

WE OUGHT TO BE AFRAID OF "SHOULD" BUT SHOULD

WE BE AFRAID OF "OUGHT?"

Raymond Bud Zeuschner

California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

While I doubt that Franklin Roosevelt thought very much about college debate, I feel his observation that, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," could apply to many of our actions in CEDA. We make decisions often on the basis of an ad populum appeal to fear -- "that sounds like NDT! Heavens!" and the idea is rejected. Indeed, we may be able to profit from the experience of our brethren who spend their time in policy debates. One such lesson may come in the form of learning how to phrase debatable topics. Nothing has caused more frustration and more unsatisfying debates than our topic phrasing. In our fear of sounding "policy-ish" we religiously avoid "should" in our topics. Thus, we get stuck with "is" -- perhaps a worse fate.

In debate after debate over the years, I have had the meaning of "is" debated for me, when I really wanted to hear about the substantive issues involved. Does "is" mean just for now? Is there a future "is?" Is there a past "is?" I have been told there is an eternal "is" - i.e., "Jesus is Lord!" which clearly does not mean for the hour of the debate round, but stretching at least infinitely forward, and probably backwards as well when used by people to express their faith. I have heard attorneys complain after hearing one of these nonsense discussions, "Why are they quibbling over the verb and ignoring the substance?" I did not have a very good answer.

If we are serious about debating about values, and doing what Zarefsky calls, "value comparisons" then we need to adopt a perspective formally which matches the one most of us share informally. We need to be judgemental in our topics to alleviate the present tense of "is." We cannot depend on such winners as "desirable" to get to the judgement, because the verb still ties the judgement to a possible time frame. When we debated the "Energy vs. Environment" topic, many a team tried to support the proposition as a claim of fact -- energy is more important than the environment, when most of us were listening for debates which would support a rationale for placing one or the other on a higher value plane -- which one should be more important? Try that for a proposition -- "Resolved: that Energy needs should be more important than Environmental protection." Say it aloud. That didn't hurt, did it? Does anyone seriously think that this phrasing mandates a munificently funded board of self-perpetuating experts who have all necessary information, being removed only for mis- or non-? The reason we may feel uneasy is because of the convention governing the use of "should" in intercollegiate debate. Our general audiences would be perfectly happy to hear a value debate with the above phrasing, yet we have been so trained by our tradition, that we see the word, "should" and immediately elbow-jerk to the flip side of the flow for the plan.

Take the Spring 1983 topic (please!), "Resolved: That the individual right of privacy is more important than any other Constitutional right." And

so, in quarter-finals I hear the elegant argument, "Do you mean March 1983 'is' or for the whole decade, or for the whole of Western Civilization 'is'?" EGAD. I want to listen about privacy and the constitutional protections and instead I get semantic gyrations about the verb. S.I. Hayakawa observed that "is" is probably one of the most dangerous words in our language, except when used as an auxiliary verb. He may be right on this one. So how do we get out of the trivia often called for with "is" and avoid the pernicious connotations of "should?" As I am a victim of my training, I have a plan.

We could simply appropriate the word "ought" as a CEDA convention. "Resolved: That the individual right of privacy ought to be more important than other Constitutional rights." "Resolved: That Energy ought to be more important than Environment." Immediately, several things happen to our advantage.

First, we weigh the relative merits or values involved about adopting the proposition, not whether or not the proposition itself is a question of fact or value. Secondly, presumption can be immediately assigned back to the negative if we do our phrasing correctly, and the judgement as to whether or not the affirmative is prima facie becomes easier.

"Ought" is helpful, although often found to be synonymous with "should," it does not have that connotation or convention in the world of debate. Even better, in the world of dictionary, "ought" is filled with value overtones. Webster's New World Dictionary gives us, "an auxiliary used with the infinitives of various verbs to express: 1. obligation or duty: as, he ought to pay his debts. 2. desirability: as, you ought to eat more slowly. 3. expectancy or probability: as, I ought to be through by Monday."² Notice that none of these have the specificity attached in our minds of "should" and the conditional tense is expressed directly. Webster underscores the relevance to our value-orientation with the #2 definition - desirability. A look to the World Book Encyclopedia Dictionary gives us "1. to have a duty, to be obliged, 2. to be right or suitable, 3. to be wise, 4. to be expected, 5. to be very likely."³ And if that is not enough, let me turn to Black's, where we find, ". . . although generally directory only, will be taken as mandatory if the context requires it."⁴ which does not define the word at all, leaving it up to regular or normal dictionary definitions. If we create a context through our intercollegiate practices, we can avoid any problems with interpretation, and focus in on the judgmental, evaluative nature of "ought" defined earlier.

For its major benefit of assigning presumption more clearly and getting us out of the often silly communication of verb tense arguments, I feel that CEDA should indeed change its policy and adopt the one-plank plan offered -- put "ought" into our resolutions.

NOTES

¹David Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument" in Don Brownlee, ed., Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument, CEDA, 1980.

²Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, (College Ed.), World Publishing Co., New York, p. 1039.

³The World Book Dictionary, Vol. II, Doubleday and Co., New York, 1979, p. 1473.

⁴Black's Law Dictionary, Henry Campbell Black, Revised Fourth Edition, 1968.