

THE NATURE OF THE TOPIC IN VALUE DEBATE

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That the resolution plays an important part in debate is clear to any casual observer of the debate process. The resolution creates expectations for both judges and debaters; it influences the decision of debaters to debate; it determines the direction debaters take in researching; and it guides debaters in selecting arguments. The resolution is frequently the topic of discussion of debaters and coaches outside the debate round, as they look forward to working on some topics and they dread the debating of others. Despite the importance of the topic, there has been little discussion of the nature of the topic in value debate, and that discussion often is a minor part of a larger essay.¹ In addition, many debaters and coaches in CEDA assume that the same principles that govern topicality in policy debate apply to value debate.

This essay will examine the nature of the resolution in value debate. Four specific issues will be explored. First, what is the function of the resolution in value debate? Second, how should we define terms in value debate? Third, is topicality a voting issue in value debate? Finally, what, if any, is the role of counterwarrants in value debate?

THE FUNCTION OF THE RESOLUTION

In policy debate, there are at least four views of the resolution's purpose. One view suggests that the purpose of the resolution is to determine the jurisdiction of the judge.² A second view suggests that the resolution provides an area of discussion.³ Third, it is suggested that the resolution is the focus of the debate.⁴ Finally, it is argued that the resolution exists to divide argumentative ground between the two teams in the debate.⁵

All four of these approaches were developed with policy topics in mind. It is unclear if these approaches are useful for value-oriented debate. Since there is no plan in value debate, the first approach to topicality seems to be of little use. The other approaches would lead to contradictory implications, depending upon which was utilized. For example, the third approach would legitimize counterwarrants, while the fourth would not.

In order to determine the best approach to evaluating topicality in CEDA debate, it would be desirable to decide what an affirmative vote means in value debate. There are at least two possible meanings of an affirmative vote. First, an affirmative vote may imply that the judge supports the value implied by the resolution.⁶ A judge votes affirmative, from this perspective, if the judge believes the resolution is probably true. This is an internal commitment; it need not be communicated to anyone else. The second view of the

meaning of the affirmative vote is that it communicates the support of the resolution to others. From this perspective, if I vote affirmative it means that I am telling others that the resolution is probably true, and I assume that others may act under the assumption that the resolution is true. Regardless of the view taken by a judge, these two perspectives should influence the way the judge views the debate.

STANDARDS FOR TOPICALITY IN CEDA

One of the major disputes in policy debate is whether topicality disputes should be resolved by using the best definition standard, or whether the affirmative team should be allowed to use any reasonable definition. While many of the issues raised by this controversy have only minor applicability to value debate, there are numerous reasons why, in CEDA, the best definition standard should be used.

First, unlike in policy debate, in value debate the definition of terms is an integral part of the stock issues of the resolution. In value debate, there are two stock issues: the definitive issue and the designative issue. The definitive issue is essentially an issue of definition: what do we mean by good, desirable, beneficial, etc? Like any other stock issue, this issue is best evaluated by determining which side has the superior arguments on the issue. This would suggest that the best definition standard should be employed. We do not resolve other issues by asking if one side has a "reasonable" position; we ask which side has the best support for their position. Why should this stock issue be treated differently from any other issue?

In addition, part of the reason CEDA was created was to prevent what were perceived abuses of the topic in NDT debate. The best way to achieve this goal is to use a rigorous method of resolving topicality positions. This would suggest that we develop methods for determining the intent of the resolution.⁷

The best definition is also consistent with the purpose of the resolution. If we are asked to support the resolution, we need to ask ourselves what the resolution means, either as a statement to ourselves as to the nature of our beliefs, or as a statement to others as to the probable state of affairs in the world. In either case, precision would be desirable. When philosophers debate over what is the nature of "good" or "justice" or other terms, they do not accept the first "reasonable" definition; they seek to discover the best possible definition. In a similar manner, we should attempt to discover the

best definition of the terms in the resolution before we support that resolution.

IS TOPICALITY A VOTING ISSUE?

In policy debate, most people assume that topicality is a voting issue, and most CEDA theorists assume that the same is the case for value debate.⁸ While topicality is clearly an important issue in value debate, I do not think that topicality, by itself, is a voting issue in value debate; instead topicality arguments in CEDA should operate as extratopicality arguments function in policy debate.

In policy debate, the resolution determines the appropriateness of the affirmative plan. In value debate, however, there is no plan, so the resolution has another function; it determines what we are talking about. When the judge resolves the topicality dispute, the judge determines what the debate should be about. This does not mean that the negative team winning topicality will necessarily win the debate. An example may clarify this.

Suppose on the resolution "Resolved: that the death penalty is just," the affirmative team argues that by just, we mean that capital punishment is consistent with natural law. The negative team argues that this is not the case; by just we mean it is in the interest of society. If the negative wins this topicality issue, it does not mean they win the round; the affirmative could prove capital punishment is in the interest of society and justify the resolution using the negative definitions. The topicality position makes all arguments related to natural law irrelevant, operating as an extratopicality argument.

On the nuclear freeze topic, a team would not win by arguing the resolution required a permanent freeze instead of a temporary freeze; they would have to demonstrate why this distinction made some difference in the way the debate should be resolved. It is very possible that the judge may decide that, regardless of whether the freeze is permanent or temporary, it is a good idea. That would make the topicality argument irrelevant unless the negative team can prove that a permanent freeze would create some significant problems that would not be present with a temporary freeze. This would require winning several arguments in addition to the topicality issue. In short, topicality by itself would not be a voting issue, although tied with other issues (e.g., arguing that the resolution is untrue, given negative definitions) it can be a critical issue.

COUNTERWARRANTS IN CEDA

While there are numerous arguments against counterwarrants in policy debate,⁹ it is unclear that these arguments apply to counterwarrants in value debate. Initially, the resolution in value debate would seem to have a different function than the resolution in policy debate. In policy debate, by tradition, we have allowed debaters to select a single policy to defend. Even though there may be other ways to view the topic, by convention it is assumed that the entire topic is not debated. The result is that NDT tends to use broad topics that cannot be debated in their entirety.

This is not the case in CEDA. If anything, there is a dominant viewpoint that the entire resolution should be debated in CEDA, not just a part of the resolution.¹⁰ Many individuals feel that CEDA was created, at least partially, as a reaction to unusual cases that focused on one corner of the resolution. Thus, the view of the community toward the topic is different in CEDA than in policy debate, suggesting that the entire topic should be debated in CEDA. This would legitimize counterwarrants in CEDA.

It is also probable that value topics differ from policy topics in a way that may legitimize counterwarrants. In policy debate, specific policies are debated, while there are no policies that are debated in CEDA. This would require a different approach. Take the resolution, "that higher education has sacrificed quality for institutional survival." There are three ways to evaluate this topic. First, the judge could let the affirmative defend any single example of higher education they desire. They could choose one department in one college that has sacrificed quality, and they would win if they won that example. At the other extreme, the negative could argue that if they could find any department anywhere that had not sacrificed quality, then they should win.

Both these extremes are unreasonable. Besides pragmatic problems (they would place unreasonable burdens on the other team and require impossible research efforts), they are inconsistent with the function of the value topic. When one supports a value topic one means that the topic, on balance, is true. If I say a school is good, I imply not that all characteristics of that school are good, but that, on balance, the school is good. To view value resolutions differently would lead to absurd conclusions. Hitler could be said to be a good man since he was kind to a few friends. We could condemn a justice system because of one error. This is not how judgments are made about values in real

life; instead value judgments are made by looking at the entirety of value implications. The same should be the case in CEDA.

This approach will not have detrimental effects in CEDA. All examples discussed in the debate must conform to the best definition standard, so extreme examples would be irrelevant. In addition, since the judge makes an on-balance determination at the end of the round, both teams have an incentive to select important issues instead of focusing on minor issues.

This position should be qualified. David Zarefsky has noted that there are at least five types of value resolutions.¹¹ The assumption has been made by many theorists that all value resolutions should be treated alike. This position is of dubious validity. While many of the arguments discussed in this essay (as well as other essays on value debate) may apply to numerous value propositions, in the final analysis it is the wording of the resolution, not general theoretical discussions of value resolutions, that should determine the validity of certain negative strategies.

For example, if the resolution were "Resolved: That all attempts to censor are justified," counterwarrants would clearly be warranted, regardless of any theoretical objections to that strategy. Similarly, a resolution worded "Resolved: That it is possible to justify censorship," would preclude a negative strategy of counterwarrants. While the arguments in this essay address general arguments about the nature of resolutions in value debate, the applicability of these arguments to a specific debate depends upon the wording of the resolution.

Unlike policy debate, however, where the subject of dispute can be narrowed through the introduction of a plan, there is no way to narrow a value topic except through narrow definitions.¹² Debaters should ask what it means to support a resolution of value, and this should influence the way counterwarrants and other issues relating to the nature of a value resolution should be evaluated.

The topic is a very important element in any debate, but it is important for debaters to recognize that all types of topics are not alike. It is vital that we recognize that value topics are not the same as policy topics, and that topicality issues are different in value debate than in policy debate. This essay has attempted to explore some of the implications of these differences.

NOTES

¹Articles addressing the issue of topicality in CEDA include Beverly Merrill Kelley, "An Alternative to NDT Debate," in Contributions on the Philosophy and Practice of CEDA, edited by Don Brownlee (CEDA, 1981), pp. 9-10; Don Brownlee, "In Search of Topicality: Definitions and Contexts," in Brownlee, pp. 32-33; Michael D. Bartanen, "The Role of Values in Policy Controversies," in CEDA Yearbook 1982, edited by Don Brownlee (CEDA, 1982), p. 23; and James E. Tomlinson, "The Philosophy and Development of CEDA," in CEDA Yearbook 1983, edited by Don Brownlee (CEDA, 1983), pp. 2-3.

²See Walter Ulrich, "A Judicial Paradigm for the Evaluation of Debates," paper presented at the November 1983 Convention of the Speech Communication Association for a critical evaluation of this view of the topic.

³This is the assumption behind the topical counterplan. See Edward Panetta, "The Topical Counterplan: Reasserting Negative Ground," in Alternatives in Education: Stagnation or Renewal? edited by Allan D. Louden and Roger E. Solt (Winston-Salem: Debater's Research Guide, 1981), pp. 9-12.

⁴See James W. Paulsen and Jack L. Rhodes, "The Counter-Warrant as a Negative Strategy: A Modest Proposal," The Journal of the American Forensic Association, XV (Spring, 1979), 204.

⁵Marjorie Keeshan and Walter Ulrich, "A Critique of the Counter-Warrant as a Negative Strategy," The Journal of the American Forensic Association, XVI (Winter, 1980), 199.

⁶This view is consistent with the hypothesis testing paradigm. See Walter Ulrich, "Philosophical Systems as Paradigms for Value Debate," in CEDA Yearbook 1983, pp. 22-28.

⁷See Brownlee, pp. 32-33.

⁸Jan Vasilius, "Value Proposition Debate: A Pragmatic Approach," in Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument, edited by Don Brownlee (CEDA, 1980), p. 51.

⁹Keeshan and Ulrich, pp. 199-203.

¹⁰See, for example, Robert C. Rowland, "The Philosophical Suppositions of Value Debate," in Argument in Transition: Proceedings of the Third Summer Conference on Argumentation, edited by David Zarefsky, Malcolm O. Sillars and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, Virginia: Speech Communication Association, October 15, 1983), pp. 824-828.

¹¹David Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument," in Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument, pp. 9-16.

¹²Even if a team accepts the inapplicability of counterwarrants, at least the affirmative should be responsible for all implications of the resolution discussed in the first affirmative. The examples in the first affirmative at least contextually define the resolution. To permit the affirmative to drop these examples makes the first negative meaningless, decreases clash, and creates confusion about the meaning of the resolution.