

Claim Without Warrant: The Lack of Logical Support for Parametric Topicality

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The widespread practice of operationally defining debate resolutions through specific, and often extremely narrow, examples has created a situation in which it is very difficult for a negative team to win without the advantage of extensive research facilities and resources. For example: When debating CEDA's "advertising" topic "Resolved: that advertising degrades the quality of life in America" many affirmative teams chose to argue that a specific advertisement caused a devastating harm to certain members of society. This logically and grammatically *incorrect* approach to the topic was justified by the application of "parametrics" by affirmative teams. These teams claimed not only that they had the right to interpret the resolution in this manner but that negative teams debating them were allowed only one strategy—to directly refute the specific example presented by the affirmative. Affirmatives claimed that discussions of grammatical interpretation and inductive strength were rendered irrelevant by the application of parametrics.

In this paper, I argue that the practice of parametric topicality is a perspective borrowed from the "plan focus" of policy debate that is inappropriately applied to non-policy debate. Research from both debate theory and formal logic demonstrates that parametric topicality is not logically applicable to non-policy debate. Therefore, I suggest a reasonable argumentative alternative to parametrics as an approach to non-policy debate.

Parametrics Defined

Parametrics is the practice of claiming that the affirmative example replaces the resolution in each individual debate round (Berube 1991). Bile defines parametrics by saying: "The 'parametric' approach suggests that the resolution exists to place an outward boundary (or parameter) on advocacy and that as long as arguments selected fall within this jurisdiction they are legitimate" (8). Parametrics shifts the focus of the debate from the resolution to the example.

The usual application of the parametric approach to debate allows the affirmative to choose a case anywhere within the resolutional boundary, however small, and force the negative to debate only this example, completely ignoring significance and reasonability issues (Bile). In many CEDA debate rounds, affirmative teams claim a parametric right,

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derived from the "right to define," and argue that once they have established the parameters for the round, their only responsibility is to pick an example from within the established parameters and prove that it is true according to their definitions. Most of these teams refuse to accept burdens of significance, typicality, and representativeness, claiming that parametrics affords them the right to avoid these issues. This perspective extends to claiming that all negative arguments in the round must be direct refutation of the affirmative example. Counter-examples or "counter-warrants" are considered illegitimate because the affirmative refuses to accept the burden of proving the resolution true inductively and claims the ability to win the round by proving only their example, regardless of inductive strength or lack thereof.

Berube (1991) cites two particular articles as the combined source of the theory used to justify parametrics in contemporary debate. These are Lichtman, Garvin, and Corsi and Panetta and Dolley. Acknowledging the contribution of these two works to the development of the parametric approach, I would argue that much of the development of this approach is an application of the body of arguments which support the "plan focus" perspective in policy debate (NDT).

Plan Focus and Parametrics

Most of the arguments produced by debaters to justify parametrics are either re-statements or direct quotations of arguments written by policy theorists defending plan focus. The four most commonly used arguments are: 1) Time constraints preclude meaningful discussion of an entire resolution; 2) Debating the entire resolution degrades the educational value of the activity; 3) Debating resolutions instead of plans gives the negative the incentive to argue abusive examples; and 4) The bi-directional nature of many resolutions precludes the affirmative from defending all examples of the resolution (Herbeck and Katsulas).

Arguments one and two are statements of personal opinion that have no basis in logic or argumentation. They are, at best, practical considerations that have never gained overwhelming agreement or acceptance. Arguments three and four are observations that relate directly to policy resolutions and, as such, are not automatically applicable to non-policy resolutions. In the context of non-policy resolutions, argument number three is no more than an unproven assertion and can be avoided by the enforcement of proper standards of induction. In regard to argument number four, it is questionable whether a non-policy resolution can be "bi-directional," and the problem of bi-directionality can be solved by focusing on the probable truth of the resolutional statement.

In NDT, there exists an implicit agreement to ignore the resolution and debate only the affirmative plan (Paulsen and Rhodes). Most of the articles written to defend the example-based approach to competitive debate assume that the resolution being debated is one advocating a change in policy.¹ This assumption has led to an extensive body of theory supporting example-based affirmatives in the form of specific plans or policy proposals. At

one level, this body of theory considers the plan a *substitution instance*, which is an attempt to prove the truth of a proposition by demonstrating the advantages of a specific example (Panetta and Dolley). For example: if an affirmative were defending the resolution, "Resolved: that the U.S. should intervene, militarily, in the Bosnian-Serbian conflict," they could present a specific military plan of action such as "air strikes." "Air strikes" would be a substitution instance for "military intervention" as required by the resolution. If the affirmative could prove that such an action would produce more benefits than harms, it would prove the truth of the proposition.

From the perspective of some other supporters of the plan-focus perspective, the "truth" of the resolution is irrelevant. According to Herbeck, Katsulas, and Leeper, the focus of debate centers on the affirmative plan as an example of the resolution, and the affirmative has the right to focus on a particular portion of the resolution. Keeshan and Ulrich take the position that "the mere existence of undesirable forms of the resolution is not cause to reject the resolution. The only question is whether there is some form of the proposition that is desirable" (201). These theorists conclude that the resolution itself is not the subject of the debate. It merely provides the argumentative ground from which the affirmative formulates a specific proposal (Herbeck and Katsulas). The only function of the debate proposition is to decide whether a specific policy falls within the ground provided by the resolution (Keeshan and Ulrich). Once ground is divided, the affirmative is responsible only to formulate a plan which is a member of the set of all legitimate proposals (Lichtman, Garvin, and Corsi).²

Rejecting Parametrics

There are three reasons to reject the use of parametrics in non-policy debate. The first is that the arguments and theories created to justify the approach are not applicable to non-policy debate. All of these arguments are tied to assumptions that are true only of policy propositions. The second reason to reject parametrics is that the theory is not logically sound in relation to the argumentative requirements of non-policy propositions. Finally, the acceptance of parametrics in non-policy debate allows for deficient advocacy on the part of affirmative teams.

Applying Plan Focus

The question at hand is whether these arguments, which were formulated to justify plan focus in policy debate, are applicable to non-policy debate. Many debaters make the assumption that these arguments are applicable and use them to justify parametrics. The theorists who are responsible for creating these arguments, however, do not make this assumption. In fact, many of them point out that different types of resolutions require different approaches to debate.

According to Ulrich, the specific wording of resolutions is the key to determining the appropriateness of both affirmative and negative strategies such as the use and acceptability of counter-warrants. Because of the interrelationship between facts, values, and policies, many debaters falsely assume that the type of resolution being argued is irrelevant and approach every resolution in the same manner (Dixon and Leslie). If one assumes that a difference does exist between policy propositions and non-policy propositions, models of argumentation developed for policy propositions are not necessarily applicable to non-policy debate (Zarefsky 1979). Herbeck, Katsulas, and Leeper specifically state: "The overarching assumption of our position is that NDT debate is an activity principally designed to teach students how to effectively argue public policy questions" (151).

The differences between policy and non-policy propositions require that debaters approach each type of resolution differently. Fact and value resolutions do not advocate a specific policy or plan of action nor question the desirability of such an action (Dixon and Leslie). The assumption that all resolutions can and should be debated according to a set paradigm such as "policy systems" or "value hierarchy" often leads to a lack of clash and to irrelevant argumentation (Dixon and Leslie). Therefore, it is illogical and argumentatively unsound to apply set paradigms of argument to different types of debate resolutions. Arguments supporting the single-example approach to debate such as time constraints, research limitations, and tradition from NDT, are based on practicality and opinion not on argumentation theory and logical reasoning (Biggers). Even the practical considerations underlying such arguments only find support in relation to policy resolutions. The four major views of the resolution's purpose in debate—*judge jurisdiction*, *area of discussion*, *resolutional focus*, and *division of ground*—were developed for policy topics and are not necessarily applicable to non-policy debate (Ulrich).³

If we accept that there is a difference between policy propositions and non-policy propositions, then we must accept that the purpose of a policy resolution is different from that of a non-policy resolution. Rather than demonstrating the benefits of specific public policy proposals, non-policy debate is the demonstration of the relative or probable truth of the resolutional statement (Berube 1991). By convention in NDT, affirmatives are allowed to defend a single policy proposal rather than debating the entire resolution. The absence of policies and specific plans in CEDA resolutions creates a different approach and requires that an affirmative prove the resolution true on balance (Ulrich).⁴ In non-policy debate the resolution often represents a societal controversy, and to win a debate the affirmative must be able to support an on-balance judgment that considers all examples relevant to that resolution and controversy (Brownlee). This does not require the affirmative to discuss all possible examples of the resolution. The affirmative must, however, be prepared to defend the inductive strength of the example(s) it does discuss.

Lichtman and Rohrer, in their discussion of the policy-systems approach to debate, differentiate between means of evaluating policy propositions and means of evaluating fact and value propositions. For fact and value propositions, they argue that debaters present

arguments for and against the proposition, and the judge determines the relative or probable truth of the proposition according to these arguments. One of the major perspectives applied to value debate is that, by voting affirmative, the critic is telling others that the resolution is probably true (Ulrich). In arguing value topics, the use of value extrapolation as a standard approach asks if the single affirmative example proves that the resolutive value should be adopted as a whole, thus considering the individual example as either a symbol or metaphor for the entire topic (Vasilius). All of these arguments conclude that non-policy resolutions serve a different purpose than policy resolutions. Based on this conclusion, I contend that the theories and arguments written to defend the plan-focus approach to policy debate do not justify the use of parametrics in non-policy debate.

Logical Assumptions

Berube (1991) notes that many CEDA debaters are fond of quoting Panetta and Dolley's article justifying topical counterplans as a source of logical support for parametrics. Berube also accurately points out that Panetta and Dolley's interpretation of Copi's (1961) discussion of *substitution instance* and propositional functions is flawed. A substitution instance, according to Panetta and Dolley, is a specific example used to prove the truth of a resolution or proposition. They believe that false substitution instances, or examples which would prove the proposition false (counter-warrants), do not disprove a proposition because proving the truth of a resolution with a true substitution instance is a deductive argument (Panetta and Dolley). Berube (1991) argues, however, that debate resolutions are not propositions in the sense that Copi discusses propositions and propositional functions and, therefore, are not open to substitution instance as a means of resolutive proof in debate. In fact, Copi's (1968) discussion of propositional functions and substitution instance is a description of the process of forming propositions from propositional functions by substituting specific examples or generalizations, not the process of proving propositional statements true by substituting specific examples.

Panetta and Dolley's interpretation of Copi is essentially the reverse of his explanation of propositional functions and substitution instance. According to Copi, substitution instance as a means of propositional proof assumes that an individual arguer is attempting to prove that all examples of a class possess a certain property or characteristic. The example of the "advertising" topic applies to this discussion. A correct interpretation of Copi's notion of substitution instance as applied to this topic would require an affirmative to accept the burden of arguing that the detrimental effects of the particular example they presented were true of "advertising" as a whole. Substitution instance is a method of disproving inferences related to categorical syllogisms. In other words, this is the process of identifying an example that disproves the assumptions of the major premise in a syllogism. This presents a problem for Panetta and Dolley's interpretation of propositional functions.

Applied to debate, my interpretation would suggest that negatives could use substitution instance as a method of disproving affirmative generalizations. According to this model, as Copi explains it, only the negative can argue deductively. This would seem to contradict Panetta and Dolley's interpretation, which argues that counter-warrants are illegitimate because true substitution instances are not susceptible to the discovery of alternate instances (Berube 1991). Placed within this model of argumentation, any negative example would disprove the affirmative generalization and, therefore, prove that the propositional statement is false.

Burdens of Affirmative Advocacy

Though Panetta and Dolley's interpretation of Copi's arguments is arguably incorrect and their approach to resolutive debate invalid, their motive for arguing the legitimacy of topical counterplans is completely justified. They are correct when they argue: "There is no reason why the affirmative should be shielded from discussion of the substantive issues of the problem area" (170). Allowing parametrics, however, does shield the affirmative from discussion of substantive issues; as Berube (1991) notes, "Parametric topicality is designed to freeze the negative out of the debate" (23). Parametrics allows the affirmative arbitrarily to decide which issues it will defend and allows the avoidance of other issues such as significance and representativeness. This feature of parametrics decreases affirmative burdens and represents a clear departure from the arguments that support plan focus in policy debate.

Policy resolutions are argued according to a substantial base of theory and a significant tradition which delineate a well-known and accepted set of guidelines known as "stock issues" (Young and Gaske). A broad consensus exists in policy debate as to decision rules and standards for evaluation of policy questions (Zarefsky, 1980). The lack of such a consensus in non-policy debate represents a major flaw in the theory and practice of parametric topicality. Most debaters mistakenly assume that the predominance of the plan-focus view in NDT justifies its application to non-policy resolutions, in the form of parametrics, and at the same time claim that the lack of specific policy requirements justifies the avoidance of the traditional stock issues of solvency, inherency, and significance. What proponents of parametrics fail to recognize is that the traditional stock issues in policy debate act as a check against affirmative abuse. If the debate community does not actively require affirmatives to defend these issues as an integral part of their burden of proof, the check ceases to exist. We should not allow affirmatives to create ground on which only they can stand. It is illogical to allow the affirmative to prove the resolution with examples yet not allow the negative to disprove the resolution with examples (Berube 1991). Any attempt by the affirmative to prevent the negative from introducing counter-warrants or counter-examples is illegitimate if those examples fall topically within the parameters established by affirmative definitions (O'Dor).

the demands of the resolution. Allowing affirmatives to operationally define terms through the use of parametrics is equal to adding words to the resolution to justify the affirmative case. This type of addition and alteration is not justified on any grounds (Lichtman and Chandler).⁷ Parametrics must become an abuse of the past, and those who wish to compete in debate must be held to a higher and more logically justified standard of argumentation. This essay provides a legitimate and feasible solution to the problem of parametrics. If affirmatives simply will accept reasonable burdens of argumentation, a standard of debate which more accurately parallels policy debate can exist which provides fair and tentative ground for both affirmatives and negatives.

Notes

- ¹ A small number of articles and or text books have discussed the use of an example-based approach to affirmative debate, but none have advocated or endorsed the use of parametrics.
- ² The debate in NDT over plan focus versus resolutorial focus has been settled for some time. Though the various articles supporting plan focus suffer greatly from a lack of logical support, it is not the purpose of this paper to re-hash the time-worn arguments between the opposing sides on this issue. This paper admits that while there may be some reasons for allowing a plan focus approach in policy debate, the arguments used to support this approach are not applicable to non-policy debate.
- ³ Plan focus should be included in this list due to the fact that it has been the main focus of disagreement in debate in regard to the issue of resolutorial approaches.
- ⁴ This paper does not assume that CEDA debate is necessarily value or even non-policy debate; it is not the event that CEDA once again returns to policy resolutions, the conventions and practices of policy debate which are applicable. It is the absence of these resolutions in current CEDA debate that makes the arguments in this paper applicable and necessary.
- ⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the affirmative burden of interpretation see Dixon and Leslie (1984).
- ⁶ For a more detailed explanation of legitimate inductive standards see Berube (1984).
- ⁷ This was originally an argument against Bile's (1987) article on debating the "whole resolution." The concept, however, applies equally well to the practice of parametric topicality.

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