

SEEKING CLARITY THROUGH THE FOG: ON THE USE OF VALUES AND CRITERIA IN LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

by Courtney J. Balentine and Minh A. Luong

INTRODUCTION

One of the distinguishing characteristics of Lincoln-Douglas debate is the use of value premises and criteria. Therefore, it is particularly disturbing that debaters have so much trouble utilizing them in a constructive fashion. Value premises and criteria have, in effect, become items on a checklist. The debaters read them, the judge notes that they have been mentioned, and then they disappear for the rest of the round. Even when the value and criterion are discussed after the constructive speeches, they are mentioned only in passing because the debaters were told to somehow link arguments to their values. This rather distressing situation has led both coaches and debaters to question the necessity of using values in Lincoln-Douglas debate.

The authors argue that while the situation at present is confusing, it is not for lack of a strong theoretical foundation for the utilization of values and criteria in values-oriented argumentation. Rather, the authors observe that lack of clarity and consensus on the appropriate use of these useful argumentative decision-making mechanisms are the reason why values and criteria are sometimes not taken seriously and remain underutilized as a means of helping the judge make a sound, rational decision in the debate round.

ASSESSING THE REAL VALUE OF A TOOL WHICH IS CURRENTLY BEING MISUSED

There seems to be two main complaints about the use of values and criteria that need to be addressed if they are to fulfill a purpose in Lincoln-Douglas debate. The first complaint is that values and criteria have become so broad and vague that they lack any substantive meaning. One aspect of this problem is the tendency of debaters to select justice as a value regardless of whether it is relevant. This value is popular because some genius came up with the idea that justice was by far "the highest value and subsumes all other values." Debaters deliver this statement with the glassy-eyed certainty of absolute and unquestionable truth. In fact, many debaters appear to go through apoplectic fits when the supremacy of justice is questioned. Even if justice is "the" supreme value, no one could tell from the various definitions being used. These range from "giving

people their due" to "the balance of competing claims." Those definitions sound very interesting, but what exactly do they mean? The definitions of values, running the range from justice to freedom, have become so vague and all-encompassing that they confuse instead of clarify. As long as values muddle the round instead of offering grounds for logical discussion, they do little to improve the educational value of debate.

The second issue that needs to be addressed is that values and criteria are awkward to use in the presently practiced form. Many debaters feel that they must commit a series of logical contortions to make their arguments link to their values. As is often the case, while the argument is logically sound, it bears no relation to the criterion nor the value which are presented. Consequently, debaters either abandon the argument or somehow manufactures a spurious link to the criterion.

Not surprisingly, this situation has led many coaches and debaters to question the purpose of a value and criteria.¹

A CASE OF THE IGNORANT LEADING THE BLIND?

These problems arise, at least in part, because people have only a vague idea of what constitutes a value and a criterion.² Because of this lack of consensus in the L/D community, concepts such as justice and rights are merely accepted as good because everyone else seems to think so.³ Consequently, few people pause to consider why a particular idea is called a value or whether it is useful in a debate round. There is a strong theoretical foundation in the academic literature⁴ upon which to base the use of values and criteria, however, coaches as well as instructors at summer institutes thus far have not tapped this body of literature to support the use of these values-oriented decision rules.

While most coaches believe that value premises and criteria can be useful and have a place in Lincoln-Douglas debate, we have a responsibility to our students to explain its use and justify its legitimacy as an argumentative tool. In addition, the concept of goals and decision rules are commonplace in everyday professional life, and mastery of these effective decision-making techniques will prove invaluable to our students for the rest of their personal and professional lives.⁵

A COMMON DILEMMA FOUND IN LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE TODAY

While there are many potential examples, one of the more common ideas advanced in L/D debates is the "Marketplace of Ideas." This concept appears, explicitly or implicitly, whenever a topic involves progress or communication. The arguments used when debating this sort of resolution follow a fairly predictable pattern: A debater stands up and declares that free expression must be virtually unlimited because if opinions enter the Marketplace of Ideas, then truth will eventually work its way out and gain near universal acceptance. This argument is often supported by referring to scientific principles, like the roundness of the world, that were once rejected but are now accepted.

Arguments based on this pattern contain many elements of truth, however, they do not provide accurate contextual descriptions. As anyone subjected to constant electronic mail messages from the L/D-L listserv⁶ knows, universal acceptance of ideas, even something as obvious as whether or not a judge should flow, is simply not the norm. Instead, disagreement about important ideas is far more common than agreement. The relevant issue here is why disagreement is so common if the Marketplace of Ideas leads to truth. It seems intuitively true that the stronger argument will overpower the weaker and this process will lead to truth being accepted. Debaters, in particular, tend to easily accept this model because debate rounds are supposed to be decided based on the ability of the debaters to convince people through sound argumentation. Unfortunately, this model oversimplifies the process of progress. Although it is likely that "truth is ... found in questioning, opposing, disputing, and resolving the arguments of the other side," there is more to progress than just argumentation.⁷ A proper model for progress must account for the fact that people will often go to great lengths to avoid accepting that their ideas are incorrect. Racists, for example, will not reject their beliefs even in the face of overwhelming evidence. Simply dismissing these people as irrational fails to account for the fact that "normal" people often exhibit the same behavior and cling to their beliefs even in the face of evidence that refutes them.⁸ As philosopher Peter Abelard remarks, people turn habit

“into nature, they stubbornly maintain as adults whatever they learned as children.”⁹

Since merely presenting arguments is not always sufficient to change people’s minds, it is important to realize that constructing a coherent theory of progress and communication should reach beyond the discussion found in *On Liberty*. In particular, it should be noted that permitting free expression is not, by itself, always sufficient to allow progress. As John Dewey writes, He knows little who supposes that freedom of thought is ensured by relaxation of conventions, censorships and intolerant dogmas. The relaxation supplies opportunity. But while it is a necessary it is not a sufficient condition. *Freedom* of thought denotes freedom of *thinking*; specific doubting, inquiring, suspense, creating and cultivating of tentative hypotheses, trials or experimentings.¹⁰

If free expression is a necessary but insufficient condition for progress, what else is involved? An important aspect of progress is incorporating new ideas and replacing or modifying old ones. If individuals do not keep open minds when it comes to encountering new ideas, then no amount of persuasion will suffice to make them change. Additionally, a sound theory of progress should deal with the mechanism of change in people’s minds. There are many theorists who attempt to explain what happens in a person’s mind when a new idea is encountered. Instead of assuming that a new idea will mysteriously replace an old idea, debaters should make at least some effort to understand and explain what happens when someone changes opinions. Careful research may reveal that this process is not as simple as most people believe.

Finally, if some ultimate agreement about truth is to be reached, then people must possess the logical tools necessary to distinguish and evaluate “good” arguments from “bad” arguments. Professor James Gouinlock notes that in order for free speech to be truly valuable, “We must also have the various instruments that are needed to make that freedom effective. Our schools and homes, the practices of daily life, the social sciences, and our media of communication might be modified in a manner to convert an ill-prepared, bewildered, and apathetic mass into a community alive with intelligence.”¹¹ As Professor Gouinlock explains, progress depends, not only on individuals, but on the institutions that shape individuals and provide them with the tools necessary to engage in intelligent discourse. This idea closely mirrors modern communitarian theory by examining

progress as a social process instead of observing only the behavior of isolated individuals engaged in communication.

SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR DEVELOPING VALUES AND CRITERIA

The authors suggest several ways to make the value and criterion the clarifying mechanism it was meant to be in L/D debate. **First**, it is important to identify the source of values. They do not magically arrive from some unknown place; instead, values come from experience.¹² They represent concepts that have a positive impact on people’s lives. Values such as democratic freedom, physical health, and equality of outcome are considered valuable precisely because they have demonstrable benefits.¹³ Since values come from experience, it may be helpful for debaters to look at their own lives when attempting to select or define a value or criteria. Adding a personal slant to values offers several advantages over using definitions derived only from books or convention.

Perhaps the most significant benefit will be a greater understanding of what values really mean. After all, people are more likely to understand something if they explain it in terms of their own experiences instead of simply using someone else’s. So when selecting values, do not automatically pick justice. People should try looking at their own lives and considering what they believe is valuable. If justice is still the value of choice, narrow or carefully define the scope of justice so the judge knows what particular type of justice is being presented. Individuals should add a personal slant and describe it as it relates to their own lives and experiences. This process may not produce highly poetic definitions of values but, at the very least, the definitions will have some meaning to the debaters who present them. Additionally, even if people choose to use standard philosophical definitions for values, thinking about values in terms of personal beliefs and experiences can still lead to deeper levels of understanding for both the debaters and judge(s).

The **second** step to making the value and criteria relevant is to ask a question: does this value and criterion serve as an effective guide for conduct?¹⁴ In other words, could a person confronted by a moral dilemma use this value and criterion as the basis for making a decision? If the answer to this question is no, then new definitions are required.

To demonstrate the usefulness of these two steps, it may be helpful to provide an example in which they are applied.

Assume for the moment that the L/D debate topic at hand involves a question about the government limiting individual rights to better provide security for the population. If the dreaded term of “justice”¹⁵ is selected as the value it could be defined in this context as the balance between government’s obligation to protect its citizens and its obligation to respect rights as legitimate limits on its power. This definition is obviously far from perfect, in fact, it begs several questions, but it is certainly relevant to the round and will be further clarified by the criterion. Moreover, it elucidates the tension that is central to the topic and avoids the absolute vagueness often found in definitions of justice. In this case, an effective criterion could set the conditions that must be met if limitations of rights are to be permitted.

The criteria could be three-pronged and set as follows:

There must be a clear danger created by the exercise of the rights in question. The limitation of the rights should not create a worse evil than the one the government is trying to correct. Since rights are so important, they should be limited only if there is no other effective method available.

Taken together, this value and criteria provide a clear focus for the rest of the round by establishing the conditions that each side must satisfy in order to win. Instead of employing obscure philosophical theories, the value and criteria are defined in fairly straightforward terms that both lay judges and experienced judges can understand.

A CAVEAT

There is one thing to note about the value and criterion, though. No matter how hard people try, they will never be absolutely precise. Values, by definition, will be broad and perhaps vague. Herein lies the value and necessity of the criterion: It is employed to limit the vagueness and to bring the value closer to the world of specifics by establishing some tangible standards by which to evaluate or measure the value. This means that the value and criterion function as a unit to make value debate relevant and applicable to a practical world as required by the empirical nature of most contemporary Lincoln-Douglas debate topics. Although the criterion clarifies the value by being more specific, it is still difficult to completely define every aspect of a value. Philosophers have been trying to do that for more than two thousand years; it seems unlikely that debaters will succeed in half-an-hour.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of values and criteria can be both intellectually challenging for debaters

and an invaluable decision-making mechanism for judges given their proper use and application. By selecting relevant values and tailoring appropriate criteria to them, Lincoln-Douglas debates can be even more enjoyable and valuable as a decision-making exercise for our students.

This brief essay attempts to highlight just a few of the issues surrounding this emerging debate. In the opinion of the authors, it will be difficult for Lincoln-Douglas debate to develop further until the issues relating to the use of values and criteria are settled. The authors hope that the points raised in this essay will become starting points for further discussion and that others in the forensic community will express their views in the NFL *Rostrum* in the near future.¹⁶

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¹Some of the most vocal critics of the use of values and criteria have used the "apparent" lack of theoretical support and the resulting "misuse" of these decision rules as a basis for constructing Lincoln-Douglas cases without them. While it is true that value and criteria are often misunderstood and misapplied, using a tool incorrectly is not sound basis for rejecting its use.

²The official NFL Lincoln-Douglas debate guidelines stipulate the use of values and criteria but lack clarity and direction on this issue, presumably to allow for a wider interpretation. Guideline #1-c is clear, however; it states: "[A decision should be based on:] Clash in the debate based upon the values criteria and/or the values premise." (1995 NFL Tournament Manual, p. TA-4).

³The authors feel that many coaches and debaters have taken the term "value" in value debate too literally. "Pure value" terms such as "justice" are frequently the topic of debate in philosophy and political philosophy journals, however, considering the empirical-orientation of contemporary Lincoln-Douglas debate topics, selection of such terms is inappropriate.

⁴Several academic fields have relevant literature which would form a strong theoretical foundation for the use of values and criteria in L-D debate. Among them: political science (rational decisionmaking), applied philosophy (moral reasoning and decisionmaking), political philosophy (the nature of government), business administration and management science (decision matrices and decision criteria), and rhetoric (logic and decision rules). A future essay on this particular subject by the co-authors is presently under development.

⁵Those who claim that the use of values and criteria have no educational purpose in our activity are overlooking the fact that both personal and professional decisions are made with similar decision matrices. Two examples illustrate this point. When making the decision whether to continue a romantic relationship, a person may determine that they want a "committed, life-long partner." To achieve that goal, that person might follow a set of criteria which will enable her or him to determine whether a suitor is a good candidate. Such criteria might include honesty, intelligence, non-violent personality, and fiscal responsibility. In the business environment, many companies have shifted their focus to improving customer service as opposed to earning absolute maximum profits as their highest priority. In determining the business plan for the upcoming year, such companies use carefully selected criteria to determine which policies will yield the firm the highest levels of customer satisfaction, Criteria of evaluating customer service which includes number of complaints, politeness of sales representatives, number of product returns, time from order to delivery, and number of repeat customers are often used to identify areas needing improvement to increase overall customer satisfaction. These examples highlight the pervasiveness of this method of decision-making in the real world and the value of incorporating this exercise in Lincoln-Douglas debate.

⁶Anyone interested in Lincoln-Douglas debate-related issues should consider subscribing to the Lincoln-Douglas debate listserve, a free internet electronic mails service moderated by San Antonio Lee High School (TX) Director of Forensics P.J. Wexler. To subscribe, send an electronic mail message to: <ld-lrequest@world.std.com> with the single word 'subscribe' in the message body. Questions should be directed to Mr. Wexler at: <pjwexler@world.std.com>.

⁷William of Ockham. A Short Discourse on Tyrannical Government. trans. John Kilcullen. (Cambridge University Press, 1992): 7

⁸This particular trend has been growing since the Watergate scandal of the 1970s. Ever increasing levels of distrust of institutions such as government, the press, and community have led to a "conspiracy theory" mentality wherein facts are discounted because they are "manufactured by the forces of evil such as the 'New World Order' or the 'Trilateral Commission'." Indicative of this trend is the emergence and rapid growth of right-wing 'militia groups' which have been active in promoting a 'don't trust anyone' mentality.

⁹Peter Abelard. Ethical Writings. trans

Paul Vincent Spade. (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1995): 3.

¹⁰Dewey, Experience and Nature, 182.

¹¹Gouinlock, James. Excellence in Public Discourse: John Stuart Mill, John Dewey, and Social Intelligence. (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986): 72.

¹²This is a particularly important point due to the fact that nearly all Lincoln-Douglas resolutions are grounded in some type of existing social or moral problem. Selecting appropriate values which have a direct relationship to the topic area of the resolution will serve debaters best.

¹³The use of limiting or descriptive terms along with the value would be an important first step in closing the gap between values, criteria, and resolutorial analysis. In general, unless the value term is very specific or has a narrowly understood meaning, broad one-word values have proven to be too vague to be useful in brief time format debates such as high school Lincoln-Douglas debate.

¹⁴Dewey, John. Experience and Nature. (Chicago: Open Court, 1994): 9.

¹⁵With apologies to anyone expecting creativity.

¹⁶The authors thank a number of individuals who assisted with the development of this essay. Jenny Cook (Hopkins HS, MN), Rebecca S. Jacobsen, Melodi A. Morrison, and Paul Metcalf (The Spectrum Organization) provided useful insights. The faculty and fellows of the National Debate Forum contributed their views on values and criteria for the seminar upon which this essay is based. Any errors or omissions are strictly the responsibility of the authors.

(Courtney J. Balentine attends Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia and serves as an instructor at the National Debate Forum summer Lincoln-Douglas debate institute held at the University of Minnesota. Mr. Balentine co-instructed the advanced varsity lab with Mr. Luong at the 1997 NDF and serves as an instructor at National Debate Education Project seminars. Mr. Balentine was the 1996 National TOC champion in Lincoln-Douglas debate. He can be contacted via electronic mail at:

<cbalent@emory.edu>)