

- Rieke, Richard R. "College Forensics in the United States--1973." *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 10 (1974) 121-33.
- Sillars, Malcolm, and David Zarefsky. "Future Goals and Roles of Forensics." *Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective*. Ed. James H. McBath. Skokie, IL: National Textbook, 1975: 83-100.
- Sproule, J. Michael. "Constructing, Implementing, and Evaluating Objectives for Contest Debate." *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 11 (1974): 8-15.
- Tame, Ellwood R. "An Analytical Study of the Relationship Between Ability in Critical Thinking and Ability in Contest Debate and Discussion." Diss. U of Denver, 1958.
- Thompson, Bruce, and Janet Malacon. "Validity of a Measure of Critical Thinking Skills." *Psychological Reports* 60 (1987): 1223-30.
- Whalen, Shawn. "Intercollegiate Debate as a Co-Curricular Activity: Effects on Critical Thinking." *Argument in Controversy: Proceedings of the Seventh SCA/AFA conference on Argumentation*. Ed. Donn W. Parson. Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1991. 391-97.
- Williams, David. "The Effects of Training in College Debating on Critical Thinking Ability." Th. Purdue U, 1951.
- Zemsky, Robert, and Walter Massey. "Cost Containment: Committing to a New Economic Reality." *Policy Perspectives*. Pew Higher Education Research Program, (Feb. 1991): 1-2.

The Need for an Argumentative Perspective for Academic Debate

ROBERT TRAPP

After spending most of the weekend working on this essay, I came to my office Monday morning to find the April 15, 1993 edition of the CEDA executive secretary's report which contained a short essay by Michael D. Bartanen entitled "The Future of CEDA: A Pessimistic Assessment." He wrote: "CEDA is in desperate trouble. Our membership is in serious decline. The educational mission of the organization is fragmented and unclear. The level of civility in our debate rounds, awards assemblies and interactions with each other is lower than at any time since the founding of the organization. These problems overshadow the tremendous amount of good that happens as a result of our efforts."

I agree with Bartanen that debate is not healthy. At meetings and in forums like this one, people interested in the activity argue about the precise nature of the disease and about how it ought to be treated. Most of these arguments focus on the symptoms of the disease; the illness that infects debate cannot be treated merely by attending its symptoms. We must find its cause and discover appropriate methods of treatment.

Debate is in trouble because its practitioners have lost their focus on argumentation. Unfortunately, good people who value debate and who are trying to save it are concentrating only on its symptoms. These symptoms, such as debaters talking at incomprehensible rates or competitors occasionally being rude to one another, cannot adequately be dealt with until we treat the heart of the problem. In this case, treating symptoms and treating causes may not be mutually exclusive; however, we must be wary that having treated the symptoms we do not neglect to also treat the causes of the problem.

Bartanen offers five remedies which, I believe, involve treatments for the symptoms of our maladies: partitioning CEDA into categories of "academic competition" and "public communication," changing or eliminating the national tournament, refocusing our definitions of novice and junior divisions, recognizing diversity, and making the activity more humane. With a few exceptions I agree with Bartanen's suggestions; however, I believe the problems he seeks to address are, in part, symptoms of a larger problem—that we have lost our focus on argumentation as a method of persuasion.

Robert Trapp is Associate Professor and Director of Forensics at Willamette University in Salem, Oregon.

My thesis, that we ought to take an argumentative perspective on intercollegiate debate, may seem trivial to those who believe we already take such a perspective. To the contrary, I will argue that most of the perspectives taken by educators and critics are incomplete because they do not explicitly contain a master metaphor of debate as argumentation. To fully develop this thesis, I will consider four questions: 1) Why is a perspective of any kind needed? 2) Why is an argumentative perspective needed? 3) What kind of argumentative perspective is needed? 4) Given this kind of argumentative perspective, what is the likely prognosis?

I

Why is a perspective of any kind needed? The answer is simple: not taking a perspective is impossible. Put another way, the attempt to avoid a perspective is itself a perspective. A common theme in a variety of fields such as philosophy, psychology, and communication involves the notion that human beings do not approach the world without interpretive schemata. We interpret and evaluate our experiences through these schemata. Experiences do not have an objective existence apart from our interpretations of them. At the most basic of levels, these interpretive schemas are perspectives. Therefore, avoiding taking a perspective is impossible; the question is merely whether or not the perspectives we take are conscious or unconscious.

Critics who call themselves *tabula rasa* consciously try to avoid taking any particular perspective at all. These critics attempt to become "blank slates" upon which debaters write. A person who attempts an idealized form of *tabula rasa* says quite literally, "I am a blank slate and I take no position on the kinds of arguments or the kinds of strategies I find acceptable. In fact, I take no position on what constitutes an argument, evidence, good reasoning, or poor reasoning." Such persons are, I believe, only fooling themselves; they falsely assume that they can set aside their interpretive schemata and evaluate the debate from a presuppositionless point of view. Since to enact this idealized version of *tabula rasa*, persons would quite literally have to be able to set aside their minds, theirs is an impossible task. But the argument that enactment of the idealized version of *tabula rasa* is impossible is a straw argument. I do not believe that such enactment really ever occurs.¹

¹ Two of my novice students approached me with what was to them a puzzling notion. One of their debate judges made two comments prior to the debate: "First," he said, "I am a *tabula rasa* judge. Second, I don't vote on topicality."

Persons who enact *tabula rasa* in a more practical, less idealized form are theoretically on more solid ground. Although these persons admit to a variety of presuppositions regarding the nature of arguments and perhaps even to the strength of particular arguments, they still claim to evaluate the debate from objective rather than subjective or intersubjective points of view.² Although the practical form of *tabula rasa* does not assume that the audience (judge)³ is literally ignorant of any principles of argumentation, any presuppositions the audience might have are pushed so far into the background that they may become almost imperceptible. The practical form also assumes a subject/object dichotomy which is most apparent in a clear separation of roles: debaters argue and audiences judge. Furthermore, the process of judging can occur without involving the audience as an active participant in the process of arguing. So, the *tabula rasa* perspective maintains that although the audience cannot evaluate the debate without certain presuppositions about the nature of argument, the best (most objective) evaluation occurs when the judges' presuppositions are subordinated to those of the debaters.

Thus, even the *tabula rasa* point of view implicitly presupposes at least two elements of a theory of argument. The first presupposition is one in which an audience focus is replaced by a focus on the arguer, thus subordinating the audience's notion of argument to that of the debaters. The second involves a separation of audience and arguer so that the former is not an active party in the argument. Thus, the *tabula rasa* point of view is a retreat away from the "renaissance of argumentation studies" (Brockriede, "Contemporary Renaissance") and back to obsolete modes of argument of the modern period—modes of argument which have been obsolete since the late 1950s (Jonsen and Toulmin; and Toulmin). If we are to save argumentation—the heart of debate—we must produce a well-founded and clearly articulated perspective on argumentation which is applicable to educational debate.

² These ideas about the *tabula rasa* perspective have been heavily influenced by my colleague Aaron Bunch.

³ My mixing of the use of the terms "judge" and "audience" is purposive. A debate judge is a person who, I maintain, performs the argumentative function of audience. An audience is, I believe, an important concept in all forms of argumentation except formal deductive logic. While the most well known proponents of the point of view are Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, the point of view is also expressed by informal logicians J. Anthony Blair and Ralph H. Johnson.

II

Even granting that some perspective on debate is necessary, why take an argumentative perspective? The most forthright answer involves searching for those concepts most central to the act of debating and then defining the perspective around those concepts.

Of these concepts, communication and argumentation are most central because they are arguably the necessary and sufficient conditions of debate. People cannot debate without communicating or without arguing; in fact, the acts of communicating and arguing may be considered sufficient to constitute debating.

So if communication and argumentation are both central to debate, why choose argumentation over communication? Bartanen, for instance, appears to favor communication as the master metaphor since he proposes partitioning CEDA into two divisions: "CEDA as Academic Competition" and "CEDA as Public Communication." Other concerned forensic professionals probably agree with Bartanen because they see a deterioration of communication skills in the current practice of CEDA debate.

The reasons I would choose argumentation rather than communication are both theoretical and pedagogical. Theoretically, argumentation necessarily includes communication but communication does not necessarily include argumentation. One cannot argue without communicating but one can communicate (tell stories, make metaphors, offer explanations, express feelings, etc.) without arguing.

Pedagogically, a focus on argumentation might provide clearer standards for evaluation than a focus on communication. I will grant that argumentation is a broad concept and that the standards for judging effective argument are not beyond controversy, but I believe that the potential exists to develop a perspective on argumentation which would define debate in such a way that it would not only be educationally sound but would become an activity we would be proud to have observed by our department chairs, deans, and college presidents. I believe that the concept of communication is so broad that we have a better chance to successfully develop an argumentative perspective than we would have to develop a perspective that makes communication central. Furthermore, since argumentation necessarily includes communication (although not all types of communication), standards developed for argumentative communication could be included in an argumentative perspective.

Thus, the master perspective should be chosen because of its conceptual centrality to the action of debating. But what of other potential perspectives? What about perspectives like debate as education? Debate as a simulation of public affairs? Debate as a game? Without a master metaphor of debate as argumentation, these other perspectives remain hopelessly incomplete. The basic problem with these alternative

perspectives is that they must presume a theory of argumentation which, unless it is made explicit, will be unable to sustain debate.

Saying that debate is an educational activity is workable only if subsumed under a perspective of argumentation. About what should debate educate? Should debate teach students about argumentation? If so, it should be grounded in an argumentative perspective before we know what it should be teaching. Should debate teach students about the topics they debate? Yes, but the fundamental method of learning about the topic is by arguing about it. The underlying theory of argument must be sound in order to ensure that the method of learning is sound. In other words, saying that debate is an educational activity is not enough. We need to specify the educational functions of argumentation.

Others see debate as a simulation of public affairs. Using this perspective, they model debate around policy making or legislative argument so that debaters can learn how argumentation functions in these public arenas. For instance, debaters can learn how policy makers choose options which satisfy standards of cost-benefit analysis or they can learn how the judicial system applies the rule of presumed innocence.

The public affairs perspective is functional but incomplete because it focuses on the logic of policy choice rather than on the nature of argumentation itself. Debaters learn a great deal about how to choose between competing policy systems but very little about how argument functions within these arenas. For example, as far as I know, very little work has been done within this perspective to teach students about critical issues such as what counts as evidence in policy deliberations or the best evidence rule in legal argument. Public affairs perspectives focus more on the kinds of arguments made in the policy arena than on the nature of argument itself.

Still another perspective holds that debate is a game. Debate is perceived, not as real-world argument, but as a contest in which students participate. Like football or basketball are games that teach various skills, debate is a game that teaches argumentation skills.⁴

The game perspective, like the others, is potentially very sound. But like the others, it is incomplete as a master metaphor because it begs the question of what the game of debate is about. Presumably, debate is a game of argument. But what are the rules of argument? Without an argumentative perspective, the game perspective is not workable.

⁴ One of the problems with this perspective is that, unlike other games, debate has no agreed-upon set of rules. Some of us have trouble imagining a sport where the referees allow the participants to make up the rules as the game progresses.

An argumentative perspective on debate is needed because any other perspective on the debate process requires an argumentative theory to complete it. But the nature of the argumentative perspective still needs to be defined. What kind of argumentative perspective is appropriate for academic debate?

III

While a number of argumentative perspectives might be said to exist, Joseph Wenzel has identified dialectic, rhetoric, and logic as three of the more common ones. Each perspective has elements that make it desirable when applied to academic debate. In my judgment, a dialectical perspective is most useful when we are considering the format and rules for debate and a logical perspective is most useful for judging debate. Oddly, the perspective I have consciously overlooked is the rhetorical perspective. So let's begin there.

A rhetorical perspective on argumentation focuses on arguing as a natural process whereby "people try to influence one another's beliefs, values and actions" (Wenzel, 15) by symbolic means. The academic study of the rhetorical perspective on argumentation generally occurs in Departments of English or Speech Communication. Intercollegiate debate is largely a product of Departments of Speech Communication since most forensics professionals who have advanced degrees hold those degrees in Speech Communication. As a result, the rhetorical perspective has been particularly influential on the activity of intercollegiate debate.

By arguing for debate as "public communication," Bartanen appears to be attempting to resurrect the positive qualities of the rhetorical perspective on argumentation. I believe those positive qualities can be preserved by taking a different argumentative perspective. I also believe that a different argumentative perspective will allow us to avoid some of the disadvantages of rhetorical perspective—problems that I believe now infect CEDA.

The fact that intercollegiate debate grew up in Departments of Speech Communication is an accident of history, part of which is unfortunate. The rhetorical perspective on argument—the perspective taken by most in speech communication—has led, I assert, to an emphasis on what makes arguments persuasive instead of what makes arguments sound. One detrimental result of the attention to persuasiveness rather than soundness of arguments has been an emphasis on authoritative evidence, an emphasis that has been detrimental to the activity. Although a full argument in support of this assertion is beyond the scope of this essay, I will provide enough reasoning that I hope will make the argument at least worthy of consideration.

Persuasive evidence, from a rhetorical point of view, has always included evidence from authority. Of course, most authors who write on the subject of persuasion have been careful to note that evidence should be taken only from credible sources. On the other hand, research in source credibility has consistently discovered that credibility is in the eye of the beholder. A credible source is one who the audience perceives to be (but not necessarily is) competent, trustworthy, and dynamic. As a result, testimony from a source perceived to be credible became acceptable.

From the perspective of persuasion, reliance on the opinion of experts is perfectly sound since ordinary people cannot be expected to be expert in all subjects and must rely on the judgment of experts in some matters. In fact, on certain matters public audiences cannot even be expected to understand the data underlying these expert opinions. From that reliance on experts we started down a slippery slope on which we have never regained our traction. The slide began when we assessed evidence from a more credible source as better than evidence from a less credible source. Further down, we assessed evidence from a less credible source as better than evidence from an unknown source. At the bottom of the slope we evaluate evidence from an unknown source as better than no evidence. Thus, the reliance on evidence based on the opinion of experts was but a short step to the reliance on evidence based on any published opinion. Soon, anything published became "evidence" and the "credibility" of sources lost all meaning. The reliance on evidence from published opinion regardless of the credibility of its source has developed such that few debate judges are surprised to hear, for instance, that China's human rights record is improving from sources such as the government published *Bejeng Review*.

Although many well-intentioned educators articulate the need for a return to the principles of rhetoric in order to make debate more of a persuasive activity, I believe that the rhetorical perspective has become so distorted that I doubt it can be salvaged. We need a fresh argumentative perspective which can refocus debate on a sound theory of argumentation. I believe a dialectical perspective can help us gain control over the procedures of debate and a logical perspective can help us develop standards for judging debate.

Persons take a dialectical perspective on argument when they need to gain control over the natural process of arguing—when, for instance, a decision-making group needs to adopt rules and procedures to ensure that all arguments get a fair hearing. Persons focusing on argument through the dialectical perspective consider "all the methods people and institutions use in order to bring the natural processes of arguing under deliberate control. They make rules, set limits, create forums, and organize formats for debate and discussion" (Wenzel, 16). A dialectical perspective will allow us to establish debate

formats and principles which help ensure quality argumentation and fair treatment of all participants.

Another issue which might be addressed from a dialectical perspective concerns the proper relationship among debaters and between debater and audience. For example, Blair and Johnson describe dialectical argument as consisting of a proponent and an opponent in relation to a "community of model interlocutors" (50-53). In their model, the debaters are attempting to persuade a model audience through a process of debate. The debaters do not approach the audience members as "blank slates" but as knowledgeable, reflective, open, and dialectically astute persons. Their dialectical perspective could be adapted to debate to describe one aspect of how debaters should relate to judges. Brockriede's metaphor of arguers as lovers shows yet another aspect of how arguers ought to approach one another: as fellow human beings fulling deserving of respect, not as objects to be defeated.

Although the notion of dialectic forms one perspective through which we might profitably examine the methods and procedures of debate, it is incomplete because it does not provide guidance about the substantive aspects of debate. What constitutes an argument? What differentiates a good argument from a poor one? What constitutes evidence? Which kinds of arguments require which kinds of evidence? What distinguishes good evidence from poor evidence? I believe a logical perspective, broadly defined, best answers these kinds of questions.

A logical perspective is useful "to help us evaluate arguments as intellectual constructions offered for acceptance" (Wenzel, 16). The logical perspective includes, but is certainly not limited to, formal deductive logic. The logical perspective includes theories of informal logic as well. In fact, theories that emphasize informal logic are more appropriate guides to substantive aspects of debate since informal logic stresses how people argue through the use of symbols while formal, deductive logic is limited to arguments that can be translated into the quasi-mathematical symbols unique to formal logic.

A logical perspective on academic debate would ask questions about argument qua argument: What is the essence of argumentation? These are the questions that have been ignored by perspectives such as *tabula rasa*, education, games, or public affairs. A logical perspective would examine the basic questions such as the nature of argument and evidence.

My purpose in this essay is to give a broad sketch of some of the issues with which we need to deal, not to provide a complete outline of an argumentative perspective on academic debate. But perhaps I should sketch, in a much oversimplified fashion, how such a perspective might deal with a single issue: the issue of evidence.

Evidence is one of the kinds of premisses which arguers use to create a claim. Some claims can be made without evidence. For instance, an ontological argument could be constructed by reason alone. Evidence is required when a speaker must go beyond the knowledge which the speaker and audience share prior to the argument. Evidence may be required, for instance, to prove the existence or nonexistence of an event, or to establish or refute a cause and effect relationship.

The kinds of objects that debaters refer to as evidence can be divided into two categories: data and opinion. Arguers are said to have presented data when they present facts from which a claim is inferred. Arguers are said to have presented an opinion when they rely on the authority of an expert to establish a claim. Of course, evidence can consist of data or opinion or both.

Although from a rhetorical perspective, an expert opinion may be as persuasive or more persuasive than data, from an argumentative perspective, data is more compelling because it more fully provides a complete argument. A person interested in the logic of an argument would not be satisfied with an answer such as "X is true because expert Y says so."

For situations where the issue is so complex that laypersons may not be able to understand data, opinion might be necessary. For cases such as that, an argumentative perspective would need to include criteria to distinguish authoritative opinion from others. For example, Robert C. Pinto and John Anthony Blair list opportunity, ability, and dependability as three criteria of a credible opinion (20). So when debaters are forced to use opinion evidence, reliance on an argumentative perspective also would force them to argue about the credibility of their evidence rather than merely reading their evidence.

The current practice with regard to evidence seems to consist of debaters reading as much opinion evidence as rapidly as they can without regard for the data which underlies the opinion and without regard for the credibility of the source who produced the opinion. Requiring debaters to argue about data and credibility might produce effects that many concerned educators would consider positive—including effects related to effective communication.

Essentially, I have argued for a perspective on argument that combines dialectic and logic. First, the two perspectives need to be worked out in some detail. What procedures are best for debate? What kind of argumentation theory ensures that debaters will learn to make sound arguments? Of course these two perspectives need to be constructed in such a manner that they are consistent with one another. Second, the two perspectives can be interrelated by construing one as the figure and the other as the ground—logic as the figure against the ground of dialectic.

IV

Given this kind of argumentative perspective, what are the prospects for recuperation? I think recovery is possible. First, an argumentative perspective is one part, but not the entirety of the cure. I have suggested an argumentative perspective which combines aspects of logic and dialectic, as one, although not the only workable perspective. We need a sound argumentative perspective which can provide answers to some of the questions that are only assumed by perspectives like *tabula rasa*, education, communication, or games.

Second, the community needs to arrive at a consensus regarding the kind of argumentative perspective around which debate is to be centered. We may find developing the details of the perspective an easier task than developing a consensus around the perspective. If a consensus cannot be built which encompasses all of the debate community, certain programs may decide that their best interests dictate that they form a league operating within CEDA composed of those individuals who do share a consensus about the perspective we ought to be taking on debate.

The Southwest Cross-Examination Debate Association (now CEDA) was formed in the 1970s by people who hoped to cure some of the ailments that had begun in the American Forensic Association's debate circuit. Now some twenty years later, we see the same ills returning. I believe the disease is recurring because CEDA was formed to treat the symptoms, not the cause, of the disease. The symptoms then as now were that debaters talked too fast and were such an ineloquent group that most forensic directors would be embarrassed to have their deans listen to a debate. But in my judgment, the cause of these symptoms is the lack of a sound underlying theory of argumentation. I believe the disease will continue to recur until we attend to that cause.

Works Cited

- Bartanen, Michael D. "The Future of CEDA: A Pessimistic Assessment." *CEDA Executive Secretary's Report*, April 15, 1993.
- Blair, J. Anthony, and Ralph H. Johnson. "Argument as Dialectical." *Argumentation* 1 (1987): 41-56.
- Brockriede, Wayne. "Arguers as Lovers." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 5 (1972): 1-11.

- . "The Contemporary Renaissance in the Study of Argument." *Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation*. Eds. David Zarefsky, Malcolm O. Sillars, and Jack Rhodes. Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, 1983.
- Bunch, Aaron. "Beyond *Tabula Rasa*." Unpublished paper, Willamette University, 1993.
- Jonsen, Albert R., and Stephen Toulmin. *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1988.
- Perelman, Chaim, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Trans. John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1969.
- Pinto, Robert C., and John Anthony Blair. *Reasoning: A Practical Guide*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.
- Toulmin, Stephen. *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda Of Modernity*. New York: The Free P, 1990.
- Wenzel, Joseph W. "Three Perspectives on Argument." *Perspectives on Argument: Essays in Honor of Wayne Brockriede*. Eds. Robert Trapp and Janice Schuetz. Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland, 1990.