpoint of the participants to the dispute, as well as the viewpoint of the adjudicator. Since debaters and judges view the 1977-78 proposition as a question of policy, few debates will be held this year wherein the proposition could properly be called a non-policy proposition. But given a different focus?

A second preliminary observation is that, while almost any proposition may be perceived as being a non-policy proposition, the reverse is also true. Last year, David Zarefsky referred to a high school topic debated by Jimmy Carter: "Resolved: That Gone With the Wind is pure trash." (Zarefsky, 6) To measure the trashiness of the book would require, for certain policy makers, the establishment of a self-perpetuating board.

Once these two contrasting observations are made, we begin to see the primary theoretical implication which I would submit will occur when one

debates a non-policy proposition: the perception of the advocates and the adjudicator must shift from the policy to the problem.

Before moving into a discussion of the three primary shifts which I perceive, several additional comments are necessary. First, although there is merit in classification of the various non-policy propositions into types, I suspect this must remain the task of others. Zarefsky's aforementioned WSCA paper made notable effort in this direction. Second, the distinction made by Ziegmuller and Dause relating to propositions of judgment as contrasted to propositions of policy (Ziegmuller and Dause, 14-15) seem much more appropriate than the traditional set of fact/value/policy. Finally, although undeveloped herein, this writer suspects that much of the philosophical pairing concepts developed by Chaim Perelman in The New Rhetoric would apply in effective argument on non-policy propositions.

THREE THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

With apologies toward none, and in hopes that my message through humor may be clearer, I provide you with a quick visit to the movies. After all, Bernie Brock always said he liked the way I wrote, even if he didn't agree with what I had to say. Assume if you will, that you've somehow been trapped into viewing a triple feature at your neighborhood theatre. You must take some old with the new; some good with the bad. After purchasing popcorn and cokes for the kids (and yourself) you take your seat. The first film begins.

EASY RIDER or DONN'S EASY SPREADERS

In the 60s, debate became a contest in quantity. Debaters at the University of Kansas acquired a reputation based upon their ability to discover the shortest and best pieces of evidence (5 easy pieces?) to prove sub-sets of their arguments. As a result, Professor Parson's debaters won a lot of debates. Clearly, there

were other causes for these successes, but let us focus upon this cause for a while.

When one debates a policy, the central questions relate to the existence of a problem, the mechanisms by which the present system can treat that problem, and the potential of the resolutorial change. By the introduction of a large number of supported assertions, each providing independent support for the larger claim, affirmative teams were able to introduce enough different arguments to make direct refutation impractical. To further complicate the situation, the second affirmative speakers sub-divided the arguments even more, introducing vast quantities of additional data used as support for the further-divided arguments. The result? Rebuttalists found themselves relying upon a new set of cliches: "pull through that argument," "The negative dropped this argument," and the like.

Many would claim that the easy riders began their work on the negative. No matter which came first, the clash within the traditional territory of debate prior to the 60s, the case side, became so cluttered that the emphasis upon the plan seemed a relief to most of us.

But can the easy riders continue into the non-policy proposition? Not quite so easily, I suspect, at first. Spreading, when comparing the First Amendment virtue of no self-incrimination to the Fourth Amendment virtue of due process appears silly, on its face. I find a second reason which would tend to make easy riding a little more difficult.

Thomas R. Nilson, in an essay included in Perspectives on Argumentation (Miller, 180) identifies the difficult path which must be followed when one argues a value:

When we consider the physical, intellectual, and emotional variations among people, the complexity of human relationships in an interpersonal and a wider social sense, the dependence of men for their development on

numerous and highly organized institutions, we realize how very difficult it is to judge with any accuracy the effect of a particular act or course of action on the human beings involved. This is true of judgments about argumentation as well as other human acts. The difficulty of the judgment, however, does not reduce the obligation to make it.

The debater engaging in non-policy propositions will be tempted to return to the easy spreading of the mid-sixties. But the complexity of the issues generated may well create the self-regulatory feature necessary to prevent the activity.

The first feature film ends, and as the title of the second film appears, we know we are able to be treated with a chilling movie with a fading star.

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JIM?

Jim Unger was a champion college debater. After a few years at Boston College, he moved to Georgetown University, and took the nation by storm. A creature of the sixties, he discovered a niche generally untouched by his peers, the plan. Seeing the plan as the weak affirmative link, he taught his debaters to hatchet away at solvency, chop down the advantages by introduction of massive disadvantages, and choked off his opposition by developing circumvention arguments.

And Professor Unger did not stop with work destroying the negative. By careful detail piled upon careful detail, his affirmative plans became China-doll-like in their perfection. Preserved to view by all, these plans withstood the opponent's attacks well enough to generate an enviable record of tournament wins for Georgetown University.

But the most important contribution, to this writer, made by Jim Unger is the judge paradigm, "the policy-maker." Jingoism notwithstanding, the legislative model for the adjudicator is clearly the most popular one used in tournaments today. Few would dispute the claim that the fading debate star of the sixties is none other than the old policy-maker, Baby Jim.

Can a policy-maker be a non-policy maker? Probably. But should she? I think not. As my friend David Zarefsky said last year about this, "the metaphor of debate as administrative or legislative policy-making will not do, and it makes no sense to regard the judge as a policy-maker, rational or otherwise." (Zarefsky, 2)

When we debate non-policy propositions we may be rational decision-makers, value-choosers, or some other descriptor; but we will still consider the policies implied or expressed by our judgments. As noted early in this paper, the focus shifts, but the arguments remain.

Whatever happened to baby Jim when we began debating non-policy questions? He began to focus on new questions, and thereby invented new strategies, just as that easy rider, Donn has done.

Finally, an intermission. Triple features need them. But now it is time for the third film. The future epitomized.

STAR WARS or U.S.C. and J.F.K.

As implied in the observation section of this paper, this year's debate resolution can be viewed as a non-policy proposition. One of John DeBross' returning national finalists presented a future-oriented case early this year, probably based upon a value judgment; that the truth is more important to the American public than peace of mind. The case argued that the assassination of John F. Kennedy should be re-investigated.

The clash between good and evil, the pure and the contaminated, and the salvation of all that could be good in the empire observed in Star Wars merely exaggerates the basic approach attempted by these young stars at U. S. C.

Clearly, attempts of their opponents to develop substantive disadvantages to this search for the truth met with little success. But this approach is not the only attempt to make a value the center of the argument on this year's proposition.

The stars of the South, Wake Forest, are in constellation with those north-eastern stars, Dartmouth. Each claims that since no gain in justice exists by introducing prior sexual history into a rape trial, another value should prevail, the right to privacy.

But where is The Force? I suspect that the august body of the topic wording committee might be their representatives. I also suppose that, were we to recapture the Spirit of Sedalia, we might discover the central body of The Force.

Today, debaters employ terms like "process advantage" to describe that which can not be qualified, but which can clearly be identified as a "good" way of doing something. It is my judgment that these process advantages may serve as the transitional arguments for debaters who move from "policy" to "non-policy" propositions.

Professor Nobles defines the type for us in a new publication:

Propositions of judgment call only for belief; they describe or evaluate the external world. In their descriptive function they may inquire whether something was, is, or will be "so." In evaluative propositions of judgment debaters assign opposing values to a person, object, event, or idea. (Ehninger and Brockriede, 159)

Our debaters are beginning to elaborate upon the type for us in tournament debates. The STAR WARS provide us with our future.

CLOSING SUGGESTIONS

I would begin by suggesting that the topic selection committee should consider developing propositions which could be debated as either policy or non-policy propositions. /As illustrated in this paper, there is no reason to assume that a single resolution could not be defended from either perspective./ Clearly, an affirmative team would be obligated to defend the stance chosen, and the negative expected to clash with that position. The burden upon the adjudicators would be no greater than that expected of the classroom teacher of argumentation.

My second suggestion relates to the modification of terminology, as suggested herein by reference to the texts of Ziegelmueller and Dause and Ehninger and Brockriede. Resolution of this particular problem might lead to modification of the legislative model commitment which could seriously limit effective non-policy debate.

Finally, I would suggest that those of us who have watched the decline of debate as a large group activity on our campuses might consider the potential of non-policy debate in attracting additional participants. I have no doubt that many students in my argumentation classes would enjoy participation in tournaments. A proposition of judgment would lend itself, I suspect, to generic arguments which would allow broader participation from the classroom into the tournament.

The theoretical implications of debating non-policy propositions are many. Three which I have considered are the reduction in the number of lines used in a debate round, a change in the primary judging paradigm, and an emphasis upon philosophical issues as the ultimate question posed by the proposition.

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