

## TOPICALITY: AN EQUAL GROUND STANDARD

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Arguments on topicality have the potential of becoming an infinite regress. As articulated in theory, topicality is an issue of definition intended to divide ground between affirmative and negative teams. In practice, however, topicality often acquires the stigma of a "procedural" issue concerned more with the strategem of how the other team must allocate its responses than with the substance of how argumentative ground has been divided.

Much of the dispute has focused on whether "reasonable" definitions are a sufficient warrant for topicality (Herbeck & Katsulas, 1987; Parson & Bart, 1987; Unger, 1981). The alternative view has been a standard proposing that topicality decisions should favor the "best/better" definition. In either instance, the criteria and standards for evaluating topicality may become highly technical arguments which bear little relation to the function of dividing argumentative ground.

This paper proposes the use of an equal ground criterion for the assessment of topicality. The equal ground criterion assumes the "reasonableness" standard of topicality, but expands its meaning to include the effect reasonableness has on distributing ground. By this is meant that definitions are, in fact, reasonable when they distribute argumentative ground equitably between the affirmative and negative teams.

This analysis will look at four elements. The first element provides a rationale for the assumption that the function of debate is to facilitate clash over substantive issues. Second, it is maintained that the topicality issue is the means by which substantive issues are defined and emerge. Third, it is contended that current standards for resolving topicality, particularly the "reasonable" definition standard, are deficient. Finally, I suggest guidelines for the application and use of the "equal ground" criterion.

### DEBATE AS SUBSTANTIVE ARGUMENT

The equal ground criterion accepts the premise that the effect of the topicality issue should be to apportion approximately equal ground to the affirmative and negative teams. If the purpose of debate is to facilitate clash over substantive issues embodied by the resolution, then topicality should be evaluated by its ability to elicit these substantive issues.

While I am tempted to assert the proposition that "the function of debate is to develop substantive argument" is axiomatic, I believe a justification is useful. The primary support for this assertion is vested in the activity itself. The National

Developmental Conferences on Forensics (1974, 1984) adopted several recommendations which speak to the function of debate as grounded in "the ability to analyze controversies, select and evaluate evidence, construct and refute arguments, and use the values of the audience as warrants for belief." (1975, 16) The more recent (1984) Developmental Conference expressed the fundamental nature of forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people."(5)

The "controversies" and "problems" in these definitional statements refer to issues which exist in our political, military, economic, and social milieu. Debate topics reflect contemporary issues which exist in society. The 1939-40 (NDT) topic proposed strict economic and military isolation which corresponded with U.S. neutrality at the beginning of WW II. Concurrent with Watergate, the (NDT) debate community selected curtailment of Presidential power in 1974-75. (Freeley, 1986) More recently the CEDA community debated "covert involvement in Central America" and "drug testing," topics which corresponded with heightened public scrutiny of these issues.

While not every debate topic will be contemporaneous with the social and political issues of its day, the frequency with which they are situated academic debate in a real world context. Debate's relationship with "the real world" is that the external world references issues. Debate, as a laboratory for the consideration of these issues, requires that argument have fidelity with consistent, verifiable references.

### TOPICALITY AS A MEANS OF APPORTIONING GROUND

Academic debate topics divide ground. This assertion is widely supported by such varied sources as Ziegelmueller and Dause (1975) who caution that topics be phrased in "neutral terminology," (18) Patterson and Zarefsky (1983) who say that the resolution serves as a boundary between "affirmative land" and "negative land," (109) and Parson and Bart (1987) who conclude that "a reasonable interpretation of the resolution will provide an equal amount of argumentative ground to the affirmative and to the negative, thus preserving equity." (135) The equity assumed by Parson and Bart implies the criterion of equal ground for "reasonableness."

The issue of topicality serves to address the question of whether the means employed for this division are fair. It may be asked what constitutes a fair division? Wayne Brockreide (1975) proposed that one defining characteristic of argument is "a frame of reference shared optimally. [People] cannot argue effectively with one another if their presuppositions share too little or are virtually irreconcilable." (Ehninger & Brockreide 1978, 25) The very possibility of substantive argument requires that definitions provide meanings which are shared by all parties. The

implication for debate is that definitions which are meaningful to both sides and the audience are to be preferred. Definitions which unduly favor one side violate this characteristic.

There is little doubt that definitions are often selected for their strategic value in the same way that a team will feature evidence which favors its interpretation of reality. Brock et al (1973) acknowledged that cases are constructed with the end of featuring the system which is most likely to result in its justification. This is not to imply deviousness. Rather, it is to say that cases, and their accompanying definitions, are selected to privilege one team's construction of reality. Cases, and definitions, are selected for their strategic value.

It is perfectly reasonable to expect an affirmative team to select those definitions which are consistent with its desired purpose. What is questioned is whether a negative team is obligated to argue a case or definitions which constrain their arguments unfairly. Negative teams may be equally inclined to argue a construction of reality which favors the arguments it prefers to advocate. In the most extreme case, the two competing constructions of reality with their attendant definitions will be incompatible.

When one considers that arguments in debate are "advocacy-centered" rather than "truth-seeking," then it may be asked whether a rationale exists to favor one advocate's presuppositions over the other's? To artificially and arbitrarily favor one description is to convey an advantage to the advocate whose construction is selected. To the extent that definitional issues undergird the description of reality, they convey an implication for the subsequent resolution of substantive issues.

Parson and Bart (1987) have argued that topicality constitutes the primary procedural issue in academic debate. They further assert topicality remains one of the few issues which is resolved as a dichotomous "Yes/No" choice as opposed to an issue resolved as a matter of degree. (131) While this statement is innocuous enough on its face, it belies their claim that a "reasonable" interpretation will provide each team with an equal amount of ground. (135) What if it is the case that neither team's definition apportions ground equally? The reasonability standard proposed by Parson and Bart (1987) as well as by Herbeck and Katsulas (1987) accepts the goal of a fair distribution of ground, but their criteria fail to provide the means to ensure it.

#### LIMITATIONS OF "REASONABLENESS" DEFINITIONS

Parson and Bart (1987) and Herbeck and Katsulas (1987) advance similar, but not identical, criteria for assessing reasonability as a standard for topicality. Only Parson and Bart include the claim that a reasonable definition would provide equal amounts of ground to the affirmative and negative teams. Herbeck and Katsulas are silent on this. However, each pair of authors develop "field" and "grammatical context" criteria for determining reasonability. Finally, the two positions indict the

"best/better" definition standard advocated by Unger (1981).

I will deal with the two criteria common to both sets of authors and show how the criticisms applied to Unger are applicable to the reasonability standard. The "equal ground" elements derived from Parson and Bart will be expanded in the final section of this paper. "Field" and "grammatical context" criteria may be necessary, but are not sufficient to secure reasonable definitions.

The "field context" criterion for definitions begins with the assumption that the terms contained in the resolution are already used by some persons. These persons are presumed to have an understanding of the meaning of the terms in the context with which they use them. Further, the "field context" criterion imports the assumptions of Toulmin (1958; 1972) that the field in which the terms are used should be evaluated by the standards of that field. Parson and Bart suggest that these usually correspond with academic disciplines (135) while Herbeck and Katsulas presume a field context, but are less clear in explaining what constitutes a field.

There is good reason to use a field context for definitions when the evidence subsequently cited within case assumes the meaning of the the same field. Consistency between definitions used and the support backing claims establishes fidelity in meaning.

Nevertheless, just because a body of language users has agreed upon a vocabulary in its specialized domain does not mean their usage is appropriate for either ordinary language users or for the purposes of academic debate. Specialized field contexts may not assume the necessity of dividing ground required in academic debate. To say that that a term has an agreed upon meaning in a specialized context only means that within that context is the meaning stipulated. Once the meaning is exported outside the specialized field, there may not be consensus on its appropriateness. One example cited by Toulmin in *Reason in Ethics* (1950) illustrates this point:

A layperson and a scientist observing the sunset disagree about the "color" of the sun. The layperson, using the "ostensive" appearance, declares the sun to be red while the scientist, relying on "scientific" criteria, decrees the sun is yellow using concepts such as wavelength and refractive index to make his/her point. While the scientist is correct within the specialized context employed, the apparent "redness" of the setting sun is undenied. (112)

A specialized argument field may inform general usage, but it does not necessarily correspond with the context of usage outside its own boundaries. The criticisms of field context are based on the ambiguity of what constitutes a field and whether debate propositions are located exclusively within the domain of a single argument field. Dudczak (1985; 1989) has previously argued that argument fields are pedagogically suspect in their failure to define unambiguous boundaries. We

have embraced argument fields as conceptually attractive without clear guidance of their parameters. Without boundary conditions it is difficult to locate definitions with clear meaning. Several difficulties stem from this.

First, there may not be an academic discipline corresponding to the terms contained in the resolution. The recent CEDA topic proposing that increased restrictions on civilian possession of handguns would be desirable has no academic discipline, *per se*. The legal field, which has a relationship to the topic regarding the Second Amendment, does not have a consensus understanding of whether the right to bear arms is an individual or collective right. Moreover, the topic artificially separates handguns from the more common context of "gun control." Field context may not be appropriate because equivalent terms may not exist within the specialized field and the debate resolution. In short, there may not be an academic discipline which corresponds to the debate resolution.

Second, assuming that argument fields had discrete domains and consensus understandings of terms, the location of terms in a debate resolution may not reside exclusively within one field. Consequently, no authoritative field context could be derived. Abortion represents a contemporary issue which cuts across the fields of law, medical science, and ethics, if not others. While all three fields may inform arguments on abortion, privileging one field over the others would distort the actual debate on abortion. For instance, if one imposed the "precedential" standard of law as pre-eminent in the abortion debate, then the assumptions of the Court's finding in *Roe v. Wade* would ignore the moral issues Pro-life advocates feature in their arguments. Selecting a field context for a definition over competing contexts biases the subsequent resolution of substantive issues.

Finally, the criterion of a field context, assuming an exclusive field context exists, begs the question of whether the resulting definition equally apportions the affirmative and negative ground. Experts in a field of discourse may have consensus on the meaning of a term, but such consensus may preempt the possibility of debate. If theologians agreed that "violence" in the context of the Fall 1989 CEDA topic was necessarily evil and morally unjustified, then privileging their definition of violence for the resolution would make debate moot. The consensus within the specialized field would make argument on violence tautological. A privileged field context definition would prevent the very possibility of debate.

The second criterion common to Parson & Bart and Herbeck & Katsulas is grammatical context. The position embraced by both sets of writers is that the meaning of language in a debate resolution are bounded by the function of grammar in a declarative sentence. Further, they adhere to the position that a grammatical standard both examines "the 'correctness' of the definitions themselves," and determines the "'correctness' of the combination of discrete definitions." (Williams & Cross 1979).

The most obvious violations of grammatical context are those which may occur when definitions render parts of the resolution redundant or those which transpose

the grammatical function of a term such as when one defines a verb as a noun. Notwithstanding these violations' unreasonableness within the context of grammatical usage, it is unclear why the criterion of grammatical context is particularly helpful in apportioning debate ground.

First, the argument on redundancy presupposes that the language of the resolution is itself not redundant. Redundancy may be a feature of the resolution and not the definitions, *per se*. For instance, the Spring 1983 CEDA topic "that individual rights of privacy are more important than any other Constitutional right" invited the affirmative to decide whether "individual" rights of privacy were those contended by the constitution or were rights outside those constitutionally provided. It would have been redundant to specify privacy rights were constitutionally provided without their specific expression in the resolution. Nevertheless, numerous cases were predicated on the penumbra privacy rights contained in other constitutional provisions. Theoretically, by the redundancy standard, this interpretation would have been unreasonable.

The grammatical transposition violation which occurs when one defines a noun as a verb is a clearer violation. The frequency with which this occurs is unknown. Moreover, the standard becomes minimally useful when multiple "grammatically correct" alternatives exist. Defining "violence" as a noun in the Fall 1989 CEDA topic legitimizes a wide range of alternatives which are otherwise incompatible—i.e., violence as a form of vehement speech vs. violence as nuclear war. A grammatically correct definition may favor one side of the resolution over the other, thus making the definition unfair. Grammatical correctness is a necessary, but not a sufficient, criterion of reasonableness.

Parson and Bart further contend that the grammatical correctness criterion in combination with field context reduces the number of interpretations allowed. (137) This is arguable as no examples are provided to demonstrate its likelihood. In any event, as with the field context criterion, grammatically correct definitions, separately or in conjunction with field context, beg the question of whether equal ground will be afforded the respective sides in the debate. Just because a definition conforms to the grammatical rules of English does not mean that it provides both sides with equity.

The indictment of best/better definition as a standard exposes the final limitation of reasonability. Ultimately, the limitation of best/better definitions is rooted in the effect their application has to academic debates. The criteria of how one judges "best/better" definitions needs to be situated in the function served by debate. If the function is to apportion argumentative ground fairly to the affirmative and negative teams, then the effect of whether one achieves this end determines the sufficiency of the standard. Without criteria tying topicality to the outcomes a definition produces, "best/better" definition standards can only express a desired goal without the means to reach it.

The reasonability standard is equally deficient when left with just the field and grammatical context criteria to guide it. This occurs because the criteria, by themselves, cannot assess the effect of topicality arguments on the goal of distributing argumentative ground. Teams may find definitions which maintain field and grammatical context criteria without providing equity to both teams. While Herbeck and Katsulas claim that the problem with reasonability is not in the concept, but rather in its application, their criteria belie the claim:

If there is an argument to be made against reasonability, it lies not in the concept but the application. When debaters flaunt reasonability with blatantly nontopical cases, or when judges allow affirmatives to slide by with marginal interpretations of of the resolution because they "don't vote on topicality," they have cheated the reasonability standard. (150)

By the "field-context" and "grammatical context" criteria proposed by Herbeck and Katsulas, however, a case can only be "blatantly nontopical" when it fails to situate its definitions in an existing discipline or uses grammar improperly. "Blatantly non-topical cases" or "marginal" interpretations are meaningless hyperbole for Herbeck and Katsulas when these terms are applied to instances falling outside their two criteria. A case which can ground its definitions in some field context which are grammatically correct is sufficient to meet the topicality standard of reasonableness as they have defined it. Only Parson and Bart provide for an additional criterion for adjudging reasonability; that is, through the application of equal ground.

#### Application of Equal Ground

The application of equal ground as a criterion to the standard of reasonableness is an underdeveloped concept. Parson and Bart assume that a fair division of argumentative ground is required for equity, but are ambiguous as to how this is obtained. They write, "the judge will therefore examine the implications of the resolution for both the affirmative and negative. One of the ways this can be done is through an examination of the cases that would be topical given the affirmative interpretation." (135)

Asking "what cases would be topical" points us towards a procedure of evaluating topicality based upon the comparative availability of cases to each team. Rather than asking whether the definitions authorize a single, particular case, equal ground considers the range of cases authorized. An affirmative case is topical when the definitions authorizing the case result in approximately equivalent argumentative ground for both the affirmative and negative teams. When "equal ground" is invoked as a topicality criterion, the critic is being asked to make a

judgment about the "fairness" of definitions.

The use of equal ground as a criterion for reasonableness is troubling for debate critics because it requires them to make a judgment about the effect of the topicality arguments. By this I mean that the critic/judge is placed in the position of deciding what constitutes the argumentative ground available to the resolution and then evaluating how the definitions divide it between the respective teams. This may be troubling, but it is not impossible.

First, I do not imply that judge intervention is authorized by an equal ground criterion. The implications of definitions should be developed and defended by the debaters. A challenge to the reasonableness of the definitions on the criterion of equal ground requires that the debaters introduce the criterion, explain it, and articulate its implications for the judge. This requires that the challenged terms have alternative definitions offered and evaluated for their implications on the same grounds afforded to both teams.

Second, both the affirmative and negative definitions are subject to the same standards of evaluation. The negative definitions cannot be privileged by default. A negative cannot claim affirmative definitions fail to equally apportion ground and then deny an obligation to show the same for their definitions. When reasonableness is being debated on the the equal ground criterion, the definitions which most equitably distribute ground are to be favored. Of course, it would be an affirmative obligation to counter-apply the standards to the negative team's definitions.

How does one argue an equal ground criterion? It should be remembered that this paper treats equal ground as a criterion to "reasonability" standards for topicality. This means that one way a team can establish that a definition is not reasonable is through demonstrating it denies equal ground. There are three elements which may be analyzed in determining equal ground.

Tautological grounds—The debater can argue that a definition violates the equal ground criterion when it is circular. Rieke and Sillars (1984) define circularity as the condition where one provides the "claim as the grounds." (85)

Tautological definitions are abusive of equal ground because, once accepted, they deny the opponent any substantive ground to argue. The resolution becomes affirmed (or denied if used by the negative) by definition. For example, in one proposed Spring 1989 CEDA topic an affirmative which argued that economic development, by definition, is unduly degrading to the environment would violate equal ground because the definition assumes its claim as grounds. The negative would have no substantive ground to argue because the definition preempts the possibility of economic development being anything other than evidence for the affirmative case.

Uniqueness grounds—The debater can argue that definitions which authorize only one case are a violation of equal ground. On its face it might appear that an affirmative team which only wanted to justify one case would be ceding substantial

ground to the negative team. This may not be true. If the affirmative is "reasonable" by limiting the resolution to a single case, then the negative has standing to impose the same standard, albeit to restrict the affirmative to one case only. The case is not "reasonable," per se. The definitions are reasonable. A case could be topical under a set of definitions which provided adequate ground to both sides, but untopical under an alternative set of definitions which did not. And if effect of the definitions is to justify only one case type, than the same definitions used in reverse (by the negative) would restrict other affirmative case. The principle here is that both sides should operate under the assumption of equity.

A unique definition is most often drawn from a specialized field context such as when "extreme prejudice" is lifted from the jargon of covert operatives as a euphemism for "killing." In a resolution proposing that "Prejudice is increasing in American society," the negative team could attempt to limit the acceptable affirmative case as one which demonstrates that more people are being killed. (Incidentally, this definition would be "reasonable" by "field-context" and "grammatical-context" criteria.)

Net case options—This standard probably comes closest to stating the number of viable alternative positions available to each side should approximate each other. It is most obviously violated when the alternatives available to one side approaches a single alternative, i.e., a negative definition which would allow only one type of affirmative case, while reserving numerous options for the negative.

While it may be impossible to determine whether the alternatives afforded each side are approximate when both affirmative and negative have numerous alternatives, the disparity in available ground becomes conspicuous when the number of options available to one side is capable of being enumerated while the alternatives for the other side are apparently unrestricted.

These three dimensions of the equal ground criterion—tautological, uniqueness, and net options—expand the meaning of "reasonableness" to exclude those definitions which attempt to "define the other team out of the round" or attempt to limit the opponents to a few options while retaining numerous options for oneself. The result of arguing the equal ground criterion for "reasonableness" is to ask whether a definition provides the effect of equal argumentative possibilities for each team. Field and grammatical context criteria are incapable of achieving this. In advocating the expansion of the equal ground criterion I am not rejecting reasonability as a standard for topicality. Rather, I am suggesting that the criteria of field context and grammatical context are insufficient to address the "blatantly nontopical" or "marginal cases." Were debaters to argue the effect of how ground is distributed by the definitions, then critic/judges have an expanded ground for the consideration of topicality.

No standard of topicality or criterion for its application represents a remedy for the avoidance of clash on the substantive issues if debaters are so intentioned.

Nevertheless, equal ground represents an additional warrant in the debate arsenal which may increase the likelihood of the debate focusing on the substantive rather than the procedural issues.

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