The Function of Criteria in Non-Policy Argumentation: Burdens & Approaches

Mark A. Cole, Carroll College
Ronald G. Boggs, Oregon State University
Kevin M. Twohy, Carroll College

Where are the values in value debate? How are those values compared? And what is a superior value? In perhaps no other area of non-policy debate is there a greater need for clarification than in the role of value standards, decision rules, or criteria. Too much of the actual value argumentation employed by debaters relies on vague criteria or circular, self-fulfilling decision rules. Much of this confusing and unsound argumentation is due to an incomplete understanding of the role of criteria. Though much of the existing value debate theory pertains to criteria, the gap between debate theory and debate practice is wide. By drawing from existing theory on value criteria and values in general, this article will set forth a number of requirements or burdens that will apply to most, if not all, non-policy propositions.

Clarifying Criteria

Before discussing the burdens that apply to criteria, the concept must be clarified. Keefe, Harte and Norton define criteria as "factors that serve as standards or tests for evaluating the worth of a belief or a course of action. Criteria are the main issues in propositions of value." [1]

The importance of criteria cannot be underestimated. Numerous theorists support the notion that criteria arguments are a necessary or even a prima facie burden in non-policy argumentation. [2] Church and Wilbanks argue that

> the affirmative team has the burden of defending the proposition and therefore must provide and must defend a criterion or set of criteria. Without criteria or equivalent arguments defining the key evaluative terms, non-policy propositions would be neither understood nor debated. [3]

Facts, in and of themselves, are value-neutral or meaningless to the outcome of a debate. Once the facts are measured in accordance with the standards set up in the criteria, a value judgment can be assessed. In this sense, a criteria does not simply name a value that one team wishes to defend, but rather, sets up standards to weigh competing values proposed by both teams.

The Function of Criteria

Church and Wilbanks suggest that the function of criteria for propositions of value is unique. They write that

> The criteria dealing with values must specify a method by which the strengths and weaknesses of the values can be mutually and simultaneously evaluated. Weighing contrasting elements, as we have already learned, might be an option in debating propositions of inference, but such a balancing measure is essential in debating value propositions . . . . The selection of such a measure, or criteria, provides the basis for balancing the relative advantages or disadvantages of the competing values. [4]

Our discussion of the function of criteria will establish a number of requirements or burdens that must be met by a well reasoned criterion. The intent of establishing burdens for criteria arguments is not to give the negative team a list of presses, but rather to make value based argumentation clearer through strong, explicit affirmative criteria and also to assist in clarifying voting issues inherent to non-policy propositions.

Matlon has popularized the notion of two stock issues for propositions of value. He explains

> They are most often called the "definitive issue" and the "designative issue." The first issue poses this question: "Are certain specific definitions or criteria available to justify the judgment claimed in the propositions?" Here, value standard(s) are made explicit . . . . The second issue poses this question: "Do the beliefs, values, or facts in the proposition conform to the definitions or criteria?" Here, the characteristics of the person, object, event, etc., must fulfill the conditions for the assignment of the value standard(s). [5]

Though the definitive and designative issues are necessary stock issues in

value propositions, we believe that there are subsidiary burdens that must be met in order to allow the criteria to function in the manner described by Church and Wilbanks. For example, Matlon has called for the explication of the value standard(s). But the need for explicitness implies more specific burdens. The standard must be stated in the first affirmative speech. This prevents the affirmative from shifting arguments and allows both teams to address criteria issues early in the debate. In this sense, criteria should be treated as jurisdictional issues. Young and Gaske write that "the negative team may present arguments that the affirmative has failed to meet its prima facie burdens -- it has failed to present and justify a valid 'decision rule' or value system . . . ." [6] Because of the prima facie and jurisdictional nature of criteria, the negative team must address the affirmative's criteria in the first negative speech. Failure to do so grants the affirmative criteria as the only jurisdiction for the round. It should be noted that this establishment of jurisidiction must not be self-fulfilling for either team, but that it should allow for competing values to be compared. For example, an established standard for measurement is necessary to compare which is more important, democracy or capitalism.

Another requirement in making standards explicit is the avoidance of vagueness. A criterion is vague when in the context of ther resolution, no clear meaning can be attached to the evaluative term or phrase. A classic example of a vague criterion is national security. Just what exactly is national security? This concept requires further explanation before it can be debated clearly. Jack Ray feels that "too much of our value argumentation involves 'fuzzy edges, like fleecy clouds . . . .When we reason or argue ideas that involve loose or vague concepts, we should

locate and specify a territory within the loose concept." [7] Arguing a vague criterion without specifying a territory is fallacious argumentation and leads to unclear analysis.

Closely associated with specification of the territory is the idea of establishing a threshold. Church and Wilbanks explain that "A threshold is the point at which the condition justifies the evaluation." [8] The discussion below captures the probability connected with establishing the threshold:

> Though truth is sometimes a matter of black or white, much more often it ranges through a whole spectrum of colors. One catches a train or fails to catch it. An electric light is on or it is off. On the other hand, a govenment will never be simply "good" or "bad," for here the range of possible variations is infinite. Where a situation requires a relative judgment, it is a fallacy to wrap up a judgment into one hasty bundle labeled All or Nothing. Good or Bad Blameworthy or Blameless. [9]

Non-policy argumentation often centers on these borderline questions rather than on absolute questions of good and bad. Criteria should provide the way to establish a threshold.

With the topic Resolved, That censorship is justified to defend the national security of the United States, it was necessary to establish threshold arguments. Since not all type or conditions of censorship could reasonably be argued as justified, the establishment of a threshold was warranted. After the term "national security" was made explicit by specifying the territory most relevant for discussion, a threshold was needed to determine when censorship was justified. Establishing a threshold provided a demarcation point specifying what was required of the affirmative team in order to justify the resolution.

When a vague evaluative term or phrase is debated as having impacts rooted in a risk or threat assessment of future harm, then not only should the value term be made explicit and a threshold set, but also the

probability or propensity of that risk/threat be given. For example, it would be reasonable for a negative team, when confronted with an affirmative claim that any risk of future harm justifies the resolution, to demand explicitness, a threshold, and a high probability that this harm would actually occur. If the affirmative team cannot answer all three of these burdens then the negative should win the debate.

Justification of Criteria

Probably the most overlooked aspect of criteria argumentation is not the criteria themselves but the justification of the criteria. Barry argues that "if we are interested in giving reasons for a moral [value] judgment, we must at some point appeal to and defend the moral [value] standard on which it is based." [10]

The critic of a non-policy debate needs to have justifications for standards introduced by both teams in order to determine which standards are better. One method of criteria justification encouraged by some theorists (notably Matlon and Ulrich) is that of employing a philosophical belief system. If this is the justification method, debaters have a variety of perspectives from which to draw. However, a burden emerging from this justification method is the ethical system's universality. Matlon explains that

> According to Toulmin it is possible to draft general, field dependent rules of ethical inference. . . . Now, in order for rule to really be a rule, it must be universalizable. Ethical statements that cannot be universalized within the field of ethics or, at the very least within the universe of the topic, generally cannot be accepted as moral rules. [11]

This is to say that the ethical standard upon which the criteria is based must be universally applicable to value questions contained within the resolution.

Counter-Criteria

Because criteria are prima facie in nature, the negative can refute the affirmative criteria and thus justify a negative ballot. Additionally, Bartanen believes that the negative may opt to provide alternative criteria, but these must be justified and demonstrated superior to those of the affirmative. Whereas, Bartanen suggests the second negative as the speech for presenting counter-criteria, the affirmative jurisdictional criteria should be initially refuted by the first negative speaker. By providing alternative criteria the negative established a method by which the affirmative case can be shown to fail to measure up to the resolution. Counter-criteria also provide a means, other than the affirmative's criteria, by which the negative off case argumentation may be weighed. The burdens of explicitness, threshold, probability, and justification apply equally to counter-criteria as they apply to affirmative criteria.

Summary

The intent of this article has been to provide some direction to clarify the role of criteria in non-policy argumentation. The definitive and designative stock issues have received considerable support, but a number of subsidiary burdens exist upon the definitive issue: explicitness, threshold, probability, and justification. Use of these four burdens will help focus non-policy debates as well as to specify realistic voting issues that can be used to resolve non-policy controversy.

Notes

[1] Carolyn Keefe, Thomas B. Harte, and Laurence E. Norton, Introduction to Debate, (New York: Macmillan, 1982) p. 360.

[2] See David A. Thomas and Maridell Fryar, "Value Resolutions, Presumption and Stock Issues," in Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation, ed. George Ziegelmueller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association, 1981),pp. 527-528; Rob Norton, "Reno Tournament Judging Survey" (Humbolt State University, Mimeograph, 1980), cited by Beverly M. Kelley, "An Alternative to NDT Debate," in The Philosophy and Practice of CEDA, ed. Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association, 1981), p. 12; Ronald J. Matlon, "Propositions of Value: An Inquiry into Issue Analysis and the Locus of Presumption," in Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Confernce on Argumentation, ed. George Ziegelmueller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, VA: Speech Communiation Association, 1981) pp.496-498 and 502-504; David Zarefsky, "Criteria for Evaluating Non-Policy Argument," in Perspectives on Non-Policy Argument, ed. Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association, 1980), p.15; George W. Young and Paul C. Gaske, "On Prima Facie Value Argumentation: The Policy Implication Affirmative," in CEDA Yearbook, ed. Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association, 1984), pp. 25; Russell T. Church and Charles Wilbanks, Values and Policies in Controvery: An Introduction to Argumentation and Debate (Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, 1986), p. 54; Anway M. Jones and Stephen W.Crawford, "Justification of Values in Terms of Action: Rationale for a Modified Policy-Making Paradigm in Value Debate," in CEDA Yearbook, ed. Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association,1984). p. 12.

[3] Church and Wilbanks, p. 50.

[4] Church and Wilbanks, p. 54.

[5] Matlon, p. 496.

[6] Young and Gaske, p. 26.

[7] Matlon, p. 497.

[8] Church and Wilbanks, p. 52.

[9] Ward Fearnside and William B. Holther, Fallacy: The Counterfeit of Argument (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p.30.

[10] Vincent Barry, Applying Ethics, 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1985),p. 13.

[11] Matlon, p. 505.

[12] Michael D. Bartanen, "The Role of Values in Policy Controversies," CEDA Yearbook, ed., Don Brownlee (Cross Examination Debate Association, 1982), p. 24.