WHEN THE WHOLE BECOMES A BLACK HOLE: IMPLICATIONS OF THE HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Arnie Madsen
Northwestern University

Robert C. Chandler
Illinois State University

Jeffrey Bile (1987) argues that academic debate should occur at the level of the resolution. He further suggests that when the scope of the resolution is unclear, debaters should assume a more general or holistic focus. This proposal in effect adds words and phrases to the debate resolution. This implies to us that debates could center on issues drawn from words not specified in the resolution. Our purpose in this response to Bile's essay is to examine the assumptions and implications of a "holistic perspective" for contemporary debate theory. We are not arguing the merits or problems of debating a resolution as a whole. We do contend that allowing debates to center on issues not specified in the wording of the resolution is undesirable.

Before developing our response to Bile's proposal, it is important to describe the assumptions on which our position is based. We acknowledge that we hold a bias for substantive clash rather than extensive discussion of theoretical issues. We agree with Freeley (1986, pp. 1-5) and Ziegelmueller and Dause (1975, pp. 3-6) that the goals of academic debate are to increase critical thinking ability and advocacy skills. In order to achieve these goals, the debate community selects a topic of timely concern which provides relative argumentative parity to advocates on both sides of the question. Through discussion of the problem area, debaters increase their knowledge of the specific topic as well as improving their ability to think critically and become more sophisticated advocates. This response will develop these concerns as it examines in turn Bile's educational rationale for an expanded scope, explicate his language or semantic justification, and consider the argumentative implications of "holistic resolutional focus."

The Lack of Educational Justification for Holistic Focus

Bile's initial assumption that "holistic resolutional focus is pedagogically preferable" for debate centers around quotations from theorists writing on education. Bile believes that a holistic focus would promote "general education." General education is desirable since it increases content relevance and because general theories have more staying power than specific facts (p. 9-11). These justifications for "holistic focus" are deeply rooted in a specific notion of a "general education." The claim that debate should provide such a general education is a critical part of Bile's argument. We agree with Bile

that "general education" is desirable, yet we disagree over the manner in which "general education" becomes operationalized.

The meaning of the phrase "general education" in this review of literature seems at odds with its use by Bile. He argues that a general education is one which ignores or subordinates specific factual discussions, emphasizing instead theoretical knowledge. The implication for debate is that resolutions should be viewed as statements of broad theoretical concern.

The traditional meaning and use of the concept "general education" is at odds with the Bile interpretation. For example, Morris (1979) defines a general education as one which covers a wide range of subjects: "not limited to one class of things; diversified; miscellaneous: general studies (p. 548)." Bile's view implies an expanded definition of the term "general": "involving only the main or more obvious features of something; lacking detail or precision: a general grasp of a subject" (Morris, 1979, p. 548). It is reasonable to assume that the authors cited on "general education" most likely refer to the traditional notion of education which is broad-based rather than a learning process that emphasizes abstract concepts over specific instances.

The traditional view of general education likely would correspond to what Bill Honig (1985), the California State Superintendent of Public Instruction, refers to as a "common curriculum" — history, government, science, and literature. Similarly, Ernest Boyer (1985), the President of the Carnegie Foundation for the advancement of Teaching and former United States Commissioner of Education, refers to a "core of common learning" within a curriculum. Boyer describes the basic curriculum as a study of:

> . . . those consequential ideas, experiences, and traditions common to all of us by virtue of our membership in the human family at a particular moment in history. . . . In addition to strengthening the traditional courses in literature, history, mathematics, and science, emphasis should also be given to foreign languages, the arts, civics, non-western studies, technology, the meaning of work, and the importance of health. (p. 312)

Boyer and Honig both refer to curriculum proposals that would normally be considered general education. Rather than focusing on general or abstract theories, their proposed curriculum would instead emphasize a wide diversity of disciplines which are important foundations for being able to function in today's society.

In fact, the type of education that is bemoaned by professionals is one that ignores the core or general curriculum instead replacing it with less relevant electives. Armbruster (1979) is concerned that:

> Children can now take social studies in the place of certain formerly required history courses. They can also take English courses of apparently low scholastic value as electives for credit in place of the older, scholastically richer courses that formerly were required. Mathematics requirements have also been lowered and the requirement to take a foreign language in high school has been dropped entirely in many of our great school systems. (p. 57)

Furthermore, without a foundation in the basic curriculum, other disciplinary focuses are irrelevant. Lerner's (1980) view is typical of the problems faced when the basics are ignored:

> . . . reading, writing and arithmetic are the fundamental tools necessary to free children to choose the visions and vocations they will pursue. Without those fundamental tools, it is folly to think that youngsters can learn enough about anything else in the modern world—philosophy, plumbing, physics, firefighting, or what-have-you—to make a meaningful difference in their lives or our society. (p. 145)

The conclusion that over-emphasis of specific knowledge undermines the learning process cannot fairly be drawn from the traditional educational theorists, as they argue that it is a lack of core or basic courses which devalues education.

Bile assumes that the specifics of a subject have little utility in increasing student knowledge, yet his ideal education system would be even more problematic. Imagine a mathematics class that only describes theories without emphasizing specific applications—students would learn that addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division are the four basic functions, but they would not be encouraged to relate those functions to any practical situation. Similarly, science at the theoretical level would indicate that there are a number of possible ways to explain the relationships between naturally occurring phenomena—yet the theories could not be compared because to do so would require application to specific situations—students could still be taught that the earth is flat. English would become a purely theoretical subject, emphasizing grammar and composition theories, with no application to writing, everyday communication, great literature, etc.

Given the nature of the alternative, our view is that specific discussions serve to increase understanding of the theoretical constructs that Bile would emphasize. Students can be taught theoretical knowledge via examples, but it is difficult to provide useful information to students without any application to the everyday world of existence. In addition, critical to any theoretical position are the specific operationalizations of its assumptions and predictions. Theories are thus tested through the individual examples and applications in which they are enacted.

Bile's analogy further disintegrates when he draws the idea of liberal education into the discussion (p. 10). Here he quotes Good (1959) as indicating that a liberal education is broad and general rather than one which is narrow and specialized (Bile, 1987, p. 10). What Good (1959) praises is the American system of education, which emphasizes broad based knowledge. Bile quotes Averill (1983) as saying—"By holism I understand for one thing a rejection of unidimensional preoccupations" (Bile, 1987, p. 12). We doubt that Averill and Good would denounce an inter-disciplinary focus in education but rather the higher education model of Oxford in Great Britain where students are usually confined to courses in a single subject matter for a three or four year period.

We concur with Morris' (1979) suggestion that a liberal arts education is one which is based on the following concepts: "academic disciplines, such as languages, history,

philosophy, and abstract science, that provide information of general cultural concern, as distinguished from more narrowly practical training, as for a profession" (p. 753). Contemporary academic debate is a representative case study of a general or liberal education. A new topic area is debated every semester or every year dealing with an area of socio-political concerns. Students learn through the process of debate about a wide range of academic disciplines, via specific facts and theories.

The Lack of Language Justification for Holistic Focus

As the second justification for a holistic focus, Bile suggests that debaters should employ rules used by semanticists and philosophers. The most significant implication of this process is the tendency to "fill-in" the "missing modifier" which is supposedly implied by any resolution. There are a number of specific problems with this justification. First, semantic distinctions like those suggested by Lyons (Bile, 1987, p. 11) frequently assume "ordinary language" or conversations between ordinary people. The appropriateness of those theories in the debate situation is unclear. In ordinary discussions people tend to be imprecise in their use of language, often constructing symbols, syntax, and sentences with minimal precision or diligence. As a result there is a great deal of ambiguity in ordinary use of language. With debate propositions it is a different situation. Since resolutions are not hastily constructed, they are ontologically different than the imprecision and ambiguity of everyday conversation. Propositions are the result of intense deliberation concerning the best possible phrasing to use to generate interesting and educational debate and to avoid the ambiguity inherent in ordinary language usage. With debate propositions, modifiers may be intentionally left out in order to allow the implications of a single sentence to be debated over the course of several months. Unmodified resolutions encourage critical thinking as innovations in topic interpretation develop over a period of intensive debate.

Second, when examining ordinary conversations semanticists do not assume that there is a single "correct" interpretation. While Lyons may indicate that in a specific example we "could" put in a modifier to demonstrate that the entire class is being considered, he does not suggest that there is some "correct" interpretation of the sentence, or even that semanticists would agree on proper phrasing. As Lyons (1979) indicates later in his discussion, "the status of generic propositions is philosophically controversial: so too is the correlated notion of generic, as distinct from general, reference" (p. 194).

A third problem with Bile's "language justification" lies in his reliance on logicians and their interpretation of "indesignate form" (p. 11). While formal logic may assume that certain propositions are universal rather than particular, people do not reason via formal logic. Stephen Toulmin suggests that there are no "correct" or "incorrect" answers to questions, even though formal logic would require us to find the "truth" (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1985, p. 83). As Toulmin (1958) argues:

this is not to say that the elaborate mathematical systems which constitute 'symbolic logic' must now be thrown away; but only that people with intellectual capital invested in them should retain no illusions about the extent of their relevance to practical arguments. (p. 185)

Our position is that Bile uses formal logic to justify his application of the "missing modifier" to a practical reasoning situation, a situation to which such applications are not appropriate.[1] Such a position subjugates the accepted canon of rhetorical and argumentation theory and replaces it with theories drawn from mathematics and formal logic.

Implications of the Holistic Focus for Debate

There are a number of implications for debate as an activity which are not discussed by Bile. The undesirable consequences which Bile does acknowledge are simply dismissed out of hand:

> holistic focus DOES NOT [emphasis in original]: (a) eliminate all discussion of specific examples, (b) eliminate the affirmative "right to define," (c) require the affirmative to prove each and every example true, (d) justify counterwarrants, (e) unduly encourage "example stacking," or (f) favor the negative. (p. 12)

After stating that these effects do not result from the holistic focus, Bile discusses other matters without providing any rationale for dismissing these side effects. We believe that most of the problems that Bile dismisses would in fact logically follow from the practice of his perspective.

First, while Bile suggests that his view does not eliminate all discussion of specific examples, he never provides any justification for why examples would be desirable within the holistic perspective. According to Bile examples hurt the educational process. He cautions debaters against using them because they legitimize the other side's use of the counterwarrant (p. 13). We fail to understand, for example, how one could profitably debate Bile's sample topic of "military preparedness" without the use of any examples. While M-16 rifles or army boots may not merit extensive discussion, they are certainly examples of U.S. military preparedness, or lack thereof. Some examples are essential in debating the implications of such a resolution. The size of the navy, the availability of spare parts, levels of troop reserves, and the like, are all specific elements which would merit examination under the sample topic.

Bile also criticizes the possibility of a person encountering two hundred subtopics which are repetitively narrow (p. 11). While this could result, the opposite would be encouraged by Bile's suggestion that debaters broaden the scope of the resolution as far as possible. Debating two hundred holistic cases would be repetitively broad, cutting against the benefits of general education. Two hundred hours of discussion on the same arguments would be approximately equivalent to a student experiencing all of their

coursework over a semester concentrated not only on the same discipline, but on the same theory within a discipline, repeated day after day. The benefits of such study to students would be questionable. This is certainly not the educational system imagined by either Plato or Dewey (both referred to by Bile, pp. 10-11). As Gass (1987) has argued, continued repetition of arguments over time results in less educational value for debate than would result with exposure to new ideas (p. 367).

In addition there are "workability" problems with the idea of incorporating the "missing modifier approach" into debate. The first problem of the missing modifier is that there are no standards to govern which specific modifiers to include. One debater might suggest that the resolution implies that "most" of something is desirable, while an opposing debater might argue that "all" of something must be supported. While semanticists and logicians may suggest that the modifier would be relatively constant (generally, typically, characteristically, normally), those modifiers assume the simplistic examples of lions, whales, and kangaroos referred to by Bile (pp. 11-12). Animal categories of definition may serve to demonstrate the need to modify statements of fact, but are weak examples of a theory supposedly intended to be applied to propositions of value or policy.

On the example of the military preparedness topic, a variety of modifiers could be inserted. Debaters could argue that military preparedness is generally important, is always important, or is typically important, all of which have separate and distinct meanings. For example, the second semester CEDA topic from 1984-85 (that the United States is justified in providing military support to nondemocratic governments) could be modified to read "support to all nondemocratic governments," which would be a more general statement than the original. Bile offers no standards other than a general resolution is best to resolve such a controversy.

There is also nothing to restrict further modifications. A debater could suggest that United States (or Soviet) military preparedness is important, at a more general level that NATO (or Warsaw Pact) preparedness is important, or at an even more general level that global military preparedness is important. As soon as debaters are encouraged to alter a resolution for educational reasons, the floodgates of addition would be opened.[2]

It is likely that as soon as changes are allowed in resolutional form through the addition of "missing words," that debaters would then proceed to the next step of altering the actual substantive words of the resolution, again for the justification that it results in a better education. The fall semester CEDA topic from 1985 is illustrative of the problem. This resolution could be modified from its present form, "that significant government restrictions on coverage by the United States media of terrorist activity are justified," to a more general form such as "complete government prohibitions on coverage" are justified. While this example may be extreme, we believe that it demonstrates an actual threat to the process of debate which would be legitimized if the community allows debaters to alter the resolution within the debate round.

Adding words to the topic also may increase the ambiguity inherent in the resolution which would serve to counter the initial precision sought by the framers.

Effects of this process may be analogous to the addition of a parameter statement to the national policy debate topic. Community frustration with the inability of the parameter to clarify the resolution resulted in the parameter's elimination in 1985 (SCA, 1985).

Finally, Bile advocates shifts in resolutional form from the example of "some X is Y" to "all X is Y." As Hynes and Ulrich (1985) indicate, such a shift would alter the form of the resolution to a form which any example would disprove (p. 835). Bile contends that the present resolution form allows the affirmative to argue from example, leaving the negative with few options for refutation. A holistic perspective shifts this to a situation where the affirmative argues the entirety of the proposition, leaving the negative with the freedom to choose from any number of examples, any one of which will disprove the resolution (Ulrich, 1987 p. 473). Not only are counterwarrants encouraged by this perspective, but abusive applications of counterwarrants are encouraged. We thus concur with Rowland (1984) when he suggests that "it is an axiom of competitive activities that the rules of the game should not be subject to change during the game" (p. 85).[3]

Instead of adopting Bile's proposal for holistic focus, we believe that the debate community should continue to assume that the form of the resolution is, to use Gass' (1987) terminology, "inviolable" (p. 365). Terms of the resolution should be accepted as given, and not be alterable within the context of the debate. This does not preclude discussion of the meaning of terms of the resolution, but it does prevent any additions or alterations in resolution wording once the topic has been accepted by the community.

We are skeptical about the path suggested by Bile because of the possibility of debater abuse of the "missing modifier." We feel that no modifiers, except those initially phrased in the wording of the resolution, should be binding on debater's interpretations of ground. The benefit of keeping the initial wording of the resolution intact is an increased focus on substantive rather than theoretical clash.

We believe that the goals of debate are to increase critical thinking and to increase advocacy skills. Changing the process of determining resolutional meaning to a holistic perspective might instead result in an increased emphasis on strategic gamesmanship. Preserving the existing nature of resolutions would maintain the best hope for competitive equity for both teams. Allowing either side to re-write the resolution and impose alternative assumptions would seriously undermine the prospects for meaningful clash in a debate (Gass, 1987, p. 366).

Notes

[1] It is interesting to note the tension in sources that Bile uses in justifying his position. Bile uses formal logic to justify inclusion of the missing modifier, because propositions may be of "indesignate form." Toulmin would likely argue against this position because of his view that formal logic does not apply in most situations. Yet Bile later (pp. 12-13) quotes Biggers quoting Toulmin to justify practical reasoning as a basis of advancing a valid inductive argument.

[2] As a more general level is approached, there is a corresponding need for specific examples. With the first version of the military topic debaters would only be required to have examples of US military preparedness. With the second version they would need to have examples of both US and NATO military prepar-

edness. With the third version they would need to have examples of all nations' military preparedness. This results in an effect exactly opposite that which is desired by Bile.

[3] Resolutional form has been receiving increasing attention in recent years. Gass (1987), Hynes & Ulrich (1985), Madsen & Louden (1987), and Ulrich (1987) all suggest that it is the form of the resolution which determines which affirmative and negative approaches to a resolution are legitimate. Alterations in resolutional form change not only the affirmative, but also the negative arguments on the topic. There is incentive for both teams to attempt to change the implications of the resolution in order to achieve strategic superiority.

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