

BACK TO BASICS: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH TO VALUE PROPOSITION DEBATE

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It is better to debate a question without settling
it than to settle a question without debate.

- Joubert

While the annals of speech pedagogy are littered with examples of value propositions used for both academic and popular debate, competitive inter-collegiate forensics has too often reduced the proposition of value to a lesser status; both theory and practice in recent years has centered upon propositions of policy. Recently there have been efforts to deviate from this policy expectation. The CEDA debate association (redundant phrase) has offered its entrants propositions of value for practice. Meanwhile, various individuals and the CEDA organization itself have tried to remedy the theory vacuum. Yet despite these efforts, value proposition debate has seemed unable to divorce itself from the practices and traditions of "NDT" debate. Is the popularity of CEDA also its nemesis? Must all debate devolve into "fast-talking, evidence-reading sessions with weird analysis and even weirder cases?" (I nearly-quote a colleague here). My own response is that value proposition debate in the CEDA manner is indeed possible, and possible without artificial checks on cases or evidence. I suggest that a cross-cultural perspective can provide an excellent basis for the exploration of value propositions.

Consider an example. The 1979-80 CEDA topic focused on the desirability of requiring a period of national service for all United States citizens. In the main, affirmative teams focused on the need for particular types of national service: military service, public service, even education and tax-paying! While mandatory cardio-pulmonary resuscitation courses or honesty in IRS deductions may seem an odd way to interpret "national service," all such arguments in this line seem an odd way to debate values. You may decide whether something is of value, but not whether something should be held as a value. By placing the emphasis on policy criteria many times removed from values, the values were bypassed, or simply assumed. Territorial integrity for a nation state may be a value, and a value based upon other values, but to consider that value only as translated into arguments on whether the Soviets may or may not be deterred or defeated by our current armed forces does not address the value itself, only the policies surrounding that value. Thus, the emphasis is shifted from consideration of national service, per se, to the present need for a particular type of national service to satisfy a need; the emphasis is shifted from value to policy.

A focus on values, however, may still not be wholly satisfactory. To continue with the same topic used above, the more philosophical and "value oriented" debates I heard were also curiously shallow. In general, these debates involved an overview of the need for a citizen to serve her country, by the affirmative; the negative team would then respond, quoting such sages of Locke and Mill, that such a duty could only be justified in extreme circumstances. The debate would then shift to a consideration of whether such circumstances were sufficiently extreme. The idea of values is identified with philosophy or abstraction, a view not necessarily accurate, and the whole once

again focuses on policy. As I will discuss below, the problem is not merely the policy focus, but the shallow, culturally limited value discussion.

Somewhat belatedly, I must admit that there is no harm in treating value propositions as policy propositions. If those in CEDA wish to label their propositions one thing and treat them as another, no little brains will become particularly warped. I am distressed at the use of those same argumentative constructs as are used to test policies, to test values. There seems to be an opportunity cost involved when people unnecessarily limit the scope of their argument.

Although I would never claim that a value should be, or even can be, divorced from its policy implications, such implications need not be the focal point of discussion. A value may be good in and of itself. Courage, for example, is generally held to be a laudable trait, but few would say that it should be an absolute factor for determining behavior. Indeed, such cliches as "Discretion is the better part of valor" suggest that courage should be tempered by wisdom. Yet to argue that we should not value courage because courage alone can lead to foolish action ignores the cultural context of courage and makes the argument shallow and silly.

It is at this point that the vacuum in both theory and practice becomes apparent; the rejection of policy paradigms for value argument gives no clue as to how values should be argued. Debate theory itself may not hold any answer. The narrow, culture-specific manner in which the entire topic is approached may well be the root of the problem. By operating from our current cultural assumptions the only "real life" question in many debates is "does the circumstance fit the criteria?", a path which leads to policy or fact investigation. The criteria themselves are excluded from investigation, as our culture considers them as "given." A quick review of recent topics, such as education, national service, environment or church and state relations should provide examples of how the value was bypassed in favor of criteria-fit.

An alternative strategy is the removal of the debate from its cultural context. For example, while "national service" or "national security" is a value, there are other, competing values. Might global government not be preferable to nation states? Might anarchy not be superior? Does a citizen owe any involuntary duty? Does the individual exist only to serve the state? Or take a more recent topic: should there be a difference between church and state? Does information provide a good or unneeded conflict? Should rulers be decided by majority or salient minority? Such questions evolve around very profound differences in values; differences so profound as to be fundamental. If there is no agreement on the desirability of a nation, there is not likely any agreement on the conditions of national service. If the church and state dichotomy is discarded, involvement by religious groups in the electoral process will be viewed as positive. Thus, although policy questions are still involved, discussion of specific policies is suspended until the underlying values are resolved.

Immediately, three questions spring up: First, policy considerations are still present; second, because some values are so deeply rooted in the American culture, the speaker wishing to counter those values must use a different cultural context to find support for such values; third, such cross-cultural concepts are outside the experience of most American undergraduates, and are also outside the experience of most debate critics.

To provide a circuitous response to these issues, consider my own "operational definition" of values, that is: the beliefs or attitudes which underly policy or behavior. Scant as it may be, such a definition seems to be compatible with more formal definitions. Dale Hample suggests values "are thought to typify both people and cultures by defining proper (or good or acceptable) action and behavior" (1977, p. 106). Ron Matton insists that "a proposition of value is a qualitative judgement . . ." (1978, p. 195). Bruce Gronbeck suggests value propositions are "intermediates between the world of fact and the world of advice" (1968, p. 31). Writing from an intercultural perspective, L. E. Sarbaugh explains in part that values are "that set of beliefs that pertain to what is important or unimportant, good-bad or right-wrong" (1979, p. 144). Edward Stewart maintains that in defining values "the one feature that is common to all usages is the idea of oughtness" (1972, p. 17). All these definitions support the previous discussion: value is a pre-policy consideration. Thus, by implication, the most appropriate focus for value proposition debate is the pre-policy area.

To return to my three issues, the responses should be fairly apparent. If policy is still present in the debate, fine; the policy consideration is still present, but is not, and should not be, the prime focus. In addition, by shifting away from argument on present policies to universal questions of value, the argument can expand beyond time-specific considerations of immediate need into argument which relies upon logic, philosophy or history rather than current events alone.

On my second question, I welcome the expansion into a cross-cultural perspective. The image of the crude, oblivious, ethnocentric "Ugly American" can apply just as easily to educators and students as to politicians or camera-wielding tourists. If a question demands an answer not found in a student's own cultural milieu, why not go outside that specific culture for the answer? In the case of value propositions, the use of a variety of cultural standpoints allows exploration of the best position, not merely discussion of a position which currently enjoys favor in the United States. A student also need not go past the borders of this country to discover a great variety of cultures which are no less valid because they hold minority views.

The third issue, lack of preparedness, is not a reason to reject cross-cultural efforts, but to expand pedagogy in the area of debate to include both cross-cultural materials, and tools by which a student may explore cultural diversity, rather than merely her own cultural concepts. The second part of this issue, that of judge acceptance, a problem non-unique in this one area. I remain optimistic that any critic is willing to accept a quality argument, whether or not it is unusual; even better, if both teams agree to discard cultural restrictions on argument, the critic will have no option but compliance.

In short, these particular arguments against arguing value propositions from a cross-cultural perspective are in large part arguments in favor of such a perspective. If intercollegiate debate adheres to its goals of encouraging intellectual development, expanding knowledge, aiding analysis and research abilities, expansion into an intercultural approach seems appropriate. CEDA debate, in particular, would seem an appropriate home for argument which demands more thought than evidence.

What does this mean in practical terms? For a start, the hypothesis-testing paradigm is well suited for both value proposition debate and intercultural argument (See also Vasilius, 1980). While other currently popular paradigms force comparison between only two values; or analyze values in the context of current policy through either a stock issues or systems analysis framework; a paradigm which encourages debate simply against the resolution is both simple and adaptable. As each team is free to select a strategy without being constricted by policy expectations, the debaters can also free themselves from debating or defending "status quo" American values. In practice, no one need even risk the problems inherent in cultural relativism; rather than argue one value as best, the only question is whether the value expressed in the resolution is good. Thus, the debater may draw on material to support her claims without having to rely on the advantages of a single policy, value system or culture.

At least as pragmatic as paradigm selection is value identification. Inasmuch as certain values are embedded in our own culture, that same culture can prevent examination of these values, and other values, by obscuring the possibilities beyond the accepted belief structure. Take a deceptively simple concept, "Women should be equal to men." Focusing wholly on the values in this statement, the analysis seems simple: women should be equal. The problem comes in defining the underlying policies which would indicate equality. This is because the mainstream American value questions on this issue tend to focus on a pro- or anti-ERA position, in which the policy defines the value. Yet this analysis ignores other, no less valid, options. Positions on this issue range from the view that women cannot and should not be equal to men (because they have no souls, they are impure, they are not intelligent, they are evil); through the egalitarian view of separate but equal; the liberal view that women should be equal to men; the androgynous view that women and men should be equal to each other; to the separatist view that equality is a ridiculous concept due to extreme gender differences; or even the view that women should be superior to men. Some of these views may seem poor at first glance, but such an ethnocentric viewpoint ignores the sophisticated reasoning underlying each view, from the most "reactionary" to the most "radical."

There are many sources which can promote a cross-cultural exploration of values. I will suggest three intercultural texts.

American Cultural Patterns, by Edward Stewart, provides an excellent consideration of general American values. Stewart does that which is difficult for an American; he examines American values from an outsider's perspective. Example: Stewart suggests that the "middle class American thinks of . . . doing as his preferred activity" (p. 17). In that one phrase Stewart gives a rationale not only for general value constructs in the United States, but a cause of the terrible problem argument theorists have with the concept of inherency?! Stewart provides a catalog of both specific and general examples; the use of material oriented toward identification of American values can be an initial step in debating values from a cross-cultural perspective.

A plausible second step is delineation of values found outside the dominant American culture. Harris and Moran suggest many different ways to analyze cultural differences in their business text, Managing Cultural

Differences. One technique divides values into U.S. values, alternative values, and outlines the policy implications. A debater could use this as a model, and construct a similar table delineating mainstream U.S. values, alternative values and their effect on arguments. Sarbaugh provides a complicated taxonomy for classifying cultural differences in Intercultural Communication. Such a taxonomy could aid in classifying values and assessing the degree of difference between conflicting values. On the environment/energy topic, for example, a chart showing the values on each side could be prepared. Each value would then be paired with alternative values, and the degree and nature of incompatibility assessed. The debate could then focus on the areas of disagreement, with each side using value arguments that are in conflict, and not merely tangential.

Finally, evidentiary and analytical support for the cross-cultural value positions would have to be assembled. In this process, the traditional Western forms of linear logic, or the traditional sources of debate evidence may not be the best. Why discard, for example, a source "biased" in favor of Marxism? Are not most U.S. sources normally considered "biased" in favor of capitalism?

This essay, rather obviously, is far too brief for the subject. I would hope to see an extension in practice rather than on paper. Given appropriately worded resolutions, sufficiently interested students and encouraging coaches, an intercultural approach to debating value propositions could well construct not only a productive argumentative basis for propositions of value, but an understanding of cultural diversity as well.

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