

MY OBJECTION TO YOUR OBJECTION

by
Jonathan E. Carr

L
D

D
e
b
a
t
e

To say I am in the "old school" of Lincoln-Douglas debate is an accurate claim. In fact, I completely agree that the activity of values debate began and exists as an alternative to team debate. During my four year debate career, I had the opportunity to travel to countless tournaments, from rural Alabama to New York City. In retrospect, it goes without saying that the styles and methods of Lincoln-Douglas debate are different depending on the locale the activity is being practiced. A debate round in Massachusetts is not the same as a debate round in Texas, for the debaters in these regions are taught different methods of approaching the activity. This is one of the intriguing and strategic aspects of winning on the national circuit: adapting to the expectations of different judging pools.

Yet within these differences *exist* a number of problems

.....As an important role for judges, it is increasingly clear that the activity needs more interventions at times, where judges speak out on the ballots and explain to students that they are misusing given philosophers in their cases. Otherwise, the activity fails in its educational mission.

which *bring* a black eye to Lincoln Douglas debate: critiques, spreading, and misuse of philosophy. In truth, none of these flaws are inherently new. I have been out of the activity for over five years, and they exist now just as when I debated. Yet, their continued existence is a sore point in the continuing evolution of the activity. And as the organizers of this activity continue to promote its virtues on a national and state level, it remains puzzling why judges and coaches still tolerate these three problems.

Critiques are the new and growing fad in Lincoln-Douglas debate. The problem is that fundamentally this form of argument is outside both the scope and purpose of the activity. It first has to be expressed that specific guidelines do exist for Lincoln-Douglas debate. This activity was never intended as an extemporaneous debating forum **entirely**. Instead, values debate started under the assumption that a fair resolution could be offered, which would allow both the affirmative and negative to present cases in support and opposition to the resolution. From that, each side would argue the merits of the presented materials as a means to weigh the issues and prove their points. But notice the foundation presented here as a guideline to debate: the resolution is considered fair and equal. If this were not the case, then how would it be fair for the affirmative or negative to equally debate a resolution if one was immediately presented with the "lemon"

side of the resolution? Critiques, however, miss this fundamental point, because instead of attacking the arguments presented, they argue against the rhetoric and language used by the other debater. For example, imagine two debaters arguing the resolution, "Economic sanctions against proven rogue states are moral." The affirmative stands, reads the prepared case, and answers questions. Rather than presenting a negative constructive and then attacking the affirmative case, the negative instead shifts the debate by running a critique on the resolution. Such a critique might attack the term rogue as ostracizing a country, and then the debater might read evidence from postmodernists and dependency theorists stating why rogue nations receive unfair treatment in the international community. Hence, the negative has not actually attacked anything the affirmative has argued (and spent countless hours preparing), but instead, this debater is essentially trying to win the round because of the wording used by the resolution's writers. So much for the first affirmative constructive.

A larger point raised by the use of critiques though is what they are actually attempting to accomplish. My reaction to this strategy is that it is both superficial in logic and shirking in the duties of a debater. Many times in hearing critiques, those who run this argument use it as a method to mask certain ideological arguments. In essence, a negative who argues that the term "rogue" implies ostracism is making an argument that some might accept as true, and using it as accepted fact to attack the way a resolution is written. Moreover, by making this argument, a debater defeats the educational purpose of this activity. Perhaps you could run a critique here and claim I am imposing my views on what Lincoln Douglas debate entails. And you are absolutely right if you do so. In order for this activity to survive, some semblance of what is accepted and unaccepted in terms of strategy has to be made. Otherwise, debaters will run the risk of increasingly walking into rounds where no value premises are used (rather odd in values debate) and critiques are run (ignoring the merits of the resolution in place of rhetorical semantics). Granted, some flexibility must exist in an activity to allow creativity and individual development. But again, Lincoln Douglas debate is not a tabula rasa activity, where debaters walk in cold slate, having no idea as to what their expectations are. I frankly believe that if more judges would enforce a basic understanding of the activity, then so many rounds would not devolve into one side making absurd statements like, "The

resolution is flawed, hence you must vote for me."

A second dilemma facing the activity is that speed debate is as popular as ever. Granted, this is not as problematic as the use of critiques, because many good rounds can still exist despite one side speaking extremely fast. However, it should always be remembered that the negative has an inherent advantage, because of the time constraints presented in the first negative constructive and the first affirmative rebuttal. Too many rounds focus on the arguments which the affirmative dropped due to time constraints. The negative simply stands in its rebuttal and extends these arguments, claiming that the round is won because the affirmative dropped given points one, two, and so forth. But is this really debate or packaged strategy? How is an activity educational when a debater uses time constraints to force his opponent to miss a certain point, and then shifts the grounds of the debate to the point? If anything, it seems almost cowardly, for the debater *is* refusing to actually engage in intellectual conflict, instead picking and choosing his or her fights based on the arguments conceded because of the three minutes in difference between the INC and the IAR. Certainly, nothing is inherently wrong if a debater impacts a dropped argument, because both sides have an equal burden to debate the important points of the round in order to have clash. However, it is obvious when a debater runs a stacked case, written intentionally to take advantage of the time constraints imposed on the affirmative in order to extend arguments. When such a scenario happens, I am hopeful that judges will recognize the blatant misuse of spreading and punish the debater accordingly. There simply is no need for such a strategy in an activity which partly began to move away from speed debate.

Third, an ever increasing trend is for debaters to misuse and

misunderstand philosophy. It is quite amazing for high school students to use the philosophers often quoted, because many are not fully studied and analyzed until graduate school. Whenever judging a debate round, I immediately become suspicious of students who run Kant, for the simple fact that it is usually 99 percent certain they do not fully understand his philosophy. Yet, as I noted above when discussing critiques, students often run arguments which have no merit simply as one tag line arguments. Claiming that such and such point imposes "Western hegemonic imperialism" implies knowledge about this topic, which most debaters simply do not have. I do not raise this concern simply to slam the activity or frown upon the use of philosophy, but running a given point is futile if a debater does not understand the logic s/he is using. As an important role for judges, it is increasingly clear that the activity needs more interventions at times, where judges speak out on the ballots and explain to students that they are misusing given philosophers in their cases. Otherwise, the activity fails in its educational mission.

In short, there is no question that Lincoln Douglas debate continues to prosper and thrive as an activity. However, this does not detract from the improvements which the activity could address. Each of these issues are important, because they address specific areas of values debates in terms of logic and style. Furthermore, a refinement of these issues would begin the process of steering debate away from practices which undermine its educational value. While I admit that no one solution exists to improving this activity, these three steps could serve as initial steps.

(Jonathan E. Carr is a Fulbright Scholar at The London School of Economics and Political Science)