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Advanced Concepts in Lincoln-Douglas Debate

Victory Briefs Textbook: Advanced Concepts in Lincoln-Douglas Debate
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Advanced Concepts in Lincoln-Douglas Debate 2012

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Introduction

The Victory Briefs Institute is the largest Lincoln-Douglas Debate Camp in the country. For more than a decade we have been helping students reach their full potential at every level of competition, including many winners of the NFL National Championship, the Tournament of Champions, the National Debate Coaches Association Championship, and the CFL National Championship, along with countless invitationals at both a local and national level. We pride ourselves on maintaining an innovative curriculum and seeking out a top-tier instructional staff every summer at UCLA.

With this volume we are excited to be able to bring you some of our most popular curriculum components in written form. The articles presented are adapted from lectures, seminars, labs, skill workshops, and drill sessions attended by students at VBI Session I, VBI Focus Weeks, and VBI Session II. Each of the authors has been an outstanding camp instructor and has a distinguished debate resume, including high-level success in high school competition, college competition, or as a coach (and in several cases, all of the above).

The essays that follow cover a range of topics for people on all circuits and at all experience levels. It includes explanations of everything from foundational concepts to advanced strategies. Because there are helpful tips for students of all skill levels, the book will continue to be useful as you develop your debate talents. It is packed with great information from cover to cover, so you'll be picking up new insights the second and third times you read it.

In addition to conveying the conceptual basis for different skill and knowledge sets, our goal is to give you practical, implementation-oriented steps to help you improve right away. With that in mind, we encourage you to not only read the book but also take advantage of the drills and other exercises suggested by the authors. It is one thing to know what you're supposed to do; it's another to be able to execute it. Getting the most out of this book will require you to put time and effort into practicing these skills and concepts before you use them in competition.

This book is not meant to provide a comprehensive debate curriculum. Instead, our goal is to give you a sampling of insights on various core topics from some of the top coaches and judges in the activity. There are some suggestions about which some of our authors would undoubtedly disagree. As debaters we know that there is nothing wrong with difference of opinion. If you find our authors recommending a different approach to a given topic, use that as an opportunity to think more about what best fits your style and experience. Like most things, there is more than one way to debate well, and we believe the opportunity to hear different viewpoints will help you to develop the style that is most comfortable for you.

For more information about Victory Briefs or the Victory Briefs Institute, please visit www.victorybriefs.com.

Enjoy!

Positional Debating

By Jake Nebel

Positional debating is a style in which one's constructive arguments and rebuttals work together to support a focused thesis. This essay explains the concept of positional debating, discusses the strategic advantages of positional debating, and describes how to write a positional case.

Mike Bietz and Neil Conrad each gave this module for years before me. I am greatly indebted to both of them — to Mike, for first bringing these thoughts to a wide audience at VBI, and to Neil, for teaching these concepts when I was a student. Neil deserves credit for all of this essay's good thoughts and none of its bad ones.

1. What is Positional Debating?

Positional debating is a style in which one's constructive arguments and rebuttals work together to support a focused thesis. The *thesis* is the central claim for why the judge should affirm or negate the resolution. A *focused* thesis is clear, and it should be more specific than the resolution. Judges know exactly what the positional debater is defending, with no ambiguity. The positional debater communicates with precision, does not oversimplify, and pays attention to detail. The positional debater unifies the line-by-line debate and the big picture debate. The positional debater knows how arguments interact, and how to connect the dots for the judge.

In the next section, I explain why positional debating is a good way to win rounds. I then describe the positional research and case-writing processes, concluding with a checklist for positional debating.

2. Why Positional Debating?

Many debaters think that positional debating is outdated, and that it is not the best way to win rounds. In this section, I briefly explain why I think positional debating is, in many circumstances, a great way to win rounds.

2.1 *The Spread*

Even the best debaters often lose to a good spread. By “spread,” I don't mean the kind you put on toast, or fast talking. I mean a rebuttal with a high quantity of objections to your constructive. Debaters sometimes avoid losing by devising *ad hoc* ways of beating the spread — typically by giving themselves easy ways to transcend the flurry of argumentation. These solutions, I believe, often involve bad arguments and cheap shots.

I believe that positional debating is a better way to avoid the spread for two reasons. In my experience, the number-one reason why debaters get spread out is because they have too many ill-focused arguments in their case. Debaters tend to think that having lots of claims, rather than a single thesis, gives them more options for the rebuttal. But a good opponent can turn any option into a liability.

If you think some claim is risk-free, then you are probably thinking too narrowly about argumentative risks. Your opponent can make an argument risky for you in a number of ways: by turning it, by generating a contradiction with another argument, by using it to make their own impacts relevant, by identifying it as the violation of a theory argument, by setting up a concession in cross-examination, by making it the link to a disadvantage or critique, or even by confusing your issue selection. If an argument is less risky in one of these ways, then it is probably *more* risky in another way!

If you only make one central claim, and support it as well as possible with an eye to the rebuttals, then you limit the number of ways in which you can lose. You will also know your argument well enough to predict all of the risks, so you can prepare against those risks more efficiently than if you had lots of arguments with unknown sources of risk. If you master positional debating, even a good spread is easy to answer because your nuanced arguments will make your opponent's answers non-responsive. Think about it: the authors you're citing spend their working hours by supporting their arguments and answering objections. It is hard to believe that you have presented the most airtight version of their arguments in less than ten minutes, when they spend exponentially more time presenting them in detail at conferences and in academic publications.

So, positional debating is an efficient way to avoid the spread without resorting to unreliable tactics like bad arguments and cheap shots.

2.2 *Trusting Your Arguments*

I suspect that most debaters are afraid of positional debating because they don't want to put all their eggs in one basket. And I suspect that most debaters don't want to put all their eggs in one basket because they aren't confident that their focused thesis would win. But, if you know the art of positional debating, then you will (rightly) be confident that your focused thesis will win.

Positional debating requires that you put more thought into the quality of your arguments and into your arguments themselves. Suppose you do your research and come up with a lot of different arguments. You're choosing between writing a positional case about one of them and writing a case with more than one. Since you have so many arguments, you might think that at least *some* of them must be good. And you may not be so sure about any individual argument, or you may be uncertain about which of your arguments is the best. So it seems easiest to run all, or many, of the arguments, so you don't have to decide amongst them.

Not only does that easy solution ignore the sources of risk for each additional argument; it also underestimates the importance of *developing* arguments. Before I explain the importance of argument development, let me explain a few ways to make an argument more developed.

The first, simplest way to make an argument more developed is to have *multiple warrants*. Multiple warrants are more than one reason why some claim is true. If you read more evidence for your conclusion, then your opponent has to beat more evidence to defeat your conclusion.

A second way to make an argument more developed is through *deep warranting*. Deep warrants are reasons why an initial warrant is sound. An argument is just a series of premises that justify a conclusion. Deep warrants are arguments for the premises. Well-developed arguments have multiple, deep warrants. You can (almost) always increase the depth of your warrants. Ask yourself why some claim is true, and then ask yourself why *that* answer is true. Or, identify an assumption in your evidence that may be vulnerable to attack, and try to support that assumption analytically or by doing more research.

When you can't increase the depth of your warrants, you can further develop them with *explanation*. One way to explain a point is to give an example. An example is often more helpful than trying to explain the point in different words, because introducing different words may be imprecise or misleading. Another useful way to develop an argument through explanation is by showing how it is different from similar arguments in the same ballpark. You can draw a distinction between two claims or concepts that may seem similar, but are in fact importantly different for the purposes of your argument. You then say which one is part of your argument, making problems with the other claim or concept irrelevant. This kind of strategy is standard practice for academic philosophers, and it is extremely useful for setting up rebuttals: you can show how your opponent's objections are non-responsive because they fail to get a grip on some crucial distinction; they're talking about the wrong concept or claim.

A fourth way to make an argument more developed is through *impacting*. The impact is the reason why your claim matters — why it counts in favor of, or against, the resolution. You can add different impacts to give yourself more flexibility in the rebuttal, and you can make each impact more detailed.

So, you haven't fully developed your argument until you have multiple, deep warrants, each of which is well explained, with flexible, detailed impacts. Now return to your choice between a positional case and a case with lots of different arguments. Maybe all of the arguments you're considering, when equally developed, would be roughly as good as each other. But if you develop a single argument in a positional case, then that argument will be much better than the less-developed alternatives you would have in a non-positional case.

This means that you must choose which position to write, and this choice carries a lot of weight. That is why positional debating puts a high premium on topical research. When deciding what the best strategy is, you need to compare the costs and benefits of different positions fleshed out in different ways.

In the next section, I describe the research process for positional debating.

3. Positional Research

Positional research requires that you approach the resolution as a thinker, not just as a debater. Debaters often ignore what the resolution really means because they are more comfortable with a different resolution. By contrast, positional debaters make an effort to understand the resolution's conflict scenario and division of ground before figuring out a position. This process demands a significant amount of research in order to figure out the best position on each side of the topic.

3.1 *Bottom-Up Research*

The most common approach to case construction is a *top-down* approach. Debaters who use the top-down approach to case construction come up with an idea for a case (typically the first, the most interesting, or the most (seemingly) strategic idea that comes into their heads) and *then* do research to find evidence for that position. This process might seem like the most efficient approach because it is quick: come up with an idea, and then do the research.

But the actual efficiency of the top-down approach is low. You risk running into a dead end, where the arguments in support of the idea are relatively weak or not quite tailored to the resolution. (The top-down approach, I think, is why so many debaters use evidence that isn't germane to the topic.) If you use this approach, the evidence may be worse than what you would have found with a more open mind; debaters often face this problem because they use search terms they invented from thin air, when they should be getting search terms from academic publications. Perhaps the objections in the literature turn out to be overwhelming, or (even worse) the scholars working on the topic don't even take the idea seriously. These are all bad signs for your case.

Positional debaters, instead, use a *bottom-up* approach to case construction. In this approach, research comes first, followed by the moving parts of the case. The following is a rough outline of this process:

Background research — Understand what the topic is about, using sources like Wikipedia and introductory books.

Broad positional research — Research both sides of a few positions. Start thinking about which position on which side seems strongest.

Narrow positional research — After choosing a position, set up an evidence file where you can focus on work only relevant to that position.

Outlining — Write an outline of the position's moving parts. You should have much more evidence in your file than you can expect to put in the outline.

Writing — Write the case, using the outline as a guide and the file for evidence.

Although the top-down approach seems easier, the bottom-up approach (in my experience) is a more efficient long-term strategy if you want good results. The bottom-up approach resembles academic research more closely than the top-down approach, and it ensures more comprehensive coverage of the topic area. You will already have answers to the position you're running, and you'll have frontlines (responses to common objections) to defend it. You will be in a great position to revise the case for future use, which is important on a topic with multiple tournaments. The writing process itself goes more quickly on the bottom-up approach than on the top-down approach, since you already have an outline and a file. Most importantly, you are in a better position to judge throughout the process whether this case is really worth writing, so your work is more efficient. The bottom-up approach prevents you from wasting too much time on a bad idea.

In short, the best position will be the one you find after many hours of research.

3.2 *The Case Selection Principles*

There are three guiding considerations for choosing which principle to write.

(P1) Choose the position that answers the greatest number of your opponents' arguments.

(P1) requires you to find common threads in the topic literature, and try to predict which arguments will be most common. You then choose the position that, after careful consideration, interacts best with those common threads or arguments. You want a position that clashes with what you'll hear every round in a way that is to your advantage.

(P2) Choose the position that answers the most challenging of your opponents' arguments.

(P2) requires you to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of the arguments on the other side, and to consider which arguments you are in the worst position to beat. In order to apply (P2) successfully, you may need to do some blocks first, so you can assess which of your blocks is weakest. I definitely suggest doing (at least some) blocks and refutation research before committing to a position.

(P3) Choose the position with the most limited and reasonable assumptions.

(P3) requires you to map out each argument and figure out its unsupported premises. Assumptions are premises that you take for granted. In any good argument, there is bound to be some assumption that isn't supported by evidence or argument. (If there were no assumptions, then every step in the argument would be justified by some other step, *ad infinitum*.) Then compare the plausibility and number of these assumptions with the

assumptions for other positions. You want a position that rests on very few assumptions, each of which is highly plausible. If you choose a position with a lot of implausible assumptions, then you just might lose the round in cross-examination.

If you follow these principles, then your position will be hard to defeat, and your opponents' positions will be easy to defeat.

4. Writing a Positional Case

Positional cases contain few, if any, spikes (i.e., short preemptive arguments) because spikes detract from offensive development and usually don't cohere with the position as a whole. Instead, every word of a positional case is carefully chosen to support your thesis.

4.1 *Clarity and Foresight*

Before writing your outline, ask yourself what you want your final rebuttal to sound like. Ask yourself what you *don't* want your opponent's final rebuttal to sound like. Now write the position with an eye to these final rebuttals. If you do this right, then you should have similar voting issues in every debate. This will make your final rebuttals significantly better because you'll be practicing the same stories every round.

In order to write your constructive from the perspective of your final rebuttal, you need to be very clear. Present your arguments in ways that avoid misinterpretation. People sometimes think that being vague or confusing helps because it puts opponents at a disadvantage. While this kind of tactic may win a few rounds, there are huge dangers that make it not worth the risk. First, good judges won't vote for arguments they didn't initially understand. The utility of an argument is low if the judge doesn't understand it well enough to vote for it. Second, your opponent will make the round even more confusing with their confused refutation. Muddled rounds remove the decision from your control, so confusion can turn against you. Third, it's hard to extend arguments that aren't initially presented clearly. You have to spend more time explaining them, which you should be using to answer your opponent's arguments.

Internal signposting goes a long way in terms of clarity. The most common impediment to clarity isn't the use of ambiguous words (although that is a problem); rather, it's the failure to clarify *what* you're doing and *why* you're doing it in a way that translates to a structured flow. Announce the point of your argument, roughly, before launching into it. Separate each argument with numbers or sub-points, so the judge can organize the position on his or her flow.

4.2 *Smart Standards Analysis*

You want a framework that coheres with your position as a whole, and your aim is to make it as easy as possible for you to win the debate on your position. A good, positional standard is

evidence-oriented. A standard is evidence-oriented in two respects: first, by being derived from your contention evidence; second, by being justified and explained through evidence rather than analytics.

Debaters often have trouble figuring out a good standard, or criterion, for their position. My advice would be to read carefully through the evidence in your contention, and perhaps return to the sources from which you cut that evidence. List all of the impacts for each piece of evidence. Then highlight an impact common to all of your evidence. The best impact shared by your contention evidence is a good candidate for your standard.

Justify this standard with evidence. And then explain (clearly!) how the standard operates. Say things like, “If I show X, then I win,” “Unless my opponent does Y, then I win,” and “Whoever demonstrates Z best wins.” It is also important to be clear about the scope of your standard’s importance. Do you claim that your standard is the *only* relevant impact, or do you think your standard is just one *very important* impact? It’s important to be clear about this issue, because your evidence may only justify the latter, not the former.

4.3 *Offense and Multi-Functionality*

Before writing your contention arguments, think carefully about the extent to which an argument is self-contained. The best-case scenario is that each of your arguments is complete, and does not rely on any other argument. If each of your arguments relies on the next, then your opponent can isolate the top of the chain and cut it off there. Argument dependence may be hard to avoid, but try to minimize it.

My most important advice on case-writing is to incorporate multi-functionality every step of the way. The function of an argument is what it does for you in the debate. Each argument you make should have two or three potential functions, at least. It may be hard to come up with more than one function for a given card; if so, then you need to choose different cards from your evidence file. The simplest function may be that the argument impacts to your standard. But another function may be weighing: the argument shows how one kind of impact trumps another kind of impact. Another function may be defense: it answers some argument from your position’s point of view. And it may be defense against many different arguments.

You should not save multi-functional impacting for the end of your case-writing process. You should be thinking about diverse argument functions throughout the research process and while you’re working on an outline.

5. Conclusion

Positional debating is a powerful approach, and it is worth trying even (and especially) if it differs from how you have debated in the past. Positional debating requires specificity, nuance,

and precision. Don't oversimplify, and don't ignore attention to detail. Approach the resolution as a thinker, not just as a debater.

Positional Debater's Checklist

1. What does the resolution really mean? What is the conflict scenario? What do I have to defend? What don't I have to defend? What does my opponent have to defend?
2. What are the strongest positions on each side? What are their assumptions? Which positions have the most limited and reasonable assumptions?
3. How do these positions interact with the positions on the other side of the topic? Which position answers the greatest number of, and the most challenging of, arguments on the other side?
4. Is my evidence file more than enough to write a case? Do I have enough evidence to create frontlines? Is my evidence multi-functional?
5. Is the structure of my position clear? Is my thesis or advocacy open to misinterpretation? What do I want my 2AR/NR to look like?
6. Does my standard cohere with my contention evidence? Is it clear how my standard operates?
7. To what extent are my arguments independent of one another? Can I develop them further by adding multiple warrants, deep warrants, explanation (by example and by distinction), and impacting?

Strategy and Argumentation in Standards Debate

By Marshall Thompson

Standards debate is becoming increasingly complicated, especially on the national circuit. Debaters can no longer get by with a rough overview of arguments to make on the standards. Instead they often need to be prepared to engage complex, nuanced, multifaceted and annoying frameworks. The standards are a difficult part of the debate to bypass, as they lay the framework for so much else that happens in the round. This article will first explain why standards debate is worth practicing and learning, cover some needed preliminary advice, and then discuss strategies for CX, negating and affirming.

Why Debate Standards?

With so many different things to become good at in debate - from theory, to weighing, to judge adaptation - it's important to spend some time explaining why it's valuable to hone your skills when it comes to debate the standards (by which I mean Values and Value Criteria).

Strategic Value

The first major area where standards debate recommends itself is in its strategic value. The standards allow you to control what arguments and impacts matter within a debate. If you can win your standard you can seriously restrict your opponent's access to their favorite piece of offense. You can also render the arguments that are most compelling on your opponent's side of the resolution obsolete.

Second, lots of people are apprehensive about trying to engage philosophy. They view it as scary, which is all to your benefit. If you are not scared you will have a real advantage over your opponent.

Lastly, getting good at the standards debate can be really strategic because it's an area where it's comparatively difficult to get blindsided. It's possible in the evidence heavy world of contention level debate that your opponent has a statistic, study or card that you just cannot beat. That is unlikely to happen on the standards debate. There really aren't many standards that are just naturally unbeatable.

Efficiency

It can take a long time and a lot of reading to really get good at philosophy. But once you are solid on standards debate it will apply from topic to topic. Much of the evidence you cut and arguments you make can apply to new frameworks you write on different topics. This means that you will have a fair amount of prep role over, making your life a lot easier.

Educational Value

Ehh, basically learning philosophy just makes you a smarter person. You learn to think abstractly and can approach the world in unique ways. Philosophy majors are some of the highest scoring majors on the GRE and the MCAT, and the highest scoring major by a considerable margin on the LSAT. You can find endless studies and evidence about the value of philosophy to learn to think; just Google it.

Preliminaries

There are some things that are just necessary if you want to become good at philosophy debate. You can know all about how to strategically make and use arguments, but if you don't have these basics you will plateau.

Read

You have to read philosophy. There is just no other way to go about it. If you are not reading the authors that people are running and really familiarizing yourself with the arguments and concepts then you will simply be out argued and out maneuvered when it comes to the core aspects of the debate. You are not as smart as Aristotle or Kant. You might think you are, but you are not. So read them and learn from what they have to say.

You do not, however, want to just reading modern philosophy. There is a lot of value in reading old philosophy, including Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Hume, Hegel, Marx and Levinas. There are many reasons for this, but a key one is that modern books are still in some sense on trial, we don't know which of them will turn out to have really significant, long-lasting ideas. We have some idea, but it is not certain.

Additionally, new books are always written within a framework that you will not understand unless you are a trained philosopher. The old books are what created and defined that framework. Thus, learning about the paradigm against which modern philosophy is written can be a valuable tool.

A final benefit of reading old books is a little harder to express. So, I am simply going to include a passage from C.S. Lewis, who expresses it well.

Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our own period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook—even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they

were all the time secretly united—united with each other and against earlier and later ages—by a great mass of common assumptions. We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, "But how could they have thought that?"—lies where we have never suspected it, and concerns something about which there is untroubled agreement between Hitler and President Roosevelt or between Mr. H. G. Wells and Karl Barth. None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same mistakes. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their own errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us. Two heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.¹

Prepare for the theory debate

Not everyone likes philosophy, and not everyone is good at it. People will thus try to avoid it, especially if they think you are better than them at it. The way they often try to do this is through theory, either arguing that you must accept the affirmative's standard or arguing that you must run a particular ethical theory, normally consequentialist in nature. You therefore want to be prepared to meet and beat these arguments within theory debates. There are many arguments out there for the value of having philosophy debates and a quick Google search will help you find them. One great place to look is at college philosophy department websites, as they often include plugs for why you should become a philosophy major with helpful arguments and statistics about the value of a philosophical education.

Philosophers themselves also spend a lot of time arguing about why philosophy is valuable, so a great place to look for these arguments is also there. One fascinating piece that you should definitely check out is called *The Value of Philosophy* by Bertrand Russell.

Know your logical fallacies

You need to know your logical fallacies back to front and be able to explain and provide examples for why each one is fallacious. If you are not sure about many logical fallacies you should spend some substantial time on Google and Wikipedia to make sure you master them.

There are a couple of reasons for this. The first is that fallacies just beat up arguments in ways that nothing else does. If your argument affirms the consequent there is really nothing you can do about it. The argument is dead; there is no real way around it. With most arguments you can answer the objection; that is really not very true with fallacies.

¹ C.S. Lewis. Introduction to Athanasius: On the Incarnation. <<http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/history/ath-inc.htm>>

Second, pointing out that something is fallacious is really persuasive to judges. It demonstrates a grasp of argumentation and has a certain clarity that is lacking when making other sorts of arguments.

Here is a list of starter fallacies that you should be able to identify and explain easily. Feel free to branch out to others:

1. Affirming the consequent
2. Denying the Antecedent
3. Affirming a disjunction
4. Is-ought
5. Appeals to
 - a. Authority
 - b. Emotion
 - c. Popularity
 - d. Tradition
 - e. Ignorance
 - f. Pity
 - g. Force
6. Fallacy of Origin/Genetic Fallacy
7. Line drawing Fallacy
8. Post Hoc Ergo Propter hoc
9. Conflations and Equivocations
10. Mind Projection Fallacy
11. Slippery slope Fallacy

Lastly, you should also be prepared to jump on impact justified standards which normally contain some sort of conflation or equivocation. An example of that type of argument would be like this: The value is morality. Things can only be moral if they have freedom, because morality is a guide for action and action can only be guided if we have actions to choose between. Therefore morality should try to minimize slavery because slavery is a lack of freedom.

First, this argument commits the fallacy of origin. Just because freedom is a necessary condition for morality does not mean that freedom is itself morally valuable. Second, there is a conflation in the term freedom. In the first use “freedom” merely implies having at least two options between which to choose. Thus we can have morality as long as there is any choice available to me, and I can therefore achieve what is necessary for the existence of moral judgments. In the second use “freedom” is taken to mean having a lot of freedom or having lots of options from which to choose, like how you act and who you work for. But there is no reason that denying someone lots of freedom means their actions can no longer be moral. Thus there is a jump in the logic rendering the argument fallacious.

This sort of jump is most common when people make prerequisite arguments. So for example, freedom is prerequisite for morality so we should maximize freedom. Or life is prerequisite for morality so we should maximize life. All those sorts of arguments are fallacious.

Strategy in Cross-Examination

When you cross examine your opponent there are several important things that you want to be doing: building trust, setting up fallacies, and understanding what in the world is going on.

Building Trust

Having the judge trust you on issues of philosophy can make or break many a philosophy debate. If you are able to get the judge to believe that you just know a lot more about philosophy than your opponent does then they often take your word on things or give you the benefit of the doubt that they do not extend to your opponent. This is often lifesaving in the time-pressed 1AR and certainly helps while negating as well.

In order to build trust with your judge it's important to point out when your opponent is incorrect in understanding some aspect of philosophy. So if your opponent says something about Locke that you know to be untrue you can say something like "Oh really, I thought Locke said X..." and say it in such a way that indicates you are quite skeptical of what your opponent is saying. This will often make your opponent flustered and give you the perceptual edge. That said, if you are wrong this can really hurt you.

Another important aspect of building trust with your judge is to not ask questions as if you are trying to clarify. Always at least pretend you are leading up to something. Use rhetoric like, "Isn't it the case that...?" or "Are you interpreting Locke this way?" That way you are not claiming that you do not know what Locke says. Instead you look like you do know a lot about the philosopher and are just unclear about how your opponent is trying to interpret and apply his or her work to the debate.

Setting up Fallacies

You can save yourself a lot of time in your speech if you can get your opponents to agree that their arguments are fallacious in CX. This is also shockingly easy to do if you phrase it as just trying to get down their exact argument. You set it up like this: "Please list the premises in card X". "Alright so the way this card draws the inference is premise 1, 2, and 3 and they fit together like this...?" The thing is that your opponent will generally agree that that is indeed how they fit together even if the way they are set up affirms the consequent, for instance. Once you have their admission, however, that that is how their syllogism works there is not much they can do.

Figuring out what is going on

This can be one of the most difficult though also important aspects of philosophy debate. It is very easy when someone reads a complicated position to have absolutely no idea about what is going on. However, there is no reason to freak out because there are lots of strategies that you can utilize to make this no problem whatsoever.

First, you can try the “explain this to me like I am 5” tactic. This often will get your opponent to explain a complicated argument in fairly simple ways. The problem with this is it harms your perceptual advantage, unless you can pull it off by making your opponent look absurd and act as though you had to resort to such extremes just to make them sensible. Another downside to this strategy is the possibility of getting a dumbed down version of the framework that they will then shift out of to make your arguments not apply. It is not that hard to sell the “her arguments apply to the 5 year old version of the argument, not the real argument I am making.”

A second strategy is to focus on lynch pin parts of the framework. Try to identify certain key points in the framework to determine what they have to win and then just try to understand those parts. This will allow you to focus on the most important parts of the case and ignore a lot of the rest. One problem with this strategy, however, is that the lynch pin parts of a case tend to be the truest part of the position. If your opponent is only making one argument to defend this claim and thus making that a lynch point it is generally because that one claim is fairly true, or is fairly true if X, Y and Z previous arguments are true.

A third strategy is to set burdens on your opponent. For example, say “Alright, for an argument to provide a valid inference it must connect premises in a valid way to draw a conclusion. What are the premises in this first card?” Then, “Okay. How does that fit into a syllogism?” The reason that this can be so effective is it forces your opponent to explain an argument in the form that you want it explained rather than in the way that they are comfortable doing it. This means that either they don’t really understand their own position (which happens a lot), they won’t be able to fulfill the burden you outline for a good argument, or they do explain it and you get a list of arguments you can easily indict - each of the premises as well as the claim that those premises on their own lead to the conclusion. To make this strategy effective, however, you need to do an excellent job of setting up why X is a necessary burden of explanation that the argument must be able to pass. Otherwise the strategy is just not very effective. This is one of the most useful techniques for figuring out what is going on if you can get good at it, but it is also much harder to do.

Strategy for the Negative

Writing Your NC

Perhaps the most straightforward strategy a negative can use when trying to go for the standards debate is to write a sufficient though essentially unturnable NC. This means you take an argument that is essentially true on the negative side and then run a framework that makes that the most important thing. On the topic “Resolved: In the United States, juveniles charged with violent felonies ought to be treated as adults in the criminal justice system,” an example would be a standard that is like consistency with codified international legal norms (which pretty clearly said children should not be treated as adults). Or, the standard could be “maximizing rehabilitation” in which turn ground existed was not the strongest. This makes it hard to run theory because it’s possible to turn it - they can argue that codified international legal norms say to treat juveniles like adults. It is just really hard to do so.

This means that that the affirmative needs to invest time answering your position with defense, which is almost always a difficult thing for the affirmative to have time to do. It also means you can keep your NC short without risking the affirmative going all in with turns to the NC and gaining a time advantage.

The next thing to try to achieve when writing an NC is to make it so your NC framework arguments operate in some sort of preclusive manner. You can do this either through some sort of metaethical claim that in theory will criticize the frameworks of most NCs, or in some other fashion. By doing this it prevents the affirmative from just excluding the NC framework via extensions from the AC, which is normally one of the best strategies that the affirmative has open to them.

A final thing to think about when writing your NC is length. As a general rule shorter is better because it means you can spend more time making arguments and turns on the AC which means that the affirmative is more likely to undercover something allowing to you play to your strengths. It is rare that the affirmative will attempt to respond to the claims of the NC line-by-line because normally there is not enough time in the 1AR. Thus you get little strategic benefit from having more individual arguments in the NC.

A final advantage to always consider when you negate is that you will know your opponents standard when you pick yours. This is great because philosophical traditions tend to have their preferred opponent. For example, utilitarians spend a lot of time criticizing deontology, but contractualism spends a lot of time criticizing util. This means that by getting to pick your framework second you can select one that naturally answers your opponent’s case really well.

Reading your NC

While reading your NC you want to do everything you can to be implicating arguments in the AC. A good general rule is that for each card you read you should have somewhere in the NC where you specifically explain why your position takes out the AC. For example, you read your first justification for your framework and then look up from what you are reading and say “This takes out my opponent’s framework because it shows that humans do not have rights in the way his case assumes.” Or “This takes out my opponent’s framework because it proves that we cannot apply his framework because we cannot know what is good or bad.” And, try to do this for each major argument in the NC, including the offense. This is often most easily done by simply linking into your opponent’s standard and weighing, i.e. “This also links to my opponents standard and outweighs his offense because X.” This makes each argument in the NC a game-over issue if they fail to address it. This prevents them from simply extending things out of the AC to exclude your position, and that will mean the 1AR almost certainly runs out of time.

Answering the AC

When you are answering the AC there are several important things to keep in mind.

First, have some general reasons to prefer your NC prepared. These are basically just like additional warrants for your standard, but rather than reading them in the NC read and apply them on the AC. By having these prepared you will always have at least a few answers to the AC and it looks as though you are being really responsive in giving reasons to prefer your NC.

Second, be comparative. Don’t just criticize the AC standard; instead give reasons why yours is preferable. This is both perceptually very dominant and has the added advantage of meaning that every objection you make to the AC standard becomes a warrant for your own standard. This puts you in a really strong position going into the 2NR where you just have loads of warrants for your standard all over the place.

Third, look for places where the AC affirms the consequent. This is the most strategic fallacy you can point out in your opponent’s case, because it means that their case becomes a necessary but insufficient burden on them. Let’s take this example: The resolution says that doing X is moral, and the affirmative argues that moral actions must have X property, and that the resolution has X property. This obviously affirms the consequent. What that means is that X property becomes a necessary though insufficient condition to be moral. If moral actions must have X, then if something lacks X that means it is not moral. This implies that if you can turn their position that is a reason that you win, but if they win their offense it is not a reason that they win.

The thing is that people make arguments that affirm the consequent all the time. Whenever people claim that morality has some particular characteristic or property they are likely setting themselves up to affirm the consequent, giving you a huge advantage.

Fourth, when you turn a philosophically heavy position it is often best to read the turns on the framework and link them specifically to warrants for the standard rather than on the contention. This will force you to directly link the position into his framework and make it much more difficult for the affirmative to exclude a group of turns by claiming they misunderstand the framework.

Strategy for the Affirmative

In many ways the affirmative has a more difficult time in the standard debate than the negative, because they have to spend at least six minutes making arguments that are not directly comparative to their opponents' frameworks. This exasperates an already painful time tradeoff for the affirmative. However, there are strategies that the affirmative can use to combat these issues.

Writing Your AC

To even begin to do justice to this issue would require its own article. However, there are a few things to keep in mind.

The more arguments you have for your standard the easier it is to link offense into your position. But the more arguments you have the easier it is for you to extend stuff to take out the NC. Thus there are advantages and disadvantages to having one long justification for your framework or lots of short ones. Additionally, if there is a major problem with a single long justification that your opponent finds, it can be devastating. On the other hand, a series of short justifications are more likely to have major problems that your opponent can find. These are all things you have to consider when crafting your position.

Strategy in the 1AR

The 1AR is a difficult speech and it is no less true in standards debate. But, there are a number of techniques that can be helpful.

First, be really comparative when you make answers to your opponent's framework. This is crucially important because it means that you basically get to make up new warrants for your standard in the 1AR. You get to make up all new reasons why your position is better than your opponents.

Second, take advantage of the judge's approach to the flow. Often when judges evaluate a standards debate they sort of presume the AC is true and then see if there are any strong reasons to prefer the AC rather than putting each standard on an equal playing field. This is often unconscious and not safe to rely on but it's an important trend to recognize and understand.

Third, find reasons why your opponent's position denies the antecedent. This is the same sort of thing as the affirming the consequent before except reversed.

Fourth, try your best to frame your AC so that it excludes the NC warrants by making them insignificant. That way you don't have to answer them all individually. Anything that you can do to save time in the 1AR is worthwhile.

Lastly, being a little vague can often be your friend in the 1AR. Judges often give affirmatives the benefit of the doubt in explaining their arguments in the 2AR, allowing a huge time save. For example, if you just say "Extend X card, this takes out the NC by explaining how its regressive," the judge will often allow you to then explain why the NC is regressive in light of that card in the 2AR. This makes it difficult for the 2NR to respond and allows you to spend time where you need it most. If you make several arguments like that you can just go for one, often giving you a decent time trade off.

You should also take note of this strategy so that you can point out excessive vagueness when found in your opponent's speeches.

Conclusion

These sort of strategic tips and considerations make up one aspect (although an important one) to framework debate. However, while they are important to practice and learn both so they can be employed and so you can formulate strategies when others use them against you, you should always remember that there are lots of other critically important aspects to framework debate. This includes especially crystallization and things of that sort which can often bring you back from near total defeat in a standards debate.

A Debater's Introduction to Metaethics

By Christian Tarsney

This essay provides a survey of the most important debates and positions in metaethics, divided into three general topic areas: (i) the function of moral language, (ii) the nature of moral properties, and (iii) the sources of moral knowledge. The goal is to familiarize debaters with the core ideas and terms from the field which are most directly debate-relevant. The last section discusses the structural role of metaethical arguments in LD rounds, in particular the interaction between metaethics and ordinary standards debate, and gives suggestions for running and responding to metaethical positions.

Introduction

The goal of this essay is twofold: first, to give a whistle-stop tour of the most important questions in metaethics, and the most popular answers to those questions, and second, to discuss the function of metaethical arguments in debate and give general strategic suggestions for running and answering these arguments effectively.

Metaethics as a widely recognized component of LD debate is quite new—as recently as three years ago, most debaters wouldn't have recognized the word. It's tempting to point out that metaethical *arguments* have appeared in debate rounds, although perhaps infrequently, for as long as debaters have been comparing ethical theories, but it would be a mistake to deny that the explicit emergence of metaethics has changed the complexion of national circuit debate quite substantially over the last few years.

Because of its relative novelty (I speculate optimistically), there is still considerable confusion among debaters and coaches about both the content and function of metaethics. The former can be taught—the difficulty, at the moment, is that many debaters are learning it second-, third-, or fourth-hand from anyone who's actually studied it (coaches remembering bits of what their lab leaders told them three years ago about intuitionism), with the result that substantial confusions exist about the content of particular views, and both debaters and coaches often don't know what they don't know. The latter is something which the LD community as a whole will have to work out by consensus, and in what follows I'll make some brief suggestions as to how that consensus should look.

So, what is metaethics? This is a question without a trivial answer, but the simplest way of thinking about it is this: *ethics* (“normative ethics,” “ethical theory,” “first-order ethics”) tries to figure out general principles by which to determine what things have what ethical properties (for instance, what actions are right, wrong, permissible, obligatory; what events or states of affairs are morally good or bad; what people are virtuous or vicious). Each ethical theory proposes a criterion for assigning these labels—for instance, a utilitarian might say: “A state of

affairs counts as ‘good’ to the extent that it involves more happiness than unhappiness, an action is right to the extent that it brings about good states of affairs, and a person is virtuous to the extent that he or she regularly takes right actions.”

Metaethics steps back from this project and asks what exactly we’re doing when we devise ethical theories, and how we ought to go about doing it. A bit more concretely, metaethics asks three kinds of questions about the practice of making moral judgments and devising moral theories:

[1] Linguistic questions: What do terms like “right,” “wrong,” “good,” “bad,” etc. mean? Can they be defined in terms of purely descriptive vocabulary (e.g. “pleasurable”)? Is someone who expresses an ethical judgment asserting a fact (i.e., saying something which could be true or false, in virtue of how things really are in the world), or are they doing something else?

[2] Metaphysical (or “ontological”²) questions: If moral judgments do seek to describe some feature of reality, what feature is it? Are there moral properties (like rightness) which simply exist over and above all the physical properties? Do the moral facts depend in some way on the physical facts (for instance, does the fact of an action’s wrongness depend on its causing someone to suffer), and if so which physical facts are the relevant ones?

[3] Epistemological questions: If moral judgments are the sorts of things which can be true or false, then how do we know which are which? Does merely having an intuition or feeling that something’s wrong *justify the belief that it’s wrong*? If not, what could justify that belief?

The next three sections will tackle these three question sets, in that order. It’s worth giving a note of caution, however, that this organization of the subject matter, and all the further organization within the sections, is open to dispute and done differently by different people—I’m organizing things in the way that makes most sense to me, but neither it nor any other taxonomic schema is canonical. In particular, I’ll point out that the ordering between language (the cognitivism/non-cognitivism divide) and metaphysics (realism/anti-realism) can and does go either way in standard presentations, and my ordering is motivated by pedagogical rather than philosophical considerations. Debaters are fond of saying things like “epistemology comes prior to ontology” with the sense that they’re saying something clear and obvious, but in general issues of language, metaphysics and epistemology are too tightly entangled to admit of such simple “orders of operation,” at least in advance of committing oneself to a particular, substantive view. (Hopefully why that’s the case will become clearer as we proceed.)

² I put the word in scare quotes because of its constant abuse by obscurantist pseudo-philosophers and, consequently, the debaters who card them. For these purposes, thinking of “ontology” as merely the task of cataloguing the “furniture of the universe”—figuring out what things (objects, properties, facts, events...) there are and aren’t. Metaphysics is the slightly broader task of trying to say something about the *nature* of these things and how they fit together. That’s vague, of course, but at least it’s vague forthrightly.

Finally, along the same lines, it should be noted that the category distinction between “metaethics” and “normative ethics” is not cut and dried—any significant view in metaethics is likely to count in favor of some moral theories and against others, and conversely a really good argument for a particular moral theory may settle a lot of metaethical questions along the way. For our purposes, I’ll discuss any view that has metaethical implications, but it would be wrong to assert something like “contractarianism is metaethics, not normative ethics” (or vice versa).

I’ll delay most of what I have to say specifically about debate applications until we’ve covered the content of the metaethical views we’ll be considering.

Moral Language

Debates about moral language center around one point of philosophical disagreement: are moral utterances truth-apt? In other words, are sentences which express either general moral attitudes (“Lying is wrong.”) or particular judgments (“What she just did was wrong.”) the sorts of things which can be true or false? Does someone who utters such a sentence intend to assert a fact, or are they doing something else?

The view that moral utterances are (in general) truth-apt is known as cognitivism. The view that they are (generally) not is known as non-cognitivism. I think it’s fair to claim that most of us are intuitively cognitivists about our use of moral language—we take ourselves, or at least we take most people, to be aiming for truth when expressing moral judgments (such that we either succeed, and do state a truth, or fail and state a falsehood). But noncognitivists have offered increasingly sophisticated accounts of moral language which challenge this intuition. I’ll say a few things about cognitivism first, then examine some of these proposals.

Cognitivism

There’s not terribly much to say about cognitivism per se—by and large, it’s simply an unstated assumption. Cognitivists believe that ordinary, well-formed moral utterances are either true or false—there might be exceptions, indeed perhaps quite large ones, for particular kinds of moral discourse which are found to be somehow incoherent, but all the cognitivist needs to claim is that at least some sentences which express what look like ordinary moral judgments (“Lying is wrong,” “Agents ought to prevent suffering when they can do so at little cost to themselves.”) are either true or false.

This is not necessarily to claim that any of these sentences are true—as we will see in a moment, some cognitivists think that all moral claims are false. (At least some moral claims must be false, on a cognitivist account, given that some pairs of claims contradict.) The cognitivist also need not claim that we know whether any particular moral claim is true—a cognitivist believes that when we express moral judgments, we are making claims, but it’s perfectly possible that the facts on which the truth of these claims depend is entirely

inaccessible to us. (By analogy, we could write books speculating about the activities of hypothetical aliens in some distant solar system, making claims all of which are either true or false but without any ability to determine which are which.)

Defenses of cognitivism generally take the form of objections to particular non-cognitivist proposals, and we'll examine some of these arguments in the next section. No moral philosopher is just a cognitivist—rather, there are cognitivist and noncognitivist moral theories, and if a theory can provide a plausible account of what we're talking about when we make moral claims (e.g., an account of properties like wrongness which explains what it means to call an action “wrong”), then in so doing it has justified cognitivism almost in passing. The noncognitivist, then, is one who holds that there is no plausible account of moral discourse on which it involves the attribution of properties at all.

Non-Cognitivism

The non-cognitivist believes that moral utterances do something other than express truths and falsehoods. Historically, two candidates for that “something else” have tempted philosophers. *Emotivists* (or *expressivists*) think that moral utterances express the attitude of the speaker towards an action, person or state of affairs (or at least, that this is their most ordinary function). *Prescriptivists* think that moral utterances issue instructions or commands.

The simplest way to get the sense of these views is to think in terms of the underlying grammar they take moral utterances to possess. The cognitivist thinks that a sentence like “Lying is wrong.” is just what it appears to be: a declarative sentence which predicates a property (wrongness) on a grammatical subject (lying). The non-cognitivist thinks that, despite its outer form, the sentence “Lying is wrong” is not really declarative at all. To the emotivist or expressivist, its underlying form is that of an interjection, something like (to give something of a parody) “Boo lying!” To the prescriptivist, the underlying form is that of an imperative, i.e. “Don't anyone tell lies!” No one thinks that ordinary interjections (“yay!”, “ouch!”, “wow!”) or imperatives (“come here!”, “go away!”) are candidates for truth or falsehood, so to the extent that moral utterances are *really*, in some sense, of one of these forms, then neither are they.

The earliest noncognitivist account of morality (at least in recent philosophical history) is A.J. Ayer's emotivism. Ayer belonged to a group of philosophers known as logical positivists, best known for the view that the meaning of a sentence consists of its *verification conditions*, the set of potential observations which could confirm or disconfirm it. If a sentence is not open to observational confirmation or refutation, on this view, it simply fails to make a meaningful claim. The positivists, Ayer in particular, were persuaded for this reason that moral claims could be nothing more than outbursts of emotion.

This view is now widely regarded by philosophers as crude and untenable—in part, because the verification-conditions view of meaning has lost much of its popularity, but also in part because Ayer's emotivism has trouble explaining many features of ordinary moral discourse. For instance, people sometimes appear to be in genuine moral disagreement, i.e. asserting contrary

moral claims, which should be impossible if they aren't asserting anything at all. People also reason hypothetically, counterfactually and probabilistically about morality, and it's not easy to see how we could do any of those things with mere emotive reactions (compare "I'm not sure whether this is morally wrong" to "I'm not sure whether: *ugh...*"). Finally, moral claims figure in (apparently valid) deductive arguments, which seems to require that they express propositional content (this is known as the Frege-Geach objection).

Since Ayer, emotivists (and their close cousins, expressivists) have developed increasingly sophisticated ways of addressing these problems by adding nuance to Ayer's stark emotivist account. Charles Stevenson, Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard have all contributed views along these lines, which unfortunately we lack space to discuss in detail. Both Blackburn and Gibbard, however, edge in the direction of both cognitivism and realism in the course of trying to account for moral disagreement and moral reasoning (Blackburn, for instance, describes himself as a "quasi-realist").

Prescriptivism falls into the same historical tradition as emotivism and expressivism, as part of the attempt to improve on Ayerian emotivism. The best-known prescriptivist is R.M. Hare, who described his view as "Universal Prescriptivism"—in short, claiming that moral utterances express commands which apply to all agents in relevantly similar circumstances (hence, "universal"). Hare thought he could derive from this starting point a form of utilitarianism. However, like Ayer's emotivism, prescriptivism has generally been abandoned by moral philosophers since it faces most of the problems for emotivists mentioned above, and offers no particularly good solutions to them.

Moral Reality

Alongside the question of what it means to say something like "lying is wrong," there's the question of what facts or phenomena in the world these claims have to do with. One possible answer is "none at all," and people who take this view are known as moral anti-realists. On the other hand, there are a variety of moral realist views which offer competing accounts of the subject matter of morality.

Realism

Realists believe in moral properties—they believe that there really are such things as rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, virtue and vice, moral value, moral worth, etc. Not all realists believe in all these things, and just about any particular realist view will take some of them to be primary and the rest merely derivative, if they can be made sense of at all (a Kantian, for instance, takes rightness and wrongness to be primary; a utilitarian takes moral value and disvalue). There's not more to say about realism in general, but there's a good deal to be said about particular realist views, of which we'll explore three broad categories in this section.

Naturalism

Naturalists believe that moral facts are a species of “natural fact.” What this means is not always completely obvious, but for our purposes let’s say that natural facts are facts about the empirical (=physical?) world, of the sort dealt with by the sciences. It’s also not always clear what’s meant by the *identification* between a moral fact and a natural fact: at one extreme, we might think that moral terms are just alternate names for natural phenomena, so that for instance “bad” is just a different way of saying “painful” (this is the sort of naturalism that G.E. Moore seemed to be criticizing—see below). But most moral naturalists want to go a little farther than this and claim that the specifically *moral* facts are distinguished from other natural facts by some special sort of normative or action-guiding significance (though what this could be if not something over and above the natural often proves hard to say).

Naturalist views tend to go in one of two directions, corresponding to the two normative theories most closely associated with naturalism: utilitarianism and virtue ethics. Utilitarian moral naturalists, like Peter Railton, claim that the basic moral facts are facts about value, and that moral value facts are to be identified with facts about the preferences, interests or wellbeing of sentient creatures. Not all utilitarians are moral naturalists—those who aren’t hold that it’s a *further fact* about pleasurable experiences that they’re morally good (i.e., saying that “it involved pleasure, and it was good” states two facts which are necessarily connected, rather than stating one and the same fact in two different ways). The naturalistic utilitarian, on the other hand, thinks that the natural facts by themselves are sufficient: once it’s been said, for instance, that the Holocaust involved enormous human suffering, *nothing more needs to be said* to describe its moral properties.

Virtue-ethical naturalists like Philippa Foot and Michael Thompson have a different story, deriving ultimately from Aristotle (hence often referred to as Aristotelian naturalism). On their view, moral facts are facts about *function*: things in the world are divided into *natural kinds* (like “human being”) that represent privileged groupings. Each natural kind has an associated function or activity which defines it, and these characteristic functions contain within them normative criteria for what count as good and bad *performances* by a member of that kind. These functional criteria in turn yield normative judgments about particular specimens of a natural kind: for instance, if the function of a lion is to hunt gazelles, a lion which does so well is a good lion, and one which does so badly is a bad lion. In this way, the natural world furnishes judgments of functional characteristics as either positive (virtues) or negative (vices).

Of course, the notion of “natural functions” is contentious, and even if it could be extended to humans, it’s not clear why “making oneself a well-functioning human being” should take precedence over any of our other concerns—for instance, when it comes into conflict with pleasure or desire-fulfillment. In addition, there are general objections to any naturalistic account of morality which we’ll explore in the next sub-section.

Non-Naturalism

Non-naturalist realists believe that moral properties are *sui generis*—“of their own kind,” rather than a derivative or complex of other (naturalistic) properties. Non-naturalism is most famously associated with G.E. Moore, an English philosopher who wrote during the first half of the twentieth century. Moore articulated two famous (and famously obscure) objections to any naturalistic account of moral notions (in particular, “good”) which he held to indicate that the fundamental terms of morality must represent irreducible conceptual primitives.

The first of these objections, known as the Open Question Argument, suggests that naturalists who propose reductive definitions of moral terms (in Moore’s example, “good”) can’t possibly be right since if they were, the question of the truth of these equivalencies would not be (or seem to be) “open”: if, for instance, “is good” really just *means* “is pleasurable,” then a question like “I know that enjoying other people’s misfortune is pleasurable, but is it a good thing to do?” would be as trivial as “I know that Sam’s a bachelor, but is he unmarried?” On the contrary, however, the first question seems entirely substantive, and it seems as though someone could be a fully competent English speaker, as conversant as anyone with the meaning of the word “good,” and still not know the answer to it. Thus, Moore argued, since analogous open questions exist for any attempted naturalistic reduction of moral concepts, the meaning of moral terms can’t be fully naturalistic, or reducible to naturalistic terms.

Moore’s second argument accuses the naturalist of committing what he terms the “Naturalistic Fallacy.” This argument is notoriously muddled, hard to distinguish from the Open Question Argument, and rarely seen as compelling. It’s worth noting, however, that neither in Moore’s usage nor elsewhere is this “fallacy” a synonym for Hume’s “is-ought” problem (the observation that there are no valid arguments from a set of “is” claims, i.e. claims which are purely descriptive, to any “ought” claim)—debaters sometimes use the terms interchangeably, and this ought to be avoided.

The basic objection to Moore’s non-naturalism is that it makes morality deeply mysterious—it leaves little if anything to be said about the nature of moral properties, beyond their being *sui generis*, and in exchange it requires us to posit the existence of something strange and metaphysical. Non-naturalists also have a hard time explaining how we *know* anything about morality, given how far removed their moral reality is from the world of ordinary experience. Typically, non-naturalists have appealed to something like a faculty of moral intuition which simply gives us direct (if sometimes unreliable) access to moral truths. But this explanation seems only to deepen the mystery, and as we will see shortly, it has not been well-received by philosophers.

Constructivism

It does seem odd that “naturalism” and “non-naturalism” should fail to exhaust the field of moral realisms. But for whatever reason, each of these terms have acquired narrow enough meanings that there are broadly realist views which can be usefully distinguished from either. There are many ways of carving up the terrain, but making no attempt to be exhaustive, I’ll take constructivism as a third broad category of realist moral theory.

Constructivists believe, in one way or another, that morality depends on norms and agreements within human societies. These norms and agreements might be explicit, implicit or merely hypothetical, depending on the form of constructivism in question. And the criteria which define the particular sort of agreements that give rise to morality will differ from theory to theory as well.

Two kinds of constructivism have recently become popular in debate: contractarianism and contractualism. Each of these is an enormous topic unto itself, so I’ll try to indicate very briefly what each view holds, what they have in common, and where they diverge.

Contractarianism is the account of morality proposed by David Gauthier, and traceable in nascent form back to Thomas Hobbes. On Gauthier’s view, morality is a set of self-regulatory rules which agents have self-interested reasons to adopt and bind themselves to. Gauthier’s argument, in simplest terms, is that (a) we all do well by cooperating with others, but (b) we also all face incentives to defect from cooperative agreements for personal gain and (c) worry that others will defect from their agreements with us. Therefore, (d) we prefer to cooperate with people who are *disposed to abide by their agreements*, rather than with people who are constantly calculating their long-term interests in cooperating or defecting. Fortunately, (e) dispositions are detectable even when particular acts of defection are not—we have numerous ways of telling the honest dealers from the cheats and connivers, and to the extent that we can’t, we make up for it by punishing the cheats all the more seriously when we catch them in the act. Since others have the same preferences and capacities as we do, therefore, (f) it is also in our own best interests to be sincerely disposed cooperators, even in the particular instances when we could gain by defecting. To accept morality is to resolve to abide your agreements, both explicit/particular and implicit/general, and no (directly) self-interested calculation of the advantages of agreement-keeping can provide the benefits that this commitment can—namely, making you a trustworthy cooperative partner with whom others will willingly enter into agreements.

The contractualist account of morality is quite a bit different. It traces back at least to Rawls, but has found enormous recent popularity through the work of T.M. Scanlon. Where Gauthier takes the pull of morality to be fundamentally self-interested, Rawls and Scanlon argue that the moral standpoint is essentially *impartial*. For Rawls, impartiality is represented by the Original Position and Veil of Ignorance (and, on the level of metaethics, by reflective equilibrium, which we’ll discuss in a moment). For Scanlon, the impartial agent looks for rules or principles which “no one could reasonably reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.” (This

formulation expresses the core of Scanlon's theory, and many philosophers find it to be exactly as inscrutable and question-begging as it sounds.) While both Rawls and Scanlon take it as fundamental that individuals are concerned with their own interests, they suppose that we're also concerned with notions like fairness, and with the ability to justify our conduct to others, and that morality asks us to place these concerns (for their own sakes, not for even indirectly selfish/instrumental reasons) above the maximal satisfaction of our own interests. In this respect, they are in basic disagreement with Gauthier.

There are a myriad other forms of constructivism besides contractarianism and contractualism—for instance, Korsgaard's view is generally seen as a constructivist rendering of Kant. But what all constructivist views have in common is the claim that moral facts are closely linked to facts about norms, agreements, commitments or decisions by or among agents. Constructivist moralities might be "mind-independent" in the weak sense that they derive only from *necessary* facts about these agents (e.g. facts about the nature of agency), but they do depend at least on these, where other accounts of morality do not.

Anti-Realism

In its strongest manifestation, anti-realism is the view that there are no moral facts or moral properties—that nothing is morally right, wrong, good or bad. A little more weakly, anti-realists believe that there are no *mind-independent* moral facts—that if anything is, say, morally wrong, this is only to say that someone *regards it as wrong* or *projects* the property of wrongness onto it. Just about all the views which, in debate, are lumped under the umbrella of "moral skepticism" are anti-realist, but not necessarily vice versa: non-cognitivists, in particular, are (almost necessarily) anti-realists, but for the most part would not characterize themselves as "skeptical" of morality. Non-cognitivists are anti-realists by default, since they don't think that moral terms like "right" and "wrong" are even *trying* to refer to properties in the world.

On the other hand, anti-realism in combination with cognitivism yields (as always, subject to debatable exceptions) what's sometimes called an "error theory" of moral discourse—i.e., yield the conclusion that the entire practice of making moral judgments is in error, and that all sentences expressing such judgments are false. The term "error theory" entered into philosophical parlance through the work of J.L. Mackie, but it doesn't refer in any very particular way to his position or arguments (the well-known "argument from disagreement" and "argument from queerness"). Rather, an error theory is just any skeptical view which denies the existence of a moral reality, coupled with a cognitivist interpretation of moral discourse. Some debaters seem to have thought that by calling skepticism "error theory" (and carding skeptics like Mackie and Richard Joyce who use that term), they can avoid the stigma associated with running "skep." But it should be obvious that this is no more than a change of label. The one genuine advantage to characterizing a skeptical position as error-theoretic is that it specifies a particular kind of skeptical conclusion—namely, that moral claims are false, rather than (e.g.) meaningless, or unknowable, which is certainly a more useful conclusion if you're negating. But of course it's the content of the skeptical argument which determines the implication, not its label.

Moral skepticism/anti-realism is an enormous topic—in a sense, nearly as large as moral theory itself, since historically the task of answering the moral skeptic has been a central concern of almost all non-skeptical moral and metaethical theories. And from a debate standpoint, moral skepticism/error theory is its own topic, so I won't say more about it here. The important point, for our purposes, is that skepticism has a place in our picture: in metaethical terms, the paradigmatic skeptic is a cognitivist anti-realist.

Moral Knowledge

The final major question of metaethics is this: If moral knowledge is possible, how is it possible and what does it require? Standardly, epistemologists have understood “knowledge” to mean justified true belief (ignoring some irrelevant complications), and epistemology as a discipline tends to concern itself most centrally with the notion of “justification.” (Whether an agent has a given belief is largely a question for philosophy of mind and for psychology; whether that belief is true is a question for any field of inquiry the belief concerns, which in the case of moral beliefs means normative ethics and/or the metaphysical portion of metaethics. Thus, while epistemology is generally branded the “study of knowledge,” it is more than anything else specifically the study of justification.) That being so, we can reframe the central question of moral epistemology as asking what, if anything, can justify moral beliefs, or give sufficient epistemic warrant for taking a moral utterance to be true.

There are quite a few ways in which this question could turn out to be (more or less) uninteresting. If all moral beliefs are unjustified, then the answer is trivial. If what we call “moral beliefs” are in fact not belief states at all but rather attitudes, reactions, plans or prescriptions, then the question simply doesn't make sense. And if moral facts turn out to be a species of empirical fact—e.g., derivatives of facts about the wellbeing of sentient creatures, or the norms of human societies—then we learn about them by ordinary empirical methods, and there is no unique problem of moral epistemology.

That said, though, there are other moral theories for which epistemological problems are front and center, and where a special account of moral knowledge/justification is called for. We'll look at three of these accounts.

Intuitionism

Intuitionism is exactly what you'd expect: the view that our moral intuitions are reliable sources of moral knowledge. In general, intuitionists think that we possess autonomous faculties of moral judgment, i.e. capacities for discerning properties like goodness, badness, rightness or wrongness which are entirely independent of our other means of acquiring knowledge (the senses, mathematical reasoning, etc.). The appeal of this view is that it explains the vivid and compelling nature of certain moral intuitions—for instance, one's sense of wrongness when studying the Holocaust. Most people, even if they have no answers to the deep questions of

moral theory, are reluctant to abandon the thought that they're onto something with their strongly felt moral judgments, and an easy way to sustain this view is to suggest that we really have something like a "conscience" that feeds us reliable moral information.

If you read that last paragraph with suspicion, though, you're in good company. While intuitionism was defended by non-naturalists like Moore and W.D. Ross in the early- to mid-20th century, it's almost entirely defunct today, for a number of reasons. An autonomous (and reliable/truth-tracking) faculty of moral judgment would be something quite mysterious and extraordinary, and as such demands extraordinary evidence, which seems to be lacking. The compelling-ness of our moral intuitions is now much better explained (many philosophers think) by evolutionary psychology. And intuitionists have struggled to give a plausible answer to the problem of disagreement between people's deeply felt moral intuitions—once it's admitted that these intuitions can be wrong (as must be the case, if they disagree), then the case for intuitionism in the first place seems to evaporate (since there must be some other possible explanation for powerful moral intuitions besides their truth, in order to explain our having them when they're wrong).

In a debate context, there are other strikes against intuitionism. In particular, even winning intuitionism as the correct moral epistemology might not get you very far in a round since your opponent can always just deny whatever intuition your normative argument depends on—the only recourse, if two debaters are just asserting conflicting moral intuitions, is the intuition of the judge, and except when the intuition is enormously clear-cut, most judges won't want to go that route. The alternative is to present hard data on the intuitions of people in general (more and more of which are being collected by the new wave of "experimental philosophers"), but the challenge is to find data on intuitions which yield substantive conclusions about any topic of moral controversy. The sorts of issues on which there are firm and widely shared moral intuitions tend not to turn into debate topics, and a representative aggregation of people's intuitions is certainly not going to spit out anything that looks like a comprehensive moral theory (Kantian deontology, utilitarianism...) that can be applied to moral problems top-down.

Rationalism

Moral rationalism is the epistemic view with which debaters are probably most familiar—although it usually gets referred to in debate, somewhat misleadingly, as "practical rationality." Rationalism in general is the view that certain truths are knowable a priori (i.e., independent of experience), and that much if not all of our knowledge is derived deductively from these a priori starting points. The best-known moral exponent of rationalism was Immanuel Kant, and contemporary Kantians are by and large engaged in the same rationalist project, even when (like, e.g., Korsgaard) they hew to a weaker line than Kant with respect to the metaphysics of moral oughts. Gibbard's view, which has Kantian elements but combines them with an expressivist account of moral language, is also essentially rationalist, and Hare, whose normative conclusions are utterly un-Kantian, makes recognizably rationalist arguments as well.

Rationalists in general, I would suggest, see the requirements of morality as embedded in, implied by, or constitutive of being a certain kind of agent. Typically, the thought is that being an agent at all involves thinking in a certain way, and asking questions like “What should I do?” An answer to these questions must have a particular form. For Kant, it must involve willing a maxim; for Korsgaard, ascribing value; for Gewirth, setting a purpose; for Gibbard, making a plan. The requirements of morality, then, are requirements of being an agent, or a practical reasoner. As Kant would have it, for instance, making choices means doing things for reasons, doing things for reasons involves willing maxims (which endorse those reasons as reasons), and willing a maxim means willing a universal rule for all agents, which must not be in any way inconsistent when stated in its universal form.

The basic downside of moral rationalism is that it’s hard to actually make the arguments: to spell out the premises about the nature of practical reasoning, explain why human beings are committed to them just by virtue of doing (or wanting) things, and then derive a substantive morality from them by valid deductions. If such an argument could be made, then no generic objection to rationalism would count for very much against it, but conversely if the argument can’t be made, we’d better have some epistemological alternative to rationalism if we want to avoid moral skepticism.

Reflective equilibrium

Perhaps the most popular going account of moral epistemology derives from Rawls’ notion of “reflective equilibrium.” Reflective equilibrium is, for Rawls, a way of resolving (or at least learning to live with) moral disagreement by developing a common morality through deliberation which takes account of the moral values and intuitions of all relevant parties (at minimum by locating points of “overlapping consensus” between the views of all or most individuals, but ideally also by bringing about deliberative revisions of individual beliefs and attitudes in the direction of achieving a broader moral consensus).

In its contractualist application, reflective equilibrium has more to do with the metaphysics than the epistemology of moral judgments, since it represents a way of creating a morality (and a tool for imagining what an ideal public morality might look like), rather than a means of discovering pre-existing moral facts. But others have given the idea a more epistemic flavor, suggesting that even if we don’t have any special faculties of moral judgment, our moral intuitions do still carry some epistemic weight, and the best moral theory will be the one which takes account of as many of them as possible—rejecting an intuition here and there if an otherwise appealing theory counts against it, but not looking for a theory that will simply tell us what to believe a priori.

Naturalistic/constructivist moral epistemologies

As I’ve already suggested, metaphysical accounts of moral facts which reduce them to mind-independent facts about the empirical world, or to mind-dependent facts about human norms,

dispositions and agreements give the most straightforward answer to epistemological worries: just go look at the world. Sometimes, this is not at all easy: for instance, debaters love to make arguments about the difficulty of figuring out which actions maximize net long-term utility. But at least for the moral naturalist, these problems don't really constitute objections to the underlying moral theory. Being a good utilitarian might be hard or even impossible, but as long as the value facts are out there (pleasure good, pain bad, or whatever), utilitarianism is still true. Naturalist and constructivist views tend to have more epistemological questions to answer at the metaethical level: e.g., how do we know that these natural facts, say concerning pleasure and pain, are the moral ones, rather than those? But this is a problem which will rarely get addressed in any detail during a debate round.

Metaethics in Debate

The Role of Metaethical Arguments

So, how should any of the above arguments be used in a debate round? In general, the answer is that metaethical claims act as a *filter on standards justifications*, and to a lesser extent on the content of standards. In other words, if a standard (“protecting life,” “minimizing suffering,” “treating persons as ends”...) embodies either a normative ethical theory (a version, ideally somewhat specified, of utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, or something constructivist) or a contextualization of such a theory (e.g. impact-justified consequentialist standards, a la “preventing terrorism”), metaethical considerations determine what sorts of reasons might be given for adopting that theory, perhaps so restrictively as in effect to rule the theory out wholesale.

This is most obvious with respect to moral epistemologies. If intuitionists are right, then moral theories must be justified by appeal to something that looks plausibly like a case of (foundational, *a priori*?) moral intuition—moral judgments which are widely shared, vividly and compellingly intuitive, and consistent with other such judgments. If moral rationalists are right, then moral theories must be justified derivatively from facts about the nature of practical rationality—i.e., must be entailed simply by the choice to deliberate, or by asking a question like “What should I do?” If naturalists or constructivists are right, then one or another sort of empirical evidence must be given in favor of the standard (although this evidence might be very general, involving appeal to ordinary commonsensical observation rather than anything meticulously scientific).

Claims about the meaning of moral terms or the nature of moral properties also constrain justification, though less straightforwardly. Although some forms of non-cognitivism (most notably Ayer's) are essentially skeptical, more nuanced noncognitivist views which allow for moral disagreement provide fairly complex accounts of what considerations do and don't count in favor of a moral theory. Robust moral realism (e.g. non-naturalism, and most forms of naturalism) rules out pragmatic justifications for moral theories (e.g. arguments that the theory

is useful as a guide to action, or that its adoption would serve social interests). And more particular metaethical arguments will each give rise to their own unique interactions.

In addition, if you're defending something like a comprehensive metaethical view and giving reasons why your normative theory does well in terms of that view, it's reasonable to claim that your opponent has some burden of proof on the metaethics debate, to show that her normative theory does at least as well (of course, she may be able to do that by leveraging pre-existing standards justifications). If, for instance, you're defending Harean prescriptivism and your opponent is defending some form of virtue ethics (admittedly, this doesn't happen all that often), you may not be able to say anything very detailed about how your arguments proactively exclude hers, but she may have an even tougher time generating the links into prescriptivism (i.e., explaining her warrants for virtue ethics in prescriptivist terms).

The practice to avoid, though, when you're debating metaethics, is to just treat it like a silver bullet on the standards debate and expect the mere fact of winning a particular metaethical claim to be game-over of the standards debate regardless of your opponent's arguments. This attitude is exemplified by debaters saying things like "metaethics precludes normative ethics" or "prefer my argument since I'm giving you a metaethical warrant," and expecting this to do the work of dismissing whatever work their opponent has done on the standards debate without the benefit of the "metaethics" label.

There are two reasons this sort of approach is wrong. The first is that, as I've stressed already, the lines between metaethics and normative ethics/ethical theory are blurry at best. We've seen just a couple instances of this blurriness, but here's one reason it arises in general: It's impossible to spell out a normative view in any details without making some metaethical commitments, and indeed debaters make such commitments constantly with even the most banal standards warrants (think of "the purpose of morality is to guide action...", or "morality must value human welfare since humans are the source of moral rules/moral rules are meaningless if moral agents have no reason to follow them."). Conversely, then, if you can make a good argument for a normative theory that carries metaethical commitments, you've also made a good argument for accepting those commitments. And to accomplish this, the commitments don't need to each be argued for individually. For instance, if I find something that looks like a good candidate for what we mean by "moral value," that seems to serve all the functions we would expect of it, then that in itself is an argument for realism, probably against non-cognitivism, and (depending on what my candidate is) perhaps also for naturalism, non-naturalism, or constructivism). If I make a compelling deductive argument from self-evident facts about practical reasoning to a complete theory of morality, the compelling-ness of that argument is good evidence in favor of rationalism. Arguments which come at the metaethical disagreements directly do not necessarily take precedence over those that aim at specific normative conclusions.

Second, even if "metaethics" as a discipline was just lexically prior to "normative ethics," that says nothing about what's happening in a particular debate round. Just the fact that you're saying something metaethical is no guarantee that you're *saying something which refutes or*

excludes any claim your opponent has made. The missing norm, I think, that can help us handle things like metaethics, skepticism and even K debates better is that the debater making the preclusion claim has to justify it by specific argument comparison—showing, for instance, something very particular which an opponent’s argument takes for granted, and your argument refutes.

The point, then, is that you should focus as much as possible on specific, on-point, substantive interactions between metaethical arguments and the rest of the flow, whether you’re running metaethical arguments or responding to them, and you should call debaters out on claiming that “metaethics comes first” without doing that sort of legwork on the flow. It’s tough to say much more in general terms about how to debate metaethics, because the argument interactions themselves are quite specific, and aren’t amenable to general strategies that can be executed by rote. Metaethics debates in front of good judges will reward debaters who are smart, well-read, and creative argument-generators.

Conclusion: Should we like metaethics?

The emergence of explicitly metaethical debates has met with a mixed reaction from the LD community. Behind the complaints about metaethics, there are at least two legitimate concerns, one in-round and one out-of-round. The in-round concern is that metaethics debates will just further stress the limits of an LD time structure which already seems often inadequate for sorting out complex, multi-level debates. The number and length of LD speeches frequently seem to stand in the way of even one level of the flow getting thoroughly debated out, and with metaethics added to the mix, it may increase the likelihood of rounds in which either whole levels of the flow are simply abandoned, or the round comes down to non-interacting offensive extensions on distinct levels and gets resolved by whatever defensive arguments or spikes end up controlling the level at which the decision gets made. Trying to resolve, for instance, a debate between two competing metaethical views, then the question of which standard is better justified in terms of each metaethic, and then who has better offense to each standard is a pretty tall order for an NR, let alone a 1AR. Toss a theory debate into the mix, and the chance of any serious debate on substance declines precipitously.

This is a real worry, but to the extent that it’s a concern about metaethics, it’s also a concern about theory, “kritiks,” and every other argument that tries to add incommensurable levels to the flow. And by comparison to these argument categories, metaethics has the advantage of not yielding offensive implications (except in the special case of skepticism). In principle, metaethics just provides a set of more sophisticated arguments to make on standards debates, and when an argument that’s “metaethical” happens to preclude one that isn’t, that preclusion is earned by its substance, not simply a matter of artificial layering. Of course, this is not the reality as long as debaters continue to adopt the silver-bullet approach to comparing metaethical and non-metaethical arguments, but hopefully this can be solved if judges hold debaters to higher standards of argument comparison.

The out-of-round concern about metaethics is that adding further esoterica to the canon of knowledge debaters need in order to compete at the highest level (and coaches, to coach at the highest level) raises one more barrier to entry into national-circuit LD. This too is a legitimate worry: we want debate to be rigorous and intellectually demanding, but this inevitably trades off with participation, and we have to think carefully about what balance we want to strike between these competing considerations. Here too, though, I think metaethics compares favorably to things like theory and K debate, in terms of the ratio of educational value received to accessibility lost. Metaethics can't be learned on the fly in a couple of hours at camp—in my experience, it takes a significant amount of fairly careful thinking to even get a solid feel for what the questions are—but it's not overwhelmingly difficult either, and most of the primary literature (especially from people like Scanlon, Railton, Blackburn and Gibbard) is quite clearly written. Of course, there's an element of subjectivity here, but I don't think we should shy away from metaethics because it's too hard for high school students to learn.

Apart from these two worries, it seems like some people in debate make the mistake of dismissing metaethics itself as mere vacuity. To be fair, almost any moral philosopher will think that some of the major debates in metaethics are hopelessly unclear, simply miss the point, etc.—part of the disagreement in metaethics is over what questions it makes sense to ask about morality, and what questions prove to be meaningless or yield trivial and unhelpful answers. But the project of metaethics as a whole is not something we can find a way around, short of simple moral skepticism (and even that only if we can dismiss everyone else's positive arguments for non-skeptical conclusions). If we want to make certain attributions of rightness, wrongness, etc., and reject others, then we have to explain what we're doing—what we mean by these attributions, what underlying facts (if any) our judgments correspond to, and how we justify accepting the particular judgments we do. None of these questions have obvious answers, and normative views which try to avoid them do so at the expense of deep unclarity. I won't try to sell the entirety of metaethics point by point (especially since I also think that some popular metaethical debates are misguided), but I'd challenge anyone who thinks metaethics is somehow bunk to answer the above questions without making any claims that are both reasonably contestable and overtly metaethical. Metaethics poses difficulties for debate, but those difficulties won't be solved by anyone's "metaethics dumb" block.

In any case, it seems unlikely to me that we could remove metaethics from debate if we wanted to (even assuming we knew what that could mean, beyond just proscribing the word). And in my mind, the increasing awareness of metaethical questions in debate is something to be happy about, all things considered. For a long time, one of the distinctive advantages of LD was supposed to be that it gave debaters a chance to learn and engage with philosophy, but in fact the vast majority of LDers knew almost nothing about any philosophy done in the last fifty years, and had only boilerplate understandings of a small and somewhat arbitrary canon of historical figures before that time. The fact that debaters are now learning to think about philosophical questions like contemporary philosophers do, and occasionally putting that ability to use in quite sophisticated and intelligent use in rounds, is pretty awesome and something I wouldn't have predicted four or five years ago. While metaethics debates to date have often been ugly and/or one-sided (if that), it's reasonable to expect that they'll improve as we figure

out how to run, answer and teach the arguments better. If you can push the envelope in that regard, you'll win a lot of rounds, and I've included some suggestions below to help you move in that direction.

Getting Better at Metaethics Debate

Reading and drill recommendations

The most basic prerequisite to winning metaethics debates is knowing what you're talking about, and the best way to get there is to (a) read and (b) talk to people who know what they're talking about. In terms of reading, I won't give you a long reading list of primary sources, because when you're starting to learn metaethics as a debater the best resource by far is the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which has very thorough articles on just about every view we've discussed, written by people who are not just expert in but usually also significant contributors to the relevant fields. From the standpoint of learning metaethics, you shouldn't pick up a primary source until you've read the relevant SEP piece—it will pack more useful information into fewer words than any journal article, and be written for non-specialists.

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy is also a useful introductory resource, as is the journal *Philosophy Compass*, which publishes survey articles on somewhat narrower topics than you'll typically find in the SEP or IEP. When you need a quick-and-easy reference source, Wikipedia is also fine—in my experience, its philosophy entries are nearly all reasonably accurate. Finally, when you're ready to start reading primary sources, I'll just recommend a reader titled *Moral Discourse and Practice: Some Philosophical Approaches*, edited by Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard and Peter Railton. Not everything in it will be useful to debaters, but it's as good as anything I'm aware of.

While you're reading, you should of course cut cards, but I would strongly suggest that you not fall into the habit of thinking you need card files to debate metaethics (or normative ethics). By and large, you'll do much better writing uncarded blocks yourself—in part because it will do much more for your understanding of the arguments than just cutting and tagging someone else's presentation of it. Cards are a nice crutch when you don't feel confident enough in your understanding of the arguments to make them in your own words, and they're also useful in front of judges who automatically lend carded arguments more weight than uncarded ones (if you have a sense of who those judges are). But in general, you can make the argument more quickly and clearly (for debate purposes) by writing it in your own words, and you'll be better at explaining and interacting it. So, write arguments early and often.

Beyond reading and writing, you want to spend some time drilling the actual debating, i.e. making metaethical arguments extemporaneously. The drill I'll

suggest for this purpose involves mixing and matching metaethical frameworks with normative frameworks. Take a typically normative framework (from one of your cases, or someone else's) and pair it (randomly, if possible) with either a written-out metaethical framework, or if you don't have a lot of those available, just with a metaethical view (the more specific the better). Give yourself a set amount of prep time to develop arguments that the metaethic excludes the normative framework, and deliver those arguments. Then give yourself the same length of time, or a little less, to develop arguments linking the normative framework into the metaethic, and deliver those arguments.

In each case, you should focus as much as you can on the *warrants* for the normative framework, and whether or not they're compatible with the metaethics; but when you're generating links, you might also in effect be creating new standards justifications that are compatible with the metaethic—whatever one thinks of that theoretically (as far as I'm concerned, it's functionally unavoidable, but there's room for disagreement), generating these links is a good way to get better. As with any drill, you should change things up as you go—start by giving yourself a lot of prep (say, five minutes per side) and slowly cut down on that. And it would never hurt to try once or twice writing the arguments out after you've delivered them. If you can run this drill with a teammate or a friend, so much the better.

Of course, if you want to get really good at debating metaethics, the best thing to do is write metaethical positions and debate them in actual rounds. Experiment with different ways of structuring your standards arguments (e.g. articulating the metaethic as a meta-standard, versus working the metaethical arguments into an ordinary set of standards justifications) and pay attention to feedback from judges. Good luck, and have fun!

Cross Examination

By Jake Sonnenberg

This essay covers a range of cross-examination strategies and techniques, emphasizing practical applications of a number of different methods. Additionally, this essay breaks down general and situational skills and goals that are involved in effective cross-examination. It concludes with a discussion of cross-examination strategies that can be employed against confusing positions.

Overview

Like all aspects of debate, successful cross-examination requires thorough strategic planning and effective technical execution. Although it is often approached casually and is sometimes seen as a type of informal banter between debaters, cross-examination should be treated as an integral part of every debate round. Not only does cross-examination amount to approximately one-fifth of each debater's speech time, it also presents a unique opportunity to establish perceptual dominance, make strategic advances, and develop a powerful ethos. To secure the greatest benefits of cross-examination, debaters should focus on developing and adhering to an effective situational strategy prior to the beginning of cross-examination as well as before the start of debate rounds.

General Strategy

In order to develop an effective cross-examination strategy, debaters must first establish the general goals that they hope to achieve in cross-examination. Typically, cross-examination serves three distinct purposes. It provides time for issue clarification, facilitates argumentative redirection, and allows debaters to establish perceptual dominance. Each of these functions requires debaters to employ a unique array of strategies to achieve their goals and also demands unique question-asking strategies and structures.

Clarification

Clarification questions are the most basic type of cross-examination questions and are asked to provide inquiring debaters with a more thorough understanding of an opponent's argument or position or to highlight important decision rules and/or argument interactions to the judge. Because of their often-limited strategic advantages, clarification questions should generally be used sparingly. However, they should not always be avoided. Successful refutation of any argument requires at least a basic understanding of the argument's crucial components. As such, clarification questions, when used appropriately and in moderation, can be vital to an effective cross-examination.

Effective use of clarification questions requires careful and deliberate execution. Because clarification questions provide responding debaters with the opportunity to explain, discuss, and rehash their arguments, they have the potential to seriously derail the progress of cross-examination. Thus, it is imperative that clarification questions are structured in a manner that minimizes the potential for a responding debater to speak at length about his or her arguments.

Most importantly, debaters should avoid asking open-ended clarification questions along the lines of “what does this argument say?” Instead, they should focus on the implications and functions of arguments. For instance, one might ask a question such as “what is the implication of this argument?” In the process of explaining the argument’s function, debaters will almost invariably provide a rough outline of the argument itself. Because the initial question in this instance demands a specific answer, it is more difficult for the responding debater to waste valuable cross-examination time speaking at length about the argument’s content.

Another effective clarification strategy involves the use of “best guesses.” When a debater needs to ask about the content of a particular argument, he or she should formulate a “best guess” about the argument’s general claim and then ask if the argument advances that claim. Because this type of question requires a direct yes-or-no response, it is not open-ended. If the responding debater agrees with the inquiring debater’s “best guess,” he or she has distilled his or her argument into an easily identifiable thesis that is understood by everyone and is more readily attacked. If the responding debater disagrees with the “best guess,” the inquiring debater can follow-up by asking how the argument is different from his or her initial “best guess.” In this way, the inquiring debater remains in control of the direction of cross-examination and can limit the responding debater’s ability to talk for extended periods of time about his or her arguments. Because it requires the responding debater to explain how an argument differs from the inquiring debater’s “best guess,” the “best guess” method also helps reveal an argument’s specific structural components.

Redirection

Redirection questions serve to highlight an opponent’s argumentative assumptions, illustrate logical gaps in an opponent’s arguments, and set up arguments that will be made in later speeches. Because redirection questions exist to expose flaws in opponents’ arguments, they require very subtle execution and highly specific structure.

To successfully execute redirection questions, debaters must have a firm grasp of their immediate objectives and the arguments about which they are inquiring. Without a full understanding of a given situation, an inquiring debater is liable to ask overly aggressive questions that betray his or her intentions and encourage the responding debater to provide evasive and unhelpful answers. To avoid this problem, inquiring debaters should reflect upon their goals before they ask redirection questions. Debaters must first identify the particular assumption or flaw that they hope to expose. It is imperative that debaters think before asking redirection questions.

Once the specific target of redirection questions has been established, debaters can begin to develop and pursue a deliberate line of questioning. One effective strategy when beginning a line of questioning is to start by asking a series of questions that the responding debater will more-than-likely agree with before building up to more contentious questions. For instance, debaters should formulate questions that identify and force acknowledgement of underlying premises in an opponent's argument. Then, having pinned-down the starting point, they can inquire about possible conclusions of the argument, building up to a final question that underscores a potentially problematic implication. This method makes it much more difficult for responding debaters to give evasive answers to difficult questions, as they have already laid out the foundations of their argument. Additionally, it makes argumentative flaws readily apparent to the judge, because it follows a single consistent chain of logic.

With redirection questions, less is often more. Debaters should avoid "showing all their cards," so as to maintain the strategic upper hand. Thus, debaters should avoid obviously incriminating questions that ask whether an opponent's argument makes a particular assumption or whether a particular point is ever actually proven in an opponent's case. For example, a debater hoping to run a Kritik should not ask a question like "does your case assume that Western democracy is good?" These questions will tip-off the responding debater to a potential problem, and simply offer him or her the opportunity to fortify his or her position, explain away the problem, and salvage a potentially damning argument.

Additionally, debaters should be willing to end a line of questioning immediately once they have secured the concession that they need. Often times, the inquiring debater will ask one-too-many questions, allowing the responding debater to reframe arguments to his or her advantage. For example, if the inquiring debater is hoping to expose a missing internal link, he or she should not conclude the line of questioning by asking if the responding debater agrees that the internal link is missing. The inquiring debater stands to gain nothing from such a question, because the responding debater will never say yes and the logical gap has already been made clear to the judge and will be fully explained in the next speech.

Redirection questions also require specificity. Inquiring debaters should demand direct answers to their questions and should not settle for vague responses. The first way to do this is to ask specific questions that refer to particular argumentative components. Broader questions allow for broader responses, which make for a less productive cross-examination. The second way to do this is to raise an objection when a responding debater offers vague answers. In such a situation, the inquiring debater should ask how the previous response addresses the particular issue raised in the initial question, highlighting the contrasting levels of specificity. Additionally, debater should be willing to interrupt a vague and unhelpful response and rephrase a question so as to elicit a more specific answer. For example, an inquiring debater might interrupt a vague response by asking where a particular piece of evidence addresses the particular issue in question.

Perceptual Dominance

Perceptual dominance is an important and often underappreciated component of cross-examination. It refers to the desired mix of ethos, credibility, comfort, and performative prowess of a successful debater. Although perceptual dominance is a highly intangible quality, a number of strategies can be employed to help establish and foster such an appearance.

The most important aspect of perceptually dominant cross-examination is mental. To come across as perceptually dominant, debaters must practice employing a particular mindset in which they believe that their arguments are correct and that their opponent's arguments are incorrect, misapplied, or lacking. Such an attitude translates into confidence and comfort in cross-examination. As is true in all competitive activities, a debater who believes he is a loser will act like a loser. A debater who believes she is a winner will act accordingly as well. Although it is a fine line between arrogance and self-confidence, debaters are probably well advised to err on the side of excessive strength rather than excessive weakness.

The best way to develop the necessary confidence for perceptual dominance is to thoroughly prepare. There is no way to fake genuine comfort or a thorough grasp of a topic. Although some debaters may be excellent actors, no debater is good enough to change his or her subjective experience of discomfort into comfort. Consequently, debaters who wish to be perceived as dominant must make themselves believe that they are dominant. This means that they must work hard before rounds, so that when they enter cross-examination, they feel prepared and knowledgeable. Debaters should develop total familiarity with their cases, evidence, and arguments. They should read the entirety of the articles or chapters from which the evidence in their cases is drawn. Before rounds, they should think about how their arguments would interact with potential opposing arguments. They should consider the ways in which they would respond to difficult questions. Through these and other pre-round preparation techniques, debaters will begin to actually feel more confident in themselves and their abilities. Eventually, this confidence will translate to perceptual dominance in cross-examination as well as other aspects of debate. Well prepared debaters will also be able to communicate to the judge that they know the most, that they understand the most, and that they should win. The goal is to know exactly what is going on at all times. Judges have a hard time voting against the debater who presents himself or herself as in total control of the round.

Perceptual dominance can also be developed through the use of certain types of questions. As discussed above, the most effective questions are specific and pointed. These types of questions will also build perceptual dominance, because they demonstrate a strong understanding of argument interactions and because they put the responding debater in a defensive position in which he or she is more likely to make mistakes or make concessions. To exhibit perceptual dominance, it is important to avoid asking easy "softball" questions. Generally debaters should avoid questions that would allow their opponent to regain control of cross-examination. Such questions include things like asking why a particular argument matters, what the significance of an impact is, or how a certain internal link causes a large impact like extinction. Usually, these questions are only acceptable if the inquiring debater has a good idea

what the response is going to be, and plans to ask an effective follow-up question that will expose an argumentative weakness. Otherwise, these kinds of questions merely function to add time to the responding debater's speech.

Timing is also an important point of perceptual dominance. Debaters should always attempt to end cross-examination and individual lines of questioning with strong points. They should resist the temptation to ask meaningless questions in order to merely fill up the allotted cross-examination period. The perceptual benefit of a particularly devastating exchange to end cross-examination outweighs the perceptual harm of not filling up the full three minutes. However, this problem can be avoided entirely through effective planning. If debaters anticipate which lines of questioning will be their strongest, they can time their strategy so that their most effective questions come at the end of cross-examination. A good rule of thumb is that if the responding debater begins giving the same or similar answers to a number of different questions, it is likely time to move on or end cross-examination.

The final component of perceptual dominance is honesty. This is most important when responding to questioning. When a debater is confronted with a difficult question, one of the worst things that he or she can do is attempt to illogically contort arguments to avoid the obvious logical implications of an overall position. This strategy is exceedingly unlikely to work, and the responding debater will look silly and disingenuous trying to perform deceitful mental gymnastics.

It is far better for a debater to confidently and assuredly respond truthfully to a question, even if they answer seems damning at the time. By acting unconcerned, the debater does not allow unnecessary attention to be drawn to the issue in question. Additionally, the responding debater's lack of concern communicates to the judge and the other debater that perhaps there is nothing wrong at all. The judge and opposing debater may even wonder if they are the ones who are not fully grasping some important issue. Moreover, the responding debater will have a chance in subsequent speeches to pick up the pieces of a cross-examination concession. This is a much preferable scenario, as it allows time for planning and preparation as well as a more protected opportunity to speak at length about an issue.

Situational Strategy

Although the strategies discussed above are useful and relevant in all cross-examination situations, it is also important to adapt to the unique demands of particular cross-examination situations. In Lincoln-Douglas debate, a debater may find himself or herself in one of four distinct cross-examination situations. As the affirmative, a debater will first respond to questions from the negative after the AC and then ask questions of the negative after the NC. As the negative, a debater will first ask questions of the affirmative after the AC and then respond to questions from the affirmative after the NC. Each of these four positions requires a particular set of goals and tactics.

Fielding cross-examination from the negative as the affirmative

When fielding cross-examination questions after the AC, the affirmative debater should be primarily concerned with expanding the 1AC. The ultimate goal in this situation is to add three minutes of speech time to the AC in which the affirmative debater will further explain and develop his or her arguments, while pre-empting and preventing potential negative responses.

Expanding the AC can be achieved through a variety of means, but most importantly it requires that the responding debater be willing and ready to speak at length about any aspect of his or her case. The affirmative debater should attempt to re-direct the discussion back to the AC as often as possible, providing explanations of arguments and argument function, examples that illustrate points in the case, analysis of important interactions, and articulation and differentiation of nuanced warrants and points. Generally, the affirmative debater should not stop talking until the negative debater asks another question.

While responding to questions from the negative, the affirmative debater should also actively anticipate negative strategy. One important way to do this is to remain vigilant of the intentions of the negative debater. The negative will often ask “gotcha” questions, which attempt to trick the affirmative into mistakenly admitting something that will later be used against the affirmative. This happens most often when the negative is looking for theory or topicality violations, kritik links, or framework assumptions.

When the affirmative debater suspects that he or she is being asked a “gotcha” question, the affirmative should immediately begin to re-characterize the AC to avoid any potentially problematic implications. For instance, if confronted with a question about the imposition of Western values on the non-Western world, an affirmative debater would be ill-advised to simply say “no, I don’t impose Western values on the non-Western world.” Instead, he or she should re-characterize the affirmative and say something like “the AC upholds a system of values that allows African nations to grow and develop free from the violence and instability that are driven by and reinforce colonialist rule.” Such a response makes a potential kritik link on this issue extremely tenuous, because the affirmative has re-positioned his or her arguments to favorably interact with the negative’s likely strategy.

While it is important to anticipate negative strategy it is also important that the affirmative not over-commit itself in cross-examination. The affirmative debater need not respond directly to questions that are not directly relevant to claims advanced in the AC. If the negative asks a question about an unrelated topic, the affirmative should not take a position on the topic and should simply say that the AC does not speak to the topic in question. The affirmative is not responsible for tackling every challenge in the world, only for defending the AC.

Cross-examining the affirmative as the negative

When cross-examining the affirmative, the negative debater should be primarily concerned with pinning-down the affirmative and exposing problems in the AC. Most importantly the negative should leave cross-examination with a perfectly clear understanding of what the affirmative advocacy consists of.

To pin-down the affirmative position, the negative debater should focus on asking specific questions that require the affirmative debater to agree to specific things about his or her argument. Additionally, the negative should usually ask questions about how the decision-rules of the AC function. In other words, the negative should establish the winning-conditions (burdens) laid out in the AC. One effective way to breakdown the structure of the AC is to ask hypothetical questions about argument interactions that inquire about the implications of disproving certain isolated arguments in the AC.

It is also important for the negative debater to maintain control of cross-examination when asking questions. During this cross-examination period, the affirmative will have just concluded a six-minute speech. It is important to reverse the momentum that was developed during this time and, more importantly, to stifle any attempts by the affirmative to expand the AC. The negative debater should focus on asking closed questions and should be willing to interrupt the affirmative debater, to prevent him or her from speaking about the AC for long periods of time.

Cross-examining the negative as the affirmative

Cross-examining the negative as the affirmative is one of the most difficult tasks in cross-examination. The negative will have just completed a seven-minute speech, likely full of multiple independent offensive positions and on-case arguments. It is vitally important that the affirmative debater uses this cross-examination period to re-focus the debate on affirmative offense and the overall story of the AC.

This cross-examination period requires an attitudinal adjustment that should permeate each line of questioning that the affirmative debater pursues. Specifically, the affirmative debater should make sure that he or she continually emphasizes the importance of the AC and the interaction between negative positions and the AC. In order to set up the 1AR, the affirmative should use cross-examination to highlight the choke points that he or she will exploit later on. Many effective questions of this type operate on the framework level. For example, an affirmative debater who plans to develop framework in the 1AR might ask questions about the underlying assumptions of the negative framework, so as to attack the assumptions in the 1AR.

Another important component of re-focusing the debate on the AC is dismantling the negative's answers to the affirmative case. To do this, the affirmative debater should first recognize that negative responses to the AC are often lacking in both quality and quantity. Many times, they are no more than different iterations of a single basic argument. An effective

affirmative debater will use cross-examination to highlight the overlap between negative responses to better group them in later speeches. A good question to ask to reveal the similarities between on-case responses is “how are the internal links in these arguments distinct from one another?” Additionally, the affirmative debater can expose the weaknesses of many on-case responses by demanding specificity and precision. For instance, the affirmative might ask, “What specific internal link does this turn?” Finally, the affirmative should capitalize on the distinction between offense and defense. Most on-case responses are heavily defensive, essentially meaning that they do not advance any reasons to vote for the negative and only constitute reasons that the affirmative might not be entirely true. If this is the case, the affirmative should force the negative to concede that the affirmative debater controls the direction of the link on a particular issue.

Fielding cross-examination from the affirmative as the negative

When responding to questions as the negative, debaters should focus on simultaneously simplifying and expanding the debate. While these two goals may appear to be in conflict with one another, when pursued skillfully, they complement each other very well. Negative debaters should try to simplify the round by identifying each discrete position and highlighting its function in straightforward terms. The general negative advocacy should be very clear by the end of this cross-examination period. The negative should also try to expand the debate by drawing attention to the wide variety of offensive arguments that were in the NC and by defending and articulating a multi-layered strategy.

Simplicity is essential in this cross-examination period. NC’s are typically delivered at very high rates of speed and often contain a broad assortment of many different arguments and positions. It is crucial that negative debaters clearly and concisely articulate their arguments when being cross-examined. In order to do this, negative debaters must have a very firm grasp of the content and structure of their arguments. Lack of familiarity with negative arguments will reveal itself immediately and will result in a muddled and confusing negative strategy.

Finally, it should go without saying that negative debaters should be honest when being cross-examined. Although all debaters should be honest at all times, it seems particularly common for negative debaters to give evasive answers when being cross-examined. Thus, it is appropriate to remind debaters here that evasion in cross-examination is dishonest, exemplary of weakness and lack of skill, and is extremely transparent and easy to spot.

Confusing Positions

Although cross-examining confusing positions can be daunting, it actually provides ample opportunity for debaters to demonstrate their technical skill and capitalize on their opponent’s weaknesses. It is extremely important that debaters remain calm and collected when cross-examining an opponent who read a confusing position.

When a debater is cross-examining a confusing position, it is of the utmost importance that he or she identifies his or her opponent's advocacy. Usually, the best way to do this is to ask directly. If the inquiring debater still cannot gain a full understanding of the advocacy, he or she might try a variation of the "best guess" method discussed above in the "clarification" section. To do so, the inquiring debater should make a "best guess" about the extent of the confusing advocacy and ask if the advocacy actually entails those components. If the responding debater says no, the inquiring debater can then ask how specifically the advocacy is distinct from the "best guess." The "best guess" strategy can also be effective when attempting to identify smaller argumentative components as well.

It is important to remember that a debater does not need to understand everything about a confusing position in order to be able to respond to it effectively. Instead, the inquiring debater should focus on major argumentative components, such as decision-rules and large internal links. There is simply not enough cross-examination time to thoroughly explore an entire confusing position. To establish broad characteristics of confusing positions, inquiring debater can ask questions about argument implications, such as "why does this argument affirm or negate?" Additionally, inquiring debaters can posit hypothetical scenarios to gain a better understanding of the function of many framework arguments. These types of questions allow debaters to cut-off confusing arguments at the top-level and avoid getting caught in a mess of unclear rhetoric.

Conclusion

Getting the most out of cross-examination should be a major goal of every debater. Cross-examination is a unique and dynamic space, in which debaters have the opportunity to severely undermine their opponents' prospects for success and simultaneously advance their own. By treating cross-examination with the respect it deserves, and by preparing for cross-examination as if it were any other speech, debaters will drastically improve their skills. Using many of the tools laid out in this essay, debaters will gain comfort and familiarity with more advanced cross-examination techniques and will be able to develop their own personal styles and attitudes as they develop as debaters.

The Lost Art of Refutation

By Josh Roberts

Debate is a game of argumentation. Winners and losers are determined based on who made, and best defended, their arguments. Inherent in this, and necessary to the process of winning a debate, is being able to refute your opponent's arguments. Unfortunately as debate has progressed, evasion instead of evisceration of arguments has become a primary strategy for many debaters. The purpose of this article is to help equip you with the skills necessary to defeat any case and/or argument without avoiding the clash that judges love to see in a debate round. This article will cover on-case refutation, answering the value/value criterion, as well as other strategic approaches that you can take as a debater to win any debate against any opponent.

The Sad Nature of Refutation in Today's Debate Rounds

Strategic refutation is awesome. Plain and simple, judges love it. It makes you look prepared. It makes it much harder for your opponent to win, and it gives you an irreplaceable advantage over any debater that is ill-prepared to engage arguments (which, unfortunately, is a vast majority of debaters). When you are watching a debate and someone has the capability to destroy their opponent's case, you are watching strategic refutation at work.

People take things like being negative for granted and assume that as long as they make a lot of arguments they cannot possibly lose because they have such a great time advantage. If this is your mindset going into debates, then you have already put yourself at a disadvantage. While this approach may work against debaters that are of equal skill or worse than you, it will not equip you with the ability to win late elimination rounds or tournaments.

Refutation requires an effective use of preparation time, not only in the round that you are currently debating, but also in the weeks prior to the tournament you are preparing for. If you want to be the best at refutation, you must go into the tournament with a solid understanding of your arguments, as well as the arguments on the topic. The people that are best at refutation are the people that have the best understanding of the literature on that topic, and have prepared the best research. When you have read enough on the topic, you know which answers to arguments are or are not strategic. This also allows you to predict how your opponent will respond to arguments, and preempt them before they even get the chance to make their arguments.

One of the most obvious things in debate, but least well recognized, is that people are lazy. Debaters want to read a lot of off-case arguments and claim that it just precludes everything. You are just shooting yourself in the foot if you fetishize the off-case arguments/preclusion strategy. For those of you who follow football, I call this the Plaxico Burrese strategy. If you

continue this style of debate, you may be a very talented debater, just as Plaxico Burress was a talented football player, but if you continue with these strategies it won't matter how talented you are because you're essentially taking yourself out of the game and giving up any advantage that you might have. The strategy of relying on off-case arguments, or preclusionary arguments, is a very narrow, shallow way of refuting arguments that avoids engaging the actual substance of your opponents' claims and leaves you very vulnerable to 1AR outs.

Bringing Back Refutation

The most responsive answers, and effective approach to refutation, require you to engage in what your opponent said. You will know your answers are responsive and effective if your opponent cannot extend this case without answering them.

The easiest way to give a rebuttal is to just extend your case – your job when refuting is to ensure that people don't get this luxury. Referring back to my point earlier about how people are lazy, once you realize this, you will understand that your opponent is looking for the easiest way to give a rebuttal. If you can identify this, that will allow you to shape your approach to answering their case in the most effective way, and in a way that will allow you to close the door on this strategy and force them to debate in a manner that they are not as prepared for. You should NEVER make your opponent's life easier by relying on things like off-case arguments that don't engage the actual arguments presented. If you are going to make off case arguments, that's fine; my point is not that you should never make these arguments. Instead, they should be one layer of your refutation – these arguments can be great, but only as a supplement to effective on case refutation.

The Importance of Layered Refutation

Your job, when answering arguments, is to destroy the argument on its level of explanation. This will make it less likely that you will alienate judges on the basis that you are destroying clash, and will make it much more difficult for your opponent to pick their easy strategy by forcing them to answer your arguments.

That being said, the key to on case refutation is layered refutation. What I mean by layered refutation is this: layered refutation entails making an array of arguments that serve several different functions. For example, you could have a negative case that functions under a different framework than your opponents (deontology versus utilitarianism, for example). You can then read an off case that functions as a reason to vote for you under your opponent's value criterion, but may not necessarily be directly responsive to one of their contention level arguments. From there, you can move to their case, answer their framework, then move to their contention and make positional takeouts (which I will explain in a bit if that is a term you are unfamiliar with) as well as turns that specifically answer their contentions. This kind of strategy will make it much harder for your opponent to give a rebuttal against because it forces them to make strategic decisions about how they want to approach their next speech since

there are several different ways that they can lose, and they won't have the time to answer every single argument.

There are two levels to on case refutation and how you go about putting together a layered strategy. The first level is the macro level. On the macro-level your speeches should layer offense, which consists of things like off cases, your case, and on case responses. The second level is the micro level. For the micro level, your on case refutation should be layered. This includes arguments like non-uniques, link take outs, and turns, to name a few.

If we are being honest with ourselves, most arguments in debate are awful. Again, people are lazy and make the first argument that they come across instead of delving deep into the literature and making solid, well founded arguments. This means that you should crush these arguments. If you know and can recognize that most arguments are terrible, you should not be afraid to engage them directly because you should be prepared to, for lack of a better explanation, make fun of these arguments while pointing out their uselessness and weakness.

The Broader Objectives of On-Case Refutation

Your goal in any speech is to make the next speech literally impossible for your opponent. The most successful debaters in the history of debate were so incredible at giving 1NCs, for example, that if the affirmative was not as prepared as they could possibly be to defend their case and refute their opponents, then they had already lost the round because there were just too many layers. It's important to note that I didn't say there were too many ARGUMENTS because it's not just about the number of arguments that you make. It is about the number of offensive layers that you bring to the debate. For example, when I debated, there was a school that was always so prepared for tournaments that they would literally have strategies prepared that involved 5-7 deep, well developed answers to the value criterion, and anywhere from 10-20 turns specific to the arguments that the affirmative made in their case.

You should be closing doors before your opponent ever has a chance to walk through them. Don't settle for preempting the 2AR in the negative rebuttal; preempt the 1AR in the 1NC. There is a formula for being the best at refutation, and it is: technical proficiency plus positional focus equates to great debater ($TP + PF = GD$). Everyone needs to be fast (depending on where you are debating, and what is appropriate or allowed), clear, and/or capable of executing arguments in the most precise way. Every refutation should start with your head above the flow. You need to connect with the judge before you get sucked into the minutia of the debate.

After you've connected with the judge, this is where you can begin to tunnel down into the flow. This is where you can put your technical skills on display, use jargon if appropriate, always maintaining precision and covering all of your bases. You shouldn't be tunneled down for 5:30 minutes of your NR or 3:45 of your 1AR though. You have to remember to tunnel back up and connect with the judge. This entails doing things like explaining the implications of an argument you just made. For example, if you have just extended a conceded link turn, come out of the

flow and explain to the judge that this means you control the strongest, if not sole link, into the affirmative's impact, thus making it a reason to vote for you.

The Specific Objectives of On-Case Refutation

Do not spend your first rebuttal cross-applying your case to respond to your opponents' case. One of the biggest mistakes I see debaters make, young and old alike, is that they make arguments in their negative case that respond to the opponent's affirmative case, and instead of engaging the affirmative arguments on the affirmative case they just cross apply their argument and move on. This strategy makes the 1AR so much easier for the affirmative because it essentially cuts the number of arguments that the affirmative has to answer in half. Cross applications are a waste of time. If you want to start weighing/interacting your arguments with the 1AC in your first speech as the negative, that is fine, but you should never settle for "X argument responds to the affirmative's contention, so just cross apply it." That time you just wasted could have been spent much more efficiently developing a unique response to that same contention.

The next specific objective for on-case refutation is diversity, diversity, diversity. You want to avoid making arguments that rest on the same assumptions; otherwise your opponent will be able to easily group these arguments and deftly respond to them in no time at all. On the flip-side, if your opponent has made 6-7 turns that rest on common assumptions, especially in the 1AR, group, group, group. You want to maximize the amount of time that you have to answer arguments, and minimize the amount of time that your opponent has to answer them. Understanding that, you want to preempt the grouping of arguments by explaining how each argument you make functions, and how it relies on distinct assumptions from prior arguments.

One way that you can go about layering your offense is by understanding that your negative case is one way that you can win the debate, but winning your negative case should never be a necessity. If you have failed to make offensive arguments on the affirmative case, via turns for example, then you have made it very easy for the 1AR to capitalize on the time advantage that you as the negative were supposed to have because you've given them a very limited number of arguments that they have to respond to.

When you are affirmative, if you are not, in some way, making offensive arguments against the negative case then you deserve to lose. By failing to give yourself ways to win on your opponents' case, you enable them to cherry pick and just defend the arguments that they want to defend without putting any pressure on them whatsoever.

Affirmative Rebuttal Strategy

When you're affirmative, it is important to remember that you do not have to answer every single argument that the negative makes. Under-covering arguments does not mean that you dropped defensive arguments (arguments that your opponent can't use to win the debate).

When you are picking which arguments you want to go for, it is okay to concede defensive arguments. The 1AR is about issue selection – if one argument has 2 defensive arguments and a turn against it, and another has 3 defensive arguments, you should almost always extend the argument that has the turn placed against it. This may seem counter-intuitive, but the reason for this is that you are going to have to answer the turn anyways, so you may as well only answer 2 more arguments, instead of 3 more.

Debating the Framework

When you are approaching engaging your opponents' framework, there are a few basic issues you have to work through first. For the purpose of this article, when I talk about framework, I am referring to everything above the contention. You can either decide that you want to accept their interpretation of the debate, or you can decide to challenge their interpretation of debate and use this as one level of your layered refutation strategy. However, you should NEVER just ignore their interpretation; this is how debaters who rely on frameworks to win the debate hose you. If you are accepting their interpretation of the debate, tell us that. Much like you would on Facebook, give us a status update, tell the judge what is on your mind. This means conveying to the judge why you are conceding their framework, or which parts of their framework that you are challenging.

Framework challenges can come in several forms, depending on the acceptance of certain types of arguments in your region. One way that they can manifest themselves is in the form of topicality. If judges that you typically debate in front of do not accept these kinds of arguments, then do not worry about this. If, however, you plan to engage in topicality debates, there are a few things you want to remember. You should only engage this debate if you have a counter definition and you would lose a significant portion of your offense or advocacy under your opponents' interpretation.

Even if you aren't thrilled with topicality, that's irrelevant. If you want to be the best debater in the country, you have to be able to incorporate these arguments into your arsenal. Use them to leverage your position, at the very least.

Commercial Interruption – Framework Spikes A.K.A. Your Worst Nightmare

The next things you want to be wary of are framework spikes. One of the most useful pieces of advice I ever received on how to identify these kinds of arguments was this: you should be like the Cookie Monster when looking for framework spikes; one of these things is not like the other. The 1ACs framework is there to ruin you before you even get the chance to engage in the debate. There are almost certainly always going to be arguments that seem bizarre and unrelated. DO NOT DROP THEM. Spikes are there so that if you drop them your opponent will extend them, make tons of your arguments irrelevant, and essentially make it impossible, or at best, extremely hard for you to win.

Back To Our Regularly Scheduled Program – Value/Value Criterion Debate

Every once in a while the value will be a great place for you to make arguments. In these cases, you should be questioning the value's link to the topic – it is the highest access point any case has to the resolution. At the end of the day, people seem to have forgotten that LD is still values debate. If you can explain why your opponent has to win that their value links to the resolution, you can beat people who didn't put any thought into their cases.

When answering your opponents' framework, you should never ignore analysis between the value and value criterion. This analysis almost always sets up their justification for the criterion, so it is your responsibility to make sure that you effectively deal with it. If they are reading evidence in their criterion analysis, that's a pretty good sign that you should probably answer it.

You should always indict the criterion as a bad-weighting mechanism due to structural flaws. Arguments that you can make include the following:

- Indeterminacy: this means that their criterion wouldn't yield an outcome if applied to the topic. This argument is a stronger way of saying that their criterion is too vague and doesn't tell us which arguments should or shouldn't influence the judge's decision.
- No brightline: this argument is, unfortunately, massively overused and a majority of the time in an incorrect manner. It is a TERRIBLE answer to a criterion if their criterion is a weighing criterion (utilitarian criterions, for example) because any marginal difference between impacts linking back to the criterion establishes a brightline. However, it can be an excellent answer when the criterion includes a word that itself requires another standard.
 - o For example, Frameworks like contractualism, contractarianism – these all rely on principles like what people would reasonably accept/reject, but this requires some external standard to determine what is reasonable. This is where your brightline arguments can be devastating.
- The criterion is bad:
 - o The criterion is just an impact. It is the terminal impact of the entire value criterion analysis. Any type of argument that works as an impact turn answers the criterion. You shouldn't call it a turn, that creates confusion, but just say that their criterion is normatively bad. The affirmative says their standard is good, you say it's bad. If you say their standard is normatively bad, you have to be careful because you then can't link turn the rest of the position. If they have weak impact analysis, the impact turn makes a lot of sense.

Positional Take Outs

A positional take out is just an argument that you can make that can be used generally to sever the affirmatives' ability to link their offense back to their criterion, or generate offense in any other manner. One example of a positional take out is an overview on the contention. These can be devastating because people often just ignore them. You can use these to show flaws in

their logic throughout the entire case, but like we discussed earlier, if you want to be the best at refutation you are going to make sure these arguments are specific to the flaws in that affirmative case.

Conclusion

Mastering the art of refutation is one of the quickest and best ways to launch yourself to the top of your circuit, win tournaments, and beat debaters who may have a better reputation than yourself. It's an extremely undervalued and rarely used skill that separates the good from the great.

DRILL: Framework Refutation

If you want to get better at refutation, here is a quick drill that you can do by yourself when you have a few extra minutes of free time. Get a framework from a case you have read before, or from another person's case that you have found online or put together through research. Give yourself 2:30 minutes of prep time, and start writing as many answers as you can to that specific framework using the skills discussed in this paper. Your speech should include different layers, be they topicality, positional take outs to the framework, impact turns, indicts to the specific warrants of their framework, or justifications for an alternate framework that you can pretend to defend for the purpose of this drill. After the speech, give yourself a few minutes of prep time, and prepare answers to the responses you just made to that framework. This is also something that you can do on the contention of a case, as well.

Evidence Comparison

By Catherine Tarsney

This essay will deal with strategies for engaging in a comparative evidence debate, and winning these issues on the flow. It will begin with a discussion of why and when evidence comparison is important. Then, the essay will cover strategies for cutting good evidence, both for your own positions and for blocking, and methods for preparing for the empirics debate before it begins. Finally, it will discuss a variety of in-round tactics for evidence comparison, including ways of attacking and defending methodologies, assessing the legitimacy of various sources, and explaining the strength and strategic function of different types of empirical claims.

Why Evidence Comparison Matters

Evidence comparison is an often-overlooked skill in debate, but is one that debaters would benefit from taking advantage of in almost every round. In all arguments below the framework level, the ability to rigorously challenge and defend the claims that authors make will give you a great advantage and will help resolve close debates in your favor. At the most basic level, evidence comparison plays the same strategic role as weighing. The impacts that you and your opponent ultimately have access to depend on a series of links, which are often warranted by authors doing empirical analysis or informed prediction. How much of an impact you can claim relies on how good each of these links are – both their strength and the likelihood of them being true – so being able to engage intelligently in this sort of argumentation at each step of the chain will help you bolster your own impacts and tear down your opponent's.

While the phrase 'evidence comparison' seems to imply that you need to have evidence of your own to leverage on any argument you want to engage, the skills it will teach you can also be used to defensively break down your opponent's claim, even when you aren't well informed about a particular issue in advance (for instance, if your opponent runs a plan that relies on a series of hyper-specific links about a certain empirical situation you don't have knowledge of or blocks prepared to answer). Knowing how to critically analyze and question authors' claims will help you take out necessary steps in their chains of reasoning, undermining the perceived credibility of their evidence and cutting off access to their impacts.

Perhaps the most important benefit of evidence comparison skills is that they allow you to strategically engage in stock debates, or stick to a case you believe in throughout a topic without worrying about prep-outs or dumps of non-responsive blocks. Being knowledgeable about your own evidence and about the cards that are commonly used in response makes it possible to confidently defend solid arguments, even late in the topic when they're no longer secret and others have blocks prepared. Too often, debaters are scared away from good positions because of the fear that they'll have to deal with informed, substantive responses.

Instead of relying on tricks and surprises, with evidence comparison skills you'll be able to persuasively defend strong but stock arguments. This makes it possible to focus your strategic planning on a few positions you know you can defend well, rather than needing to prepare a wide range of arguments of diminished quality, the success of which depends almost entirely on their shock value.

When To Compare Evidence

On face, the answer to this seems obvious, and to some extent it is. The most simple and most common use of evidence comparison is in cases where you and your opponent have cards that make directly contradictory empirical claims. In these cases, only one of the claims being made can be true, so you have to win the debate in terms of your card's credibility and the legitimacy of its logic. For instance, if one card says that affirming leads to economic growth and one says it leads to economic decline, comparison is necessary to determine who gets to control that part of the link story, since those two claims can't possibly coexist.

Comparison is also useful, however, in some less obvious cases. Even claims that don't directly contradict one another often interact in interesting ways that you can take advantage of. Specifically, there are times when one piece of evidence can be used to preclude, undermine, or mitigate an opponent's claim. If one card claims that affirming will lead to increased power in the hands of oppressive governments, and one claims that affirming will create an impetus for rebellion against oppression, it's completely possible for both of those claims to be true, but comparison is necessary to help resolve the interaction between the arguments and determine whether the net effect of affirming is a rise or drop in actual acts of oppression. This type of comparison is more complex and requires more attentiveness to the intricacies of the link being debated, but is particularly useful since you're unlikely to have cards directly denying every claim your opponent makes, and this kind of comparison lets you use the material you already have prepared in a wide range of cases.

More generally, the skills of evidence comparison will come in useful any time the claims your evidence makes are indicted. You'll be more prepared to defend your own arguments against common responses and to leverage your own claims against competing ones. It will similarly give you the ability to challenged carded (often empirical) claims your opponent makes. Even without huge numbers of blocks ready ahead of time, knowing how to effectively question the validity of a piece of evidence will be useful any time you face a series of empirical, statistical, or predictive links that would normally be hard to answer simply with analytic reasoning.

Preparing For Comparison Before The Round

Doing Background Research

The absolutely most useful thing you can do to prepare yourself for comparative empirics debates is quite simply to be well informed about the empirical situations you're likely to

debate as well as the specific cards on which your opponents are likely to rely. In other words, read. Read a lot. Being familiar with topic literature and generally being knowledgeable about the world is the single most valuable component of getting good at debating empirics.

Even before a topic is announced, there are things that you can guess are going to be pretty important to know about, meaning there's no good excuse for not keeping up with this process of background learning even during the summer or between topics. It's a safe guess that an international relations topic will involve a lot of discussion of nuclear proliferation in Iran and North Korea, or of the rising power of China, or of some major international actors like the UN. Of course this isn't close to a comprehensive list, but it gives you a basic idea of things to think about. Knowing about the relationship of the US to other major global powers, about nations on the brink of war, rebellion, or collapse, and about the major players in different types of international discussions could only be to your benefit.

And beyond just watching the news and following current events, you can also use your downtime between topics to learn about the background that led to present conditions. Understanding the causes of regional disputes (e.g. between India and Pakistan, or between North and South Korea) will give you a leg up over anyone who makes claims about how a given conflict will play out without a real understanding of the nature of the situation they're dealing with.

Of course, the same logic applies to learning about domestic policy. Follow the news, read up on noteworthy and controversial legislation, and try to learn the logic behind the arguments being made by either party over whatever the current big political conflicts are. And when you come across research that makes a good argument you could imagine using in a round, cut it. Using this background research as a way to develop backfiles that will be useful in empirical debates throughout multiple years is a good way to make sure you don't forget this new information soon after learning it. Overall, there are some positions and general themes relevant across topics such that it can only help you to become an expert on them.

Offensive Research For Casing

Once a topic has been chosen, your priorities should of course shift towards research you know will be relevant for the debates you have over the next two months. When you're looking for evidence to cut for a case or any other offensive argument, the most important thing in preparing for evidence comparison is to become as knowledgeable about your evidence and your authors as possible. It can be really tempting to try to cut cards quickly, compiling as much prep as possible at the beginning of the topic, but you have to be cautious when this risks trading off with how well you'll be able to defend the evidence you have.

Most importantly, just know where your evidence is coming from. Know who the authors are and how they reached the conclusions you're relying on. That means you should be really reading articles, and not just the paragraph or two being cut. Minimally, you should always read

your author's introduction and conclusion to make sure that the evidence you're cutting is consistent with the claim the article is trying to make.

On different topics, different types of sources will prove particularly useful, but generally there are a handful of useful resources to check out, and as you're doing your research you should be thinking about the credibility and unique benefits of the sources you're using and how to use that to your advantage in leveraging your evidence. Journal articles (most of what you'll find on JStor, Google Scholar, or other academic search engines) are generally perceived as the most trustworthy sources of evidence; they are generally written by authors with extensive qualification in the area they're writing, they are peer reviewed, providing an additional level of scrutiny in the editing process, and there is a lot of transparency in information sourcing through footnotes.

Other sources certainly have their unique upsides as well. News articles from sources like the Associated Press provide a good source for objective reporting on current events, although different news sources have different ideological biases, which means you should be more critical of claims that aren't just pure descriptions of factual events. Working papers (available from sources like SSRN) are similar to journal articles, but haven't been published yet, meaning they're somewhere in the editing process; these can be a great source for finding research by well-qualified authors, but be cautious about authors who put explicit caveats on their work (or say not to cite them), which can happen a lot in these articles that aren't quite publication-ready yet. Books (often an underused resource) can be awesome sources on a lot of topics, though their credibility varies an enormous amount based on the author and the publisher. Personal websites and blogs, which have a pretty bad reputation, can also be worth thinking about; some really well-qualified authors do a lot of their writing outside of formal publications, so you can find some great evidence here, but you have to be a lot more careful in assessing the legitimacy of your source.

Regardless of where your evidence is coming from, if you're cutting research of any kind (any card with statistical claims, that evaluates or predicts the success of a program on empirical grounds, etc.) you should be paying attention to, and cutting, the methodology. Every empirical study you read should have a section just devoted to explaining how the research was done. Later in this essay, during our discussion of in-round techniques, there will be a more developed explanation of things to look for in methodologies, but the big takeaway point here is that you need to become familiar with this part of the papers you read. It's important to be able to explain—and defend—how research you rely on was conducted, and it can provide a great starting point for comparison when you're able to explain the superiority of a given method. Part of this preparation also requires taking the time to understand the language used in explaining research design. If you have the chance to take a statistics course, that's awesome. Otherwise, look up terms you don't understand (again, some will be explained below) and practice explaining methodology in easy-to-understand language. Cards that detail the research design will be of no use to you if you can't explain to your judge why the things described are good or useful.

Preparing Blocks

This more intricate awareness of topic literature is also something you should be focusing on when you're writing blocks and thinking about answers to common arguments on the topic. In general, you should be aware of the authors being widely used and be ready to talk knowledgeably about their work. The easiest place to start this is with the evidence you're using offensively. If you're cutting a card, it's safe to assume that other people will too. So, when you're going through the process described above, you should also be thinking about weaknesses in arguments that you can exploit when you hit them. As the topic progresses, the body of literature you're becoming familiar with should grow; call cites when you hear good arguments, look up the studies and get familiar with them. This might provide you with new ideas for offensive positions, but minimally it makes you better at answering stock arguments by helping you understand the logic, the research, and potential flaws that are much harder to notice in a short, fast-paced debate round.

Again, you'll be well served by reading more of the article than just the section that was cut. Read the introductions and conclusions both to make sure that the claims your opponents make are an accurate portrayal of the author's claims and to see what exactly is being studied. Authors will often provide qualifications for how their work should be read, based on the rigor of their analysis and conclusion they're trying to reach. Huge numbers of articles conclude with notes that their work provides a starting point for research in a given field, but that much more work is needed to determine a meaningful conclusion with much certainty; cutting rhetoric like this can be very helpful in diminishing the perceived strength of a card's conclusion. In general, this is mostly a question of just being informed about the debates you're likely to have. It looks really good to be able to demonstrate in round that you know more about the evidence your opponent is using than he or she does.

In-Round Techniques for Evidence Comparison

Temporality

Time-based comparison is probably the most frequently used form of leveraging evidence in rounds. It can be extremely useful when used correctly, but you need to know when it applies and how to explain it in order for it to serve any real purpose. The simplest form of temporal comparison is postdating, or claiming that your evidence is better because it was written more recently. These arguments make sense only in cases where something about the conditions being discussed is changing over time, such that more recent claims would give us a more accurate picture of the current condition. On the extremes, postdating makes a lot of sense when you're talking about, for instance, the US political climate, which fluctuates considerably over time, but makes no sense when comparing philosophical claims that aren't any more or less true based on when they were written.

To do postdating well, you should first point out the difference in publication dates (having a card that's five years more recent than your opponent's will almost certainly do more for you than having a card that's two days more recent – unless something extreme happened on that one day in between). Then, you need to explain why the differences in dates are important. What new information does your author take into account? What relevant information has changed since your opponent's evidence was written? The major message here is that having recent evidence is only better when it's a proxy for more accurate evidence, giving us more useful information about how to act right now.

Another way to temporally compare evidence, which is much less common but at least worth thinking about, is proximity comparison. Essentially the opposite of postdating, in some cases you could argue that evidence is more accurate if it was written closer to the event it describes. Essentially, someone writing in the 1980s about the political climate during the Cold War is likely to have better insight into the issue than someone writing in 2012 (particularly if the second author didn't actually live through the events being described). The warrants for this kind of comparison would essentially be reasons for preferring primary sources. And once again, this is really a question of accuracy. Your arguments need to give a reason why our decisions now will be better informed by somebody writing at one time rather than another.

Author Qualifications

You can also compare evidence based on the credibility of the authors. While there a huge number of ways to make these comparisons, there are a few particularly useful things to think about. Knowing the field in which an author works, studies, or teaches relative to the topic of a card will give you a good starting point for assessing their knowledge on that particular issue. There are certainly arguments to be made for preferring cards from people in certain lines of work, though there is no definite right answer on any of these questions. Academics might be more objective sources than policymakers, for instance, since they don't have the same incentives to send a certain message or appeal to their constituency. Policymakers, however, might have a better understanding of the intricacies of political decision-making since they engage it in directly rather than from a distance. The importance of certain types of qualifications certainly varies extensively based on the particular claims being made, but there are a lot of strong comparative arguments to be made based on who the warrant is coming from.

Comparing Methodologies

One of the strongest ways to debate research-based evidence is through a comparative analysis of how the different studies were conducted. Cross-examination gives you the opportunity to press your opponents to figure out some basic information about how their authors reached particular conclusions, or to find out whether they know that information at all. If an opponent can't explain anything about how research they rely on was conducted, it's very easy to gain both a perceptual and strategic advantage. You'll look knowledgeable, and any claim you can

make about the superiority of your studies will be an almost automatic reason for preferring your evidence. And, if you have done a lot of background research and you know information about a card you hit that your opponent doesn't, you'll both be able to indict the evidence effectively and make it clear that you know more about what they're reading than they do.

While a complete discussion of all relevant methodological considerations is beyond the scope of this essay, it's worth talking about a few key things that you can be looking out for and asking opponents about to start engaging in this kind of comparison. One particularly important term to be aware of is "statistical significance". Most basically, this is a measure of whether the outcome of the study can really be said to be a result of a connection between the factors being studied, rather than just resulting from chance. Statistical significance is measured by a p-value, which gives the probability that the result occurred by chance. Generally, the accepted confidence level for findings is 5% or a p-value of .05, which implies a 95% confidence that the result did not occur by chance. There is some variation in where the confidence level is set (or when the threshold for statistical significance is reached), largely depending on the potential risks of being wrong, but in general, a lower p-value means a higher likelihood that the result of a study is really meaningful.

The quality of research is also affected by the study's sample, meaning the group of people, countries, things, etc. that were looked at and evaluated. Research could be compared just on the grounds of sample size – i.e. having a larger sample increases the accuracy of results by minimizing selection bias and making the sample more likely to represent the overall population. Asking 1,000 people how they intend to vote in the upcoming presidential election is more likely to correctly predict a winner than asking 10 people.

But the size of the sample isn't the only thing that matters. You should also pay attention to the specific composition of the group(s) being studied, specifically relative to the argument you or your opponent is making. For certain kinds of research, looking at a random cross-section of the population is beneficial for the same reason that having a larger sample is – it is most likely to provide an accurate picture of the impacts on that whole group. But if the topic, or a given position, isn't making an argument about the general population, then there's a good reason to prefer research that looks at a group of people more closely matched to the group relevant to the argument. For instance, if you're advocating mandating a vaccine for 12-year-olds, it's better to have a study that tests its effectiveness on 12-year-olds than on a group randomly selected across ages, though a randomly selected group is probably still preferable to a group of entirely 30-year-olds.

A final methodological consideration is the variables being controlled for in a study. Controlling variables (basically, holding factors other than the one being evaluated constant) is a way of making sure that the variable researchers are intending to test is really the one creating the observed outcome. For instance, to determine whether graduating high school increases lifetime income, a study would need to control for variables like intelligence, likely to be closely related to graduation rates, to make sure that it is graduation in and of itself that leads to higher income rather than something else that is just correlated with graduation rates. A study

that controls for the variables that provide other possible explanations for a given result is stronger and more likely to be giving us meaningful information.

Specificity

Another way to compare the claims within evidence is the content of the claims themselves. Comparisons based on specificity relate to the broadness of empirical claims relative to the broadness of the topic. For instance, if the affirmative case is claiming that the majority of people support victims of domestic violence being allowed to kill in response to domestic violence, there's a strong argument to be made for preferring evidence that talks specifically about public opinion towards family violence over evidence that just talks about self-defense, but isn't specific to the context of domestic violence. More specific evidence gives us the answer to the real question being asked, rather than just to a related, but more generic question.

Source of Claims

To begin with, it's important to distinguish source comparisons from author qualification comparisons. Here, by source, I don't mean where the card itself came from. I mean, rather, where its information originated. This is particularly relevant in comparing evidence about political conditions, where certain actors have an incentive to twist information to portray a certain image. For instance, when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad declares that US sanctions aren't hurting the Iranian economy, or that Iran isn't seeking nuclear weapons, his claims are certainly a lot less credible than conflicting ones made by journalists or political analysts without such strong incentives to portray the situation in a certain light. While nobody (to the best of my knowledge) directly cards people like Ahmadinejad to warrant these claims, lots of news articles, for instance, do just repeat information from questionable sources (probably not claiming it as true, but just reporting on what some political leader said). This is information you should be closely listening and looking for in evidence, as it provides an easy way to leverage evidence from more perceptually objective sources.

Source comparisons don't only have to be between two people saying different things. There's also a good argument to be made for preferring evidence that indicates some action is underway over evidence that is warranted by some person claiming that some action will or will not happen. Reports that Iran is currently enriching uranium mean a lot more than claims by Ahmadinejad or anyone else about whether enrichment is going to happen.

This same logic can be used to mitigate arguments that rely on statements that are at odds with observable behavior. Generally speaking, claims lose their credibility when they're made without corresponding actions and become perceived as empty threats or empty promises. This is basically a "boy who cried wolf" argument. For instance, Israel has claimed numerous times over the course of many years that they will take military action against Iran if some action isn't taken by the US or Iran doesn't change course within the next months. When those threats are

repeatedly followed by a clear lack of military action, we're given less reason to believe them in the future. Being able to effectively make this kind of argument relies on following the earlier advice and doing a lot of background research. Knowing (and having evidence to warrant) information about the history of claims, threats, etc. on a given policy issue gives you another strong basis for leveraging your own cards and mitigating your opponent's.

Presumptions in the Evidence

One of the most devastating ways to compare evidence is to be able to claim that your cards take the claims of your opponent's cards into account. In other words, your evidence can allow for the competing evidence to also be entirely true while still getting to the conclusion you want. For instance, if one card says that Iran is enriching uranium, and a second claims that Iran only wants nuclear energy for medical purposes, the second one allows for the total truth of the first – it doesn't deny that Iran is enriching uranium – but it makes its conclusion irrelevant. This kind of comparison is uniquely strong because it eliminates the need for any defensive engagement of your opponent's arguments (or makes that defense just a second level of protection). It allows you to make the claim that even if everything your opponent said were completely true, they would still lose the argument.

Strength of Claim

This kind of comparison is essentially based in the certainty the author has in his or her own conclusion. It's pretty straightforward, but just requires that you pay close attention to the rhetoric you read or hear in cards. In evidence that isn't statistical and doesn't provide explicit numbers to reflect the probability of certain outcomes, authors still build in some language that reflects their belief that a given event will occur. Strong claims, like "there is no doubt that X will occur if policy Y is implemented" represent a greater certainty, and thus a higher probability, of an impact occurring than cards that suggest that something "may" or "could" happen.

Analytic Warranting

There seems to be a general, increasingly common assumption made by debaters and judges that empirics are better warrants for most arguments than analytics. The common line is that empirics reflect the way the world actually works rather than the way academics think it should work, or that empirics test academic theories in the actual world. However, when two competing empirical claims are introduced in a round, analytics can provide a pretty useful basis for preferring one over the other, acting as a sort of tie breaker. Essentially, analytics can help check whether empirical results make sense. Providing an analytic argument for why we should logically expect to see a certain kind of outcome can help bolster your corresponding empirical claim that suggests we do in fact see that outcome. These give reasons for why the results your authors arrived at make more sense than those of your opponent's author.

Conclusion

This essay has demonstrated the importance of evidence comparison, discussed strategies for finding and cutting good quality evidence, and described techniques for engaging the evidence comparison debate in rounds. These concepts may be tricky at first, but with a little practice this skill set will improve everyone's debate success.

On Great Evidence

By Peter van Elswyk

Arguments win rounds. Great arguments win tournaments and titles. A great argument is almost always accompanied by great evidence. In this essay, I am going to explain in detail what constitutes great evidence. The primary purpose of this essay is to help debaters and coaches craft great arguments by knowing what is constituted by great evidence, but much will be said along the way about what makes evidence and the arguments they warrant less than great. So the auxiliary purpose of this essay is to provide a variety of tips about how to refute less than great evidence.

Introduction

In its simplest form, an argument is a claim or series of claims accompanied by evidence that confirms the claim(s). Both of these components, the claim(s) and the confirming evidence, are necessary for an argument. A claim without evidence is an assertion and evidence without a claim is useless in the context of a debate. But what makes an argument a great argument? The answer to this question is somewhat obvious. A great argument consists of a claim accompanied by great evidence. Yet understanding what constitutes great evidence is far less obvious. In particular, in order to understand what constitutes great evidence one should understand what it means for evidence to confirm a claim in the first place and the different ways in which different claims can be confirmed.

In this essay I will cover both of these topics to equip the reader with a more thorough understanding of what makes for great evidence. The primary goal of this essay is to help debaters and coaches craft better arguments. Inevitably, however, saying what makes for a great argument means saying what makes an argument less than great. As such, the secondary aim of this essay is providing a variety of tips about how compare difference pieces of evidence in virtue of their strength.

This essay will proceed as follows. In the following section I say a little about the nature of evidence discuss the different ways to warrant empirical claims and nonempirical claims. In the final section, before the conclusion, I will discuss some important facts about the relationship between evidence and probability and the significance of these facts for argument and case construction.

Before proceeding, however, there are three things worth flagging at the beginning. First, although arguments are occasionally structured in different ways, I will be assuming the arguments are structured following the Toulmin model. That is, I will assume that an argument consists of a claim or tagline, a warrant, and an impact that draws out the significance of the claim. Much of what I say will, nevertheless, apply equally to other ways of structuring

arguments. Second, some of the material I will be covering in this essay is fairly difficult. I will be taking us through some difficult philosophical concepts. But don't give up! I promise that at the end of difficult sections you will have a fuller grasp of difficult but important topics like the nature of evidence. I will also end each section and subsection with practical recommendations on how to craft better arguments or better refutations. Third and finally, it is worth noting that some of the conclusions I will arrive at may seem obvious. The tips I provide might be things you already do as a debater. Hopefully, however, this essay will teach you why these conclusions are true and you will have a fuller picture of the anatomy of an argument. In short, I encourage the reader to persist through this essay because of the rewards you will reap.

The Nature of Evidence

We all already know what evidence is, at least in broad strokes. The role played by evidence is very intuitive to understand. Evidence for a particular claim x is data which indicates that x is true. Put differently, it is data that gives us reason to believe that x is true. But that last sentence needs a lot of unpacking to be more something other than a platitude we intuitively grasp. That is the aim of this section.

Evidence is data. What evidence does is probabilify a particular claim. So evidence is data that probabilifies a particular claim. By "probabilify", I mean this: the probability that some claim x is true given some evidence e is greater than the probability that x is true without evidence e . In other words, the probability that a claim is true is always higher when there is some supporting evidence than when there is no supporting evidence. As such, to probabilify a claim is to boost the probability that the claim is true; it is to indicate that x is true or likely true. In what follows, I will refer to the probabilifying relationship between evidence and a claim as *confirmation*. The essence of evidence is that it confirms or disconfirms claims.

But what is confirmation and what does it mean for evidence to confirm a claim? We already have a general answer to this question. Confirmation occurs when some evidence boosts the probability of a claim's being true. Explaining how evidence boosts the probability of a claim's being true, however, is a very difficult question to answer. In fact, it is a topic on which philosophers continue to spill a lot of ink proposing various explanations. In this brief guide I am not going to spill any such ink. Instead, I am going to highlight some general properties about confirmation that have clear and practical upshots for finding great evidence and crafting great arguments.

To get a handle on confirmation and how it works, consider the following claim: *All Waffle Houses sell pancakes*. Suppose we visited a Waffle House. Suppose further that they sold pancakes. The fact that they sold pancakes would clearly partially confirm the claim that *All Waffle Houses sell pancakes*. The claim is about what Waffle Houses sell and we have now witnessed the selling of pancakes. As such, the probability that it is true that all Waffle House locations sell pancakes would be slightly boosted. Note, that our claim about Waffle Houses would not be completely confirmed. The claim is about all Waffle Houses and visiting one

Waffle House is not sufficient to completely confirm our claim. This is because confirmation is incremental; it comes in degrees. In this way, visiting a dozen Waffle Houses would more strongly confirm the claim than a visit to only one Waffle House. The greater the body of evidence, the greater confirmation is supplied to the claim.

Witnessing the selling of pancakes at Waffle Houses partially confirms the claim that *All Waffle Houses sell pancakes* because what we hypothetically witnessed is relevant to the claim. So evidence confirms a claim when the evidence is relevant to the claim. This point might sound obvious. It should. Irrelevant evidence surely doesn't confirm a claim. There is a subtle point worth stressing, however. The subtle point is that relevance comes in degrees. Accordingly, the more relevant evidence is, the more the evidence confirms the claim.

To illustrate the fact that relevance comes in degrees in a way that impacts the strength of evidence, consider another generalized claim: *All ravens are black*. This claim would be partially confirmed by encountering a black raven. But what if we encountered a gray elephant? Would that confirm the claim that *all ravens are black*? You might think not. The existence of a gray elephant doesn't seem at all relevant to whether ravens are black. Yet the existence of a gray elephant is relevant in a very weak and diminished way. Here is why. By encountering a gray thing like an elephant that is not a raven, we rule out the possibility that the gray thing we encountered is a counterexample to the claim about all ravens. Since it was a gray elephant and not a gray raven, we gained some evidence. Similarly, by encountering a gray elephant, it means that there are fewer overall unencountered objects in the world and this fact slightly reduces the probability that there are objects in the world that could be a counterexample to the claim that *all ravens are black*. So the existence of a gray elephant is relevant to the generalized claim. This relevance, however, is very weak. As a result, the amount of confirmation it supplies to the generalized claim about ravens is also very weak.³

This discussion of relevance has two important take-away points. The first point: the evidence you choose to use should be as relevant as possible to your claim. The reason for this is simple and follows from the above discussion of confirmation. Extremely relevant evidence is strong evidence because the amount of confirmation supplied by relevant evidence is greater than that supplied by less relevant evidence. You should not settle for anything short of the most relevant evidence that you can find. In practice, this means that you should avoid making overly general and broad claims. Overly broad and general claims are difficult to find evidence for that is highly relevant because lots of things are invariably broadly relevant. So, by their very nature, broad claims are more difficult to warrant.

The next take-away point concerns evidence comparison. Many debates boil down to a decision on the judge's part to choose one piece of evidence over an opposing piece of evidence.

³ The puzzle I am discussing here is known as the *Raven paradox* or *Hempel's paradox*. For a more technical explanation of how the existence of things like gray elephants weakly confirms the generalized claim about ravens, see: Branden Fitelson and James Hawthorne (2010). "How Bayesian Confirmation Theory Handles the Paradox of the Ravens." *The Place of Probability in Science*. Springer.

Debaters can alleviate any difficulty a judge would have making this decision by comparing the quality of the evidence and showing the judge that their evidence is the superior evidence. These debates thus hinge on comparing and contrasting opposing pieces of evidence. One way to compare the evidence is in terms of relevance. Since relevant evidence gives us more reason to think that a claim is true than less relevant evidence, the relevant evidence should be privileged. The best evidence confirms a claim the most. Relevance is one way to maximize the extent to which evidence confirms a claim.

I have been explaining how evidence probabilifies. Let's turn now to consider the variety of difference sources from which one can acquire evidence. Although there are a lot of difference sources of evidence, not all of these sources are equally good at confirming claims either. You could observe something with your eyes, read it in *The Economist*, prove something in a derivation, hear something from a fortuneteller, and so on. Some of these sources of evidence will lead you to believe true things and some of them will not. So we need some test to signal when evidence is the best evidence.

The best way to assess a source of evidence is in terms of its reliability. Our eyes, for example, are generally a reliable source of belief. If we trust our eyes, then we will reliably form true beliefs about our surroundings. If we see a tree, then there is probably, in fact, a tree in front of us. Fortunetellers, on the other hand, are notoriously unreliable sources of evidence. Their predictions often come out false. So they are generally unreliable sources of belief. This is not to say that all fortunetellers everywhere are unreliable and that all eyes everywhere are reliable. It is conceivable that there could be a fortuneteller who was never wrong. Were we to encounter such an infallible teller of fortunes, it might be a good idea to trust his or her predictions given the perfect reliability of the predictions. Similarly, one could have poor enough eyesight that their eyes are not a reliable source of evidence. It will vary whether something is a reliable source of evidence on a case-by-case basis, which means sources of evidence need to be assessed on a case-by-case basis, especially within a debate round.

Relevance and reliability are at the heart of strong evidence. There are a variety of slightly different ways for evidence to be relevant and reliable. In the sub-sections, I will consider the different types of claims thrown around in debate rounds and discuss specific ways in which evidence for different types of claims are relevant and reliable in different types of ways.

Empirical Claims

Empirical claims are claims that require empirical evidence. Empirical evidence is evidence acquired from observation and experimentation. The claim that *the poliovirus spreads faster in unvaccinated populations* is an empirical claim. The only way to confirm this claim is to observe the virus and how the virus spreads through populations in certain conditions. The claim $2+3=5$ is not an empirical claim. Its truth is not something that can be confirmed by going out in the world and making observations. Instead, its truth depends wholly on what "+" and "=" mean in

relation to numerals like 2, 3, and 5. Claims of this latter sort I will simply call “non-empirical” and I will discuss them in the next subsection.

In a debate context, empirical claims are almost always causal claims. Causal claims are claims about what caused or causes a particular event. But what, exactly, is causation? In broad strokes, causation is an intimate kind of relationship had between an event y and some prior event x . We might say, for example, that the cause of the explosion was the detonation of the cruise missile. The detonation of the missile was prior to the explosion and it was what “brought about” the explosion. But we can paint in finer strokes. Causation can be thought of as a special kind of dependence: If x causes y , then the occurrence of y depends on x 's occurrence. Or, put slightly differently: if x does not occur, then y would not occur. In the case of the cruise missile, this more technical sentence is equivalent to saying that the explosion would not have occurred had the cruise missile not detonated. The occurrence of the explosion *depends* on the missile's detonation.

Causation needs to be distinguished from correlation. Two events x and y are correlated if the two events are not totally independent from each other. That is, if you typically have x when you have y or *vice versa*, then x and y are correlated. In this way, causation entails correlation. The missile's detonation is the cause of the explosion, which means that the detonation of missiles and explosions are correlated events. You typically don't have one without the other. However, correlation does not entail causation. Suppose that no cruise missile was ever detonated prior to the existence of Waffle Houses. The existence of a Waffle House is thus always correlated with the detonation of cruise missiles. So there has never been a detonation of a cruise missile that occurred independent of the existence of a Waffle House. But it is obvious that the existence of Waffle Houses is by no means the cause of various cruise missile detonations. Correlation does not entail causation.

What explains the difference between correlation and causation? This is yet another big philosophical question that I will not answer in elaborate detail. (There are even skeptics who think that there is no such thing as causation.) Very roughly, however, we can say two things. First, correlation is not sufficiently intimate. Lots of cases of genuine causation involve a transfer of energy, for example. When the baseball bat strikes the baseball, it transfers energy to the ball, which is the cause of the ball soaring into the outfield. The transfer of energy is intimate; it is directly involved. Other causal sequences, however, do not rely on the transfer of energy. The intimacy I am intuitively underscoring is present in some other way. Second, the difference between causation and correlation is the fact that causes back explanations of effects when correlations do not. Let's consider an example to see what I mean by “explanation.” The fact that Waffle Houses exist prior to the detonation of a cruise missile does not provide the basis for any explanation for why there was a detonation in the first place. As such, if someone asked a question like “why did the missile detonate?”, then it would be inappropriate to start talking about Waffle Houses. This inappropriateness stems from the fact that their existence does not explain the missile's detonation. Yet if someone pointed to some facts about the detonation equipment on a missile to explain the act of detonation, then this

would offer an explanation and answer to the why-question. So reference to causes can ground answers to why-questions in a way that reference to merely correlated events cannot.⁴

It is not always easy, however, to determine whether something is causation instead of mere correlation. This is where relevance and reliability come into play. I've been claiming that causes are intimately related to what they cause, but this is to say that causes are relevant in their effects. This is why the existence of Waffle Houses does not explain the detonation. The existence of Waffle Houses is correlated, but it is not relevant in the right sort of way. So when choosing evidence for causal claims it is best to choose evidence that is highly relevant. Recall what I said earlier: one should avoid making broad claims because they are more difficult to prove given that there is little evidence that is extremely relevant. This is especially true of causal claims. Causal events are very localized events. A very specific missile detonates and this causes a very specific explosion in a very specific place. Accordingly, to adequately warrant some claim about a specific explosion, one will need to make reference to very specific facts about a specific missile, its launch, and its detonation. In doing so, one will ignore a lot of general background information and stick only to the information that is relevant. But the more general a causal claim is, the harder the claim is to warrant in a way that is not equally as general. The consequence of such generality is that it becomes much harder to distinguish correlation from causation.

Debaters, however, love general claims, especially because general claims allow one to making sweeping impact arguments. Consider the evidence infamously known as Mead '98:⁵

But the biggest impact of the Depression on the United States—and on world history—wasn't money. It was blood: World War II, to be exact. The Depression brought Adolf Hitler to power in Germany, undermined the ability of moderates to oppose Joseph Stalin's power in Russia, and convinced the Japanese military that the country had no choice but to build an Asian empire, even if that meant war with the United States and Britain. That's the thing about depressions. They aren't just bad for your 401(k). Let the world economy crash far enough, and the rules change. We stop playing "The Price Is Right" and start up a new round of "Saving Private Ryan."

Mead goes on to claim that the cost of paying of playing a new round of "Saving Private Ryan" could lead to nuclear conflict. As such, it should be obvious why this evidence is infamous in debate circles. It very quickly takes us from economic downturn to nuclear war. So debaters making arguments about the economic consequences of particular policies are prone to use this evidence to underscore the dangers of causing economic downturn. But does this evidence adequately warrant the causal claim that *economic recession causes war*? Not even close. Mead rightly points out that The Depression preceded Hitler's rise to power. So economic downturn is correlated with war. The evidence, however, does not provide any reason to think that downturn is the cause of war. The evidence is totally inadequate for that task and the reason

⁴ It should go without saying that a full theory of causation will explain why it is that a genuine case of causation is able to answer why-questions. It is this kind of detail that I am passing over in this essay. For more on causation, see Jonathan Schaffer (2007). "The Metaphysics of Causation." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.). URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/causation-metaphysics/>>.

⁵ Mead, Walter Russell. "Market free fall's threat to peace." *Baltimore Sun*, August 25, 1998.

for its inadequacy is the generality of the claim *economic recession causes war*. As such, any warrant for this claim will also be general and, as a result, any warrant for this claim will be incapable of showing causation instead of correlation. Thus great causal arguments do not make broad, overly general claims because such claims are very difficult to warrant with evidence that is relevance. The nature of evidence itself prohibits these arguments from being great arguments.

We have been considering the importance of relevance in the context of causal claims, but we should not overlook the significance of evidential reliability when considering causal claims. Since causal claims are claims about what effects will be brought about when the conditions are right, all causal claims must be warranted by some observations about what effects occurred under certain conditions with certain prior events. Yet the only kind of observation that matters is reliable observation. The key to reliable observation, however, is repetition. That is, if an outcome has been repeatedly observed to result from the same preceding conditions and prior events, then this is an indicator that the observation in question is tracking the truth and reliable. This is why repetition is a crucial part of scientific investigation. If Scientist *A* has a certain set of results in his or her lab and these results cannot be repeated, then this is reason to think that *A*'s results were a fluke or a hoax. If Scientist *B*, however, is able to fully repeat *A*'s results, then this corroboration is evidence that *A*'s results were genuine and not a fluke or a hoax. For causal claims this is important because repetition is another indicator that genuine causation is at work instead of mere correlation. Repetition shows that two events are intimately linked.

There are a few practical take-away points about causal evidence that are worth flagging. First, prefer evidence based on observations that have been repeated. This means that you should try to find what is known as a "meta-analysis" whenever it is possible to do so. A meta-analysis is a statistical study done on a particular topic that combines the findings of several other studies on that topic. The benefit of a meta-analysis is the fact that its findings are less dependent on the particular factors of a particular study. A particular study might only be showing a correlation. But if most studies are showing the same result, then a meta-analysis is able to show this convergence and agreement among the studies and underscore the fact that causation is probably at work. On the occasion that meta-analyses are not available, then you should look for other types of evidence that corroborate other distinct observations. Ideally, you do not want to be using evidence for causal claims that rests on only a few observations. So, for example, instead of citing Scientist *A*'s findings as evidence, cite scientist *B*'s findings that corroborate Scientist *A*'s evidence since this will be evidence that shows repetition in results. As a result, such evidence is more reliable, which matters because it means the evidence in question confirms a claim to a greater degree than evidence that is less reliable.

This discussion of causality also has an upshot for evidence comparison. When a debate boils down to evidence comparison, evidence should be compared according to its respective reliability. If one debater is citing a meta-analysis, for example, and the opposing debater is not, then the debater citing the meta-analysis should have their evidence preferred by the judge because their evidence is more reliable. Alternatively, debaters could save corroborating

evidence for later speeches so that, in the event of evidence comparison, they could read additional evidence to corroborate their initial evidence. Evidence comparison can thus be done with more evidence, which is introduced to show that one piece of evidence is more reliable than the opposing piece of evidence. Evidence is relevant to evidence. Imagine that!

Nonempirical Claims

Nonempirical claims are claims that require nonempirical evidence. Nonempirical evidence is evidence that cannot be gained through observation or experimentation. Earlier I gave an example of nonempirical evidence. The evidence that $2+3=5$ is ultimately facts about what “+”, “=”, “2”, “3”, and “5” mean as names. The facts about these symbols are an example of nonempirical evidence. This is because mathematical truths are not the kind of truths that one can just go out and observe in the world. To be sure, the world exemplifies mathematical truths. When you have 3 Waffle Houses and 2 cruise missiles, you have 5 things in total. But this observation rests on a pre-empirical understanding of quantities and addition. It is not the empirical investigation itself that provides the evidence.

You might be wondering why, exactly, I am talking about nonempirical claims. The reason they merit their own subsection is that many philosophical claims are nonempirical. This is due to the fact much of what philosophers discuss is not totally open to empirical investigation since philosophers often posit theories or make claims that are not easily tested in some empirical way. Not all philosophers agree with this characterization of philosophy, of course. It is itself a philosophical question whether philosophy is empirical or not. But a lot of the philosophy that is used in debate rounds proceeds on the assumption that philosophy can be a purely rational form of inquiry. As an example, consider this popular evidence from Stephen Engstrom:⁶

Now on the interpretation we have been entertaining, applying the formula of universal law involves considering whether it is possible for every subject capable of practical judgment to share the practical judgment asserting the goodness of every subject’s acting according to the maxim in question. Thus in the present case the application of the formula involves considering whether it is possible for every such subject to deem good every subjects acting to limit others’ outer freedom, where practicable, with a view to augmenting their own outer freedom. Since here all subjects are on the one hand deeming good both the limitation of others’ outer freedom and the extension of their own outer freedom, while on the other hand, insofar as they agree with the similar judgments of others, also determining good the limitation of their own outer freedom and the extension of others’ outer freedom, they are all deeming good both the extension and the limitation of both their own and others’ outer freedom. These judgments are inconsistent insofar as the extension of a person’s outer freedom is incompatible with the limitation of the same freedom.

As you might have guessed, this evidence would be used to support deontology. Deontology is the view in normative ethics that an action’s status as moral or immoral depends on whether the taking of that action breaks a moral rule or not. Engstrom’s argument is, roughly, that if we

⁶ Engstrom, Stephen (2009). *The Form of Practical Knowledge: A Study Of The Categorical Imperative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 18.

ground moral decision-making in our decision to act in a way that we would want others to mimic if they found themselves in similar circumstances (“the universal law”), then giving ourselves more freedom at the expense of other people’s freedoms is contradictory. This is because if other people were to really act similarly, then they would limit our freedom by acting as we act. So the argument being advanced by Engstrom is not empirical. It does not have to do with observation or experiments. Instead, it pertains to what is contradictory or consistent.

A broader lesson can be drawn from the Engstrom evidence. For all nonempirical claims, it is more difficult to assess their truth. This is because there is no obvious test we can perform in the world that would show whether the claim in question is true or not. This means that assessing nonempirical claims is often limited to assessing their consistency. Consistency is somewhat of a technical notion that is worth elaborating. Two statements are consistent if and only if their mutual truth is logically compatible. That is, if the truth of one of the two statements does not entail the falsity of other statement, then the statements are consistent. If the statements contradict, then the statements are inconsistent. Although a claim cannot be tested in some empirical way, it can be tested in a nonempirical way by conducting logical tests to see whether it entails something inconsistent. Engstrom performs this kind of test. If we ground moral decision-making in the universal law, then giving ourselves more freedom at the expense of other people’s freedoms is inconsistent; it entails a contradiction. Testing whether a claim is contradictory or whether it entails a contradiction is one of the best ways to assess nonempirical claims. In fact, such a logical test is, in many ways, stronger than empirical tests. If a particular claim is contradictory or it entails a contradiction, then its probability is 0. Where empirical evidence can raise or lower the probability of a claim, disconfirming evidence rarely drops the probability of a claim to 0. But a logical contradiction is guaranteed to do this because it is impossible for a contradiction to be true. So logical consistency is one means of assessing the probability of a nonempirical claim.

There is another means of assessing the probability of a nonempirical claim that is related to consistency. This other mode of assessment is accomplished by determining coherence with other accepted claims. To see what I mean by such coherence, consider a large body of claims. Call the set of claims S . Suppose that the independent probability of each of the members of S is pretty high. So all of the members are probably true. As a result, the probability had by the whole set of claims S will be pretty high since each member of the set is probable. Now suppose that a particular claim x is consistent with S . That is, the even bigger body of claims that consists of S and x does not entail a contradiction. If things are as we have supposed, then the particular claim x is coherent with the set of claims S . The consequence of this coherence is that the probability that x is true gets slightly boosted. The reason it gets boosted is pretty straightforward. If the set of claims S is probably true, then anything inconsistent with S is probably not true. All of the evidence for S and its individual members weighs against whatever is inconsistent with S . On the other hand, whatever is consistent with S has the evidence for S weighing in its favor in virtue of the fact that it is not inconsistent with S . An example might help illustrate. Imagine I only believe true things about the Los Angeles Lakers and that I believe a lot of true things about Lakers too. Now suppose you toss a particular claim about the Lakers my way and that this claim is one that I do not believe yet. If this claim is inconsistent with what

I know, then the probability that the claim is true will be pretty low. All of the evidence I have for believing what I do about the Lakers disconfirms this claim. Imagine now that it is consistent with what I believe. If it is consistent, then this is positive evidence that it is true because it fits well with all of the things I know about the Lakers.

Earlier I said that confirmation comes in degrees. Confirmation provided by coherence is no exception. This is where reliability is important. The larger the set of claims *S* with which an individual claim *x* is consistent the more the coherence with *S* boosts the probability of *x*. For example, if *S* contains all of the facts about the world but one and *x* is consistent with *S*, then this is great evidence that *x* is true. It is pretty reliable evidence that *x* is the missing fact about the world. Yet if *S* contains very few facts about the world and *x* is consistent with *S*, then the amount of confirmation provided by coherence is less than it would be if *S* contained more facts about the world. It is a kind of fit, but not a perfect fit. So coherence with a bigger body of claims confirms a claim more than coherence with a smaller body of claims.

As usual, I have a few take-away points related to this discussion of consistency and coherence in the context of nonempirical claims. First, the more internally coherent your case is, the more warranted your case is. So you should seek out, whenever possible, maximally coherent cases, especially when constructing the philosophical arguments for your value/criterion framework. This might seem like more obvious advice. But a lot of cases are not fully coherent even at the framework level. They mix and match different kinds of arguments from different philosophies and outlooks. Positional cases or cases that orient around a single primary argument, however, are very internally coherent. As a result, they are, in an interesting way, more justified because of this internal coherence. On the flipside, if cases are inconsistent or incoherent, then this should be pointed out in rebuttals for similar reasons since incoherence is an evidential problem. Here is the second take-away: avoid making nonempirical claims that conflict with obvious truths. If you claim something that is at odds with what most people take to be obviously true, then rhetorically you will be facing an uphill battle. But you will also be facing an evidential uphill battle. If the probability of the obvious truth is high and your claim is inconsistent with the obvious truth, then any incoherence with the obvious truth will lower probability of your claim. This is why highly counter-intuitive arguments like moral skepticism rarely win important rounds since they are inconsistent with claims like *slaughtering innocent children is immoral*, which is an obvious truth that gets assigned a really high probability by most people. Since nonempirical claims are already difficult to assess, you do not want to make your job debating any more difficult than necessary by defending claims that conflict with claims people take to be obvious.

I have highlighted two ways to assess nonempirical claims, but there is one other common way nonempirical claims are warranted that is worth mentioning briefly because it comes up occasionally in debate rounds. Many philosophers think that our intuitions are a source of evidence. These philosophers think that if claim *x* is intuitive or commonsensical, then this is reason to think that *x* is true. The chief advantage of this view about intuition is that it lends credence to our ordinary evidential practices. We frequently rely on our intuitions when choosing what to believe and what to disbelieve, especially when it comes to beliefs about

what is right and what is wrong. The chief difficulty with such views, however, is that it is very difficult to determine whether intuitions are a reliable source of evidence. It seems like a lot of our intuitions are false. There is also a question of relevance. If I have intuition about x , why think this is at all relevant to x 's truth? So determining the evidential merit of intuition, like all sources of evidence, is best done by considering whether they are relevant and reliable.

Probability and Evidence

As we have already seen, evidence and probability are closely related. The very purpose of evidence is to boost the probability of a claim. In this section I am going to briefly unpack some important points about how probability works since the practical upshot of these points is significant.

Before I do so, however, a brief primer on Boolean operators is needed. Boolean operators are things like “and” and “or.” If you already know about Boolean operators it is probably because a school librarian has given you a lesson on their use when they were teaching you how to search a library database. Feel free to skip ahead to the next paragraph if you already understand how these operators work. Let’s consider the two operators in turn. The purpose of “and” is to conjoin two things. *Waffle Houses and cruise missiles* is a conjunction: it conjoins *Waffle Houses* and *cruise missiles*. The result of using “and” in a search engine or database is that it provides only those results that mention both of its conjuncts. No results that discussed one conjunct but not the other would be provided. What makes a sentence containing “and” true is also different. A sentence of the form “ x and y ” is true if and only if x is true and y is true. For example, *Victory Briefs is the best summer camp and Santa Monica pier is the best Californian pier* is true if and only if *Victory Briefs is the best summer camp* is true and *Santa Monica pier is the best Californian pier* is true. In other words, the truth of a sentence containing an “and” depends on the truth of what the “and” conjoins.

What “or” does is markedly different: “or” disjoins two statements and forms a disjunction. The result of using “or” in a search engine or database is that it provides only those results that mention one of the disjointed items. For example, *Waffle Houses or cruise missiles* would provide results on either *Waffle House* or *cruise missiles*. Unlike “and”, “or” would not just provide results related to both of these items. What makes a sentence containing “or” true is unique too. A sentence of the form “ x or y ” is true if and only if either x or y is true. So long as one of the disjointed items is true, the disjunction is true.

So why do Boolean operators matter? Boolean operators like “and” and “or” matter because of how they interact with probability. Consider first “and.” The probability that “ x and y ” is true relies on the probability that x and y are both true. The way this is calculated mathematically in confirmation theory is by multiplying the probability of x and y . So suppose the probability of claim x is .2 and the probability of y is .3. Their product is .06. The probability of “ x and y ” is thus .06. Note that the probability of the conjunction is lower than either of its conjuncts individually. This is because it is a lot harder for a conjunction like “ x and y ” to be true than for

just “x” to be true. Two things have to be true. Not just one. This generally means that the probability of a long conjunction like “x and y and z” is pretty low since the product will be increasingly smaller. But this need not always be the case. If the probability of some of these conjuncts is 1 or the highest it can be, then the overall probability will not be significantly lowered.

Now let’s consider “or.” The probability that “x or y” is true relies on the probability that either x is true or y is true. Its probability requires a lot less than “x and y.” As a result, the way this is calculated mathematically is by adding the probability of x to the probability of y. So suppose again the probability of claim x is .2 and the probability of y is .3. Their sum is .5. The probability of “x or y” is thus .5. Unlike conjunctions, the probability of disjunctions gets raised. In general, this means that long disjunctions like “x or y or z” have a high probability of being true.

You might see where I am going with this discussion of probability and Boolean operators. If not, let me make the two take-away points explicit. The first take-away point follows from the discussion of “and.” The take-away is this: arguments that rely on many different claims will be much harder to warrant than arguments that rely on fewer claims. This point is worth belaboring, especially because of its importance for causal arguments that have multiple steps. Suppose again that someone is arguing that economic downturn causes war. To arrive at the impact of war, they will have to argue that economic recession will occur and that the recession will cause all of the intermediary steps that eventually lead to and culminate in war. The probability that war occurs, therefore, depends on all of the previous claims being true; it depends on a conjunction. But this means that probability that war occurs will be low in virtue of the fact that product generated by multiplying the probabilities of all of the conjuncts (i.e. the casual steps) is inevitably low. So the moral is that the fewer the steps in the argument, the stronger the argument will be in terms of the likelihood that it is true. Consequently, you should try to minimize the number of steps in your argument for maximally strong arguments. A similar point can be made about impact comparison. If two impacts are being compared in terms of their respective probability and one of the impacts relies on far more steps than the other impact, then the impact that relies on fewer steps is going to be more probable.

The second take-away point is related to disjunction. Arguments that are warranted with multiple independent warrants are more likely to be true. Suppose that in defending your value/criterion framework you offer two distinct reasons for why deontology is the preferable moral theory. Since these reasons are independent of one another, the probability that deontology is true is boosted by the disjunction of the two reasons. Since disjunctions are computed by adding disjuncts, the probability that deontology is true is greater with two reasons than with one reason. So even if you are not perfectly winning both reasons to prefer deontology because your opponent has contested these reasons, the reasons together are stronger than the reasons apart. In the context of impact debate, this means that providing more than one scenario outlining the causal steps culminating in an impact like war is better than providing scenario. More scenarios provide more confirmation.

Conclusion

Having read this essay, you should see a theme emerging. Great arguments are accompanied by great pieces of evidence, but what enables evidence to best do its job, to maximally probabilify a claim, depends a lot on the claim(s) being made in the first place. If the claim is overly broad or overly general, then the claim is much more difficult to justify with evidence. When the broad claim is a causal claim, for example, it is very difficult to distinguish mere correlation from causation. So one should be very intentional in how they craft arguments.

But how is one sufficiently intentional? How does one craft arguments or cases in such a way that the evidence is conferring maximal amounts of warrant? My answer is probably not going to surprise you. One is generally making claims that are maximally warranted when the claims have been tailored to the evidence instead of tailoring the evidence to the claims. In other words, when writing cases it is best not to start out with an outline of claims for which you then go out and try to find evidence. Instead, you should start with the evidence and let the case organically build itself out of what you find. This allows you to construct a case piece-by-piece, which ensures that the best evidence accompanies each component, each premise, and each argument. So great arguments depend on great evidence, but great evidence begins with great research. Great arguments are not made. Great arguments are found.

Down the Rabbit Hole: Mastering the Art of Crystallization

By David McNeil

While the efficacious use of crystallization is often spoken of as being a crucial practice that is of paramount importance in winning debate rounds, it can be hard to pin down exactly what crystallization really is. This is precisely because good crystallization can and will differ tremendously based on the topic, the arguments, the speech, the opponent, the judge and all those other contextual variables that go into each round. So how is one to know what good crystallization looks like, and apply it in practice? This essay unpacks what I argue are the three most important overarching components of crystallization, and explains how all the pieces can be organized and operationalized into an effective and strategic use of crystallization in your debate rounds.

Introduction

Crystallization. A scary debate-speak word that no one really seems to understand, and that sometimes doesn't really seem to have any kind of concrete meaning at all. People talk about the ability to crystallize a debate round as one of the key things that separates good debaters from really great and memorable debaters. All right then, so what exactly does this mysterious, apparently vital word mean? Before we dive in, we'd better find out.

Definition

When I type the word "crystallize" into my MacBook dictionary⁷, I get the following entry: "form or cause to form crystals." Well, that doesn't seem very helpful (although it does remind me of my dislike for the comedy stylings of Billy Crystal—again, not helpful). Let's look at the next definition. "Make or become definite and clear." Aha! That's more like it. So that makes the noun form, crystallization, the process of making the debate round become more definite *and* clear. I add the emphasis on *and*, because I think it's important to note, as a starting point for this discussion, that crystallization never has been and never will be just one task. There are certain skills in debate that only require you to master a single thing—once you've worked hard enough at speed drills, you'll be able to speak fluently at the rate that you want; once you know the right online databases and websites, searching for evidence becomes just a matter of copy/pasting in a few topic-specific keywords, etc.

⁷ Believe it or not, Apple did not pay me to write that (although you can bet that if they had offered me money, I'd be happily advocating the crystallization of everything from my awful, old brick of an iPod to that dual core A5 chip thingy in iPhones that does something I'll never understand).

But crystallization is different. It is taking place on a level distinct from and higher than the arguments themselves, because it needs to organize those arguments into a picture of what's going on in the debate more holistically. And as you might expect, it takes more than one area of focus to make the round become both definite and clear on such a holistic level—one needs to not only establish with finality in the judge's mind how each important issue has panned out, but also do so in a way that cohesively ties the round together, rather than leaving everything in a big jumble (as so many rebuttals do).

Importance

So now we've unpacked what crystallization literally means to some extent, and hopefully you're starting to get a feel for what it might mean in the context of a debate round. The importance of crystallization is also becoming clearer—and indeed, before getting into the nitty-gritty of *how* one achieves the lofty goals of in-round definiteness and clarity of important issues, I'll say one final word about why I think crystallization is so critical. If you're the judge of a debate round and you see claim and counter-claim flying against each other on framework, contention, theory, and other levels of the debate, you're going to need a way to resolve and prioritize these arguments in your decision-making; crystallization, of course, seeks to do that for the judge. But the larger point about crystallization's importance that is often overlooked, especially on the National Circuit (or "circuit") of LD debate, is that even though crystallization is fundamentally about *persuading* the judge that your arguments and your story of how things in the debate round break down are most compelling, you shouldn't lump crystallization in with other "old school" or outmoded concepts in debate, as persuasion often is. Consider this: At its core, *debate is just different forms of persuasion*. People have lots of different concepts of debate. You might think of it as an analytical strategy game, a contest of dueling wits, a primarily empirical and research-oriented contest, a platform from which to speak truth to power, a place to spark micro-political change, or even as just a way to have some fun talking about issues of the day with intelligent, engaging peers. But whatever you think debate is, and however you prefer to do it, (whether fast or slow, traditional or progressive "circuit"-style), at the end of each debate round, the same thing happens: The judge decides who has convinced him or her of their side, and signs the ballot accordingly.

Hence, because it operates on a higher level than the substantive back-and-forth of the arguments themselves, and ultimately tells the judge what matters at the end of the day and why, crystallization is at the very crux of debate itself. It should be the centerpiece of your strategic thinking, especially in the 2NR if you are negating, and the 2AR if you are affirming.

Begin at the Beginning

Of course, it is all well and good to say that crystallization ties everything together neatly and is what links your arguments to the judge's decision-making process, but it's quite another to unpack exactly how this operation starts to take place. The process of crystallization varies tremendously depending on the context of your debate round, and is definitely complicated in

some instances. But it is possible, I believe, to provide structural guidelines for approaching crystallization—should you master them, you'll be winning rounds left and right, or at least well on your way to being an effective crystallizer. Just remember that mastering crystallization is less about the rote commitment of certain rules to memory, than it is about internalizing general guidelines. It is a bit of a plunge down the rabbit hole to try and tie all the issues in a round together perfectly, but it is a plunge that can be navigated with confidence, if you keep the following components in mind.

The Three Components of Crystallization (plus one)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there are plethoras of ways that crystallization could potentially be framed and understood. Naturally, a lot of these framings are just different ways of restating the same concepts and achieve the same goal of clear, decisive meta-organization of the arguments in the round. So you should definitely feel free to critically evaluate (as with everything you do in debate) and modify for your own purposes the way that I've organized my views on crystallization. What follows is one perspective on what a good crystallization should cover conceptually, and the specific techniques that should be incorporated as well. Lastly, I suggest an admittedly very cheesy vehicle—an umbrella, if you will—for combining these concepts and techniques: The Weather Report.

(1) Strategy: Issue Selection

We've already noted that crystallization is about creating definiteness and clarity for the judge about the interplay of the arguments in the round. Towards this end, the first piece of crystallization must be the incorporation of good strategic vision, which manifests itself primarily in having smart issue selection.

What I mean when I talk about issue selection is **the choices that you make about what arguments to spend time on during your rebuttals**, especially in the 1AR, 2NR, and 2AR. As you of course know, there are time limits in debate—but what many debaters don't consciously think about during the heat of the round is that these time limits create a) a limit on what arguments you go for in rebuttal (since 95% of the time you simply won't be able to go for everything and try to win all the arguments under the sun—think about it, we've all probably tried to achieve this Herculean feat more than once), and b) a need to consciously prioritize which arguments matter and which ones you can let go because they have comparatively less importance.

The need to prioritize which arguments you go for in turn creates an opportunity cost to every argument—even every word and syllable—that you choose to spend time on. When you make an argument, you are making the statement that that argument is more important than other arguments that could fill those seconds. And because of this, there is the opportunity to make mistakes. By choosing to focus on the wrong argument during your precious rebuttal time, you might fall behind on some other key area of the debate.

The big point here is that issue selection is not something only relegated to picking out the two contentions to go for in the 1AR when the 1NR unleashes a massive spread against your position—the significance is much more salient. It’s directly key to your ability to influence and win the judge’s ballot as well, since otherwise you’ll be spreading your offense too thin, and be at a perceptual disadvantage to boot since you’ll look disoriented, blippy, and confused as you try to cover every issue in the debate.

So, what can you do to have good issue selection and thus master the biggest strategic aspect of crystallization? Here are some guidelines.

First, allocate some amount of prep time to double-checking your flow for which arguments your opponent has **dropped**—and which arguments of your opponent’s that you want to be sure **not to drop**. Especially with debate becoming increasingly technical in recent years, drops have become more and more important in determining a judge’s ballot; they can often function as a perceptual tiebreaker when the judge doesn’t know who is substantively ahead on a given contested issue. Extending a dropped argument is often the easiest way to a judge’s ballot, even if that argument isn’t substantively the best one you made. So make a big deal about offensive arguments that you extend that your opponent has dropped—weigh them as much as possible, and impact them intelligently to every standard in the round you possibly can—but don’t make the common mistake of wasting time yelling about how dropped the argument was (“*This turn was one-HUNDRED-percent ****gasp**** COLD CONCEDED ****gasp**** and it is literally ON FIRE ****gasp**** so EXTEND it!!*”). Nor should you reflexively extend an argument merely by virtue of its dropped-ness—make sure that you can make it matter in the debate.

Second, look for areas besides drops where your opponent’s coverage is weak, either substantively (they are just clearly wrong on a certain issue even though they spent a lot of time there) or because they didn’t spend enough time on a certain area. Lots of times, a 1NR will spend 3 minutes thoroughly refuting the first two contentions of the AC—but then only have 15 seconds left to blip out a couple measly “no warrant I solve and no impact either” type responses against the last AC contention. You might happen to think that your third contention was the worst of the bunch, but you should probably still be selecting it as an important issue to extend in the 1AR (and if it can’t stand up to that weak of a response, well then maybe it’s time to consider re-writing a new contention three for your AC).

A key point here is that you shouldn’t be afraid to call out bad arguments for what they are—maybe you’re debating big-shot debater XYZ from ABC awesome debate program, and their refutation skills are purportedly comparable to the fighting skills of Winterfell’s one-time great Lord, Ned Stark.⁸ But if you think an argument (or a bunch of arguments!) are non-responsive, say so! Especially in debate, quantity does not equate with quality; as rounds get faster and faster on the circuit, so does the propensity for debaters, especially on the negative, to adopt a

⁸ Forgive me; I’ve been watching a bit too much Game of Thrones lately. Read the books/watch the show if you haven’t already!

“spread and see what sticks” type strategy. Be ready, and stick to your guns if their arguments just aren’t making sense.

Third, when selecting which issues to go for in the 1AR, 2NR, and especially 2AR, look for arguments that you can impact back to both standards, and/ or impact to a standard that you’re winning is the most important in the round.

Fourth, make sure you exercise some self-control and limit yourself to a few arguments—that’s why it’s called issue selection. A good rule of thumb: for a well-developed, offensive argument, you should be spending at least 15-20 seconds (maybe less if you’re super clear and efficient and concise) per argument that you want to use as offense (i.e. a voting issue) to win you the round. And this is for a time crunched 1AR or 2AR; you’d want to allocate more time if this is a 2NR, where issue selection is paramount to effectively mopping up the debate and closing off offensive opportunities for the affirmatives’ 2AR. It’s not possible to adequately develop every potential piece of offense into an adequately articulated voter with the time constraints—so save yourself the pain of banging your head against the wall (or in this case, against the timer) and choose your extensions wisely.

Don’t forget that while you do want your rebuttals to have as much offense time in them as possible, it might be smart to go for certain defensive arguments in the 2NR and 2AR too; especially ones that seek to beat back your opponent’s most valuable offensive arguments, the ones that clash directly with your key pieces of offense.

Fifth, and this is somewhat repetitive—make sure that you’re going for an argument that you can win, and then win it decisively! Again, debate is a game of trade-offs, so whenever you make an argument, you need to be committed to making and winning that argument, or you might as well have said nothing at all. Make those precious seconds count by finding the balance between thoroughness and concision in refuting your opponent’s attacks on your key, winning points.

The bottom line is that good issue selection is based on intuitively thinking about what is important in the debate, and what you can afford to let go. Be honest with yourself about what arguments you’re probably going to be behind on from the perspective of someone who didn’t spend time writing or making either side’s arguments (AKA the judge). At the same time, there’s no need to go scorched Earth—have a realistic policy that hits on the important, most offensive parts of the debate without overstretching yourself.

(2) Predicting the Opponent: Layering and Pre-empting

Now you might be thinking to yourself, “I’m sorry, but this is a bunch of baloney. What you’ve described has nothing to do with crystallization; you’re just talking about rebuttal strategy. I thought you said crystallization was dealing with organizing the arguments in the round?” A fair point, but in a way, I think you’ll agree that figuring out which issues to select in the debate in

the first place is a primary step towards making that organization effective. You can organize arguments all you want, but if the arguments don't matter, you won't get very far. So, you've made good strategic choices and effectively selected the issues to go for in your 1AR, 2NR, or 2AR—what's the next step to making the round clear and definite in the judge's mind?

The next thing that crystallization must do is **predict the opponent**. The importance should be intuitive; debate is not solitaire, and there is a reason why you cannot (as much as you might like to) script your 1AR, 2NR, and 2AR before the round. You're dealing with someone different in each round, who is going to attack your position in a different way each time.

Consider an analogy to chess.⁹ In chess, there are strategies and principles that you can learn about tactics or positional play to give you a framework for understanding the game, which you can in turn apply to different situations that come up over the board in real games. But there is no specific scripted, best way to play the game that functions independent of how your opponent moves *their* pieces. In debate, like chess, there might usually (or always) be an objective best decision on what move to make (or arguments to go for) in a given situation. But this choice needs to function based on the choices that your opponent makes. And that means not only does thinking **reactively** have an important role in crystallization strategy, but thinking **preemptively as well**.

What this means is that a strategically airtight execution of crystallization in the debate round will always have an eye on predicting your opponent's next actions—and towards this end, there are two things you can focus on.

The first is **layering**, or establishing an order of argumentation that the judge should use in evaluating the debate. Layering is used all the time, usually in intuitive ways that we don't even think about—theoretical objections come before the case debate; framework and standards are the first issue on the case debate to be resolved; then contention level arguments, etc. The way the layering of arguments happens in a particular round will depend entirely on the qualitative nature of the arguments in that round. Some rounds are all about the empirics surrounding the efficacy of a particular military action; others are laden with theory, off-case positions, disadvantages, framework issues, and more.

So the first thing to realize about layering is that it happens in every debate round—and setting the layering of arguments is key. You need to seize the chance to explain why your offensive arguments, your framework, etc. should be evaluated before your opponent's arguments. If you have a reason why your advocacy minimizes the resentment that leads to terrorism from foreign groups in the first place, then maybe that comes prior to your opponent's advocacy of ramping up defense spending—why bother with the latter when the former will solve problems in a more advantageous, less costly way? Of course, there are infinite ways that the layering of contention-level issues and other issues might develop; use your intuition in reasoning through how that will play out, and what the smartest way is to frame those issues.

⁹ Again, you'll have to bear with me—I'm afraid I'm a bit of a chess nut. But the analogy is applicable, I promise!

Other ways you can effectively layer the debate are by, of course, going for arguments on different levels of the debate—and identify those levels when you extend your arguments. Maybe you’re winning a key argument each on a definitional level, the framework level, against their standard/ criterion, and an important turn on their contention. Just make it clear what comes first, and why the issues that you’re winning should come prior to the issues that your opponent is winning (or will try to win in their next speech). Using the rhetoric of “layers” certainly won’t hurt!

Naturally, as with the rest of crystallization there is no set formula for what the best way to layer each debate will be. Sometimes, it will make more sense to invest heavily in one layer of the round—say you’re winning five awesome turns on their AC contention level, and you surmise that the affirmative will HAVE to win offense off their contention if they hope to win the round. Or maybe going into the 2AR you think you can crush them on the standards debate with two key arguments you made in the 1AR, and then also go for one argument from your contention (and a turn on their NC as insurance). The number of levels that you’ll want to establish for the judge to evaluate in each round will vary, often tremendously, but as long as you make sure to set those layers for the judge, and win the important ones, you should be in good shape.

A subset, or perhaps a quality of layering is **pre-emption**. For an argument to pre-empt another, there needs to be some logical or empirical reason for why an argument comes temporally or necessarily prior to another argument. Pre-emption is thus very much about how issues are framed and ordered, which as we know is at the very heart of crystallization.

So, you want your arguments to pre-empt your opponent’s arguments—perhaps by impacting to a more important standard, or functioning on a logically prior way in some other manner. If there’s no way to achieve that (as is sometimes the case), then make sure to focus on making your arguments as attractive as possible compared to your opponent’s in other ways (like with weighing! More on that later...).

As with layering, using the rhetoric of “x argument *pre-empts* y contention” is important for making it concrete in the judge’s mind which place they are going to look first in the debate. Giving the judge as clear an idea as possible of where they should start when they sit back and try to make sense of all the ink on their paper after the 2AR is crucial—if the judge starts evaluating the debate on your arguments, you’ve already set the frame for their decision and are probably miles ahead of your opponent already. Everyone has rounds where their judge frustratedly starts their RFD with a bemoaning statement like “this was a messy round...” or “I really didn’t know where I was supposed to begin...” And that’s exactly what good pre-empting of your opponent’s arguments will ameliorate.

The **summary** of this **predicting the opponent** section is simply to think about not just what offense an argument can get you (as with issue selection), but also qualitatively where and how an argument logically functions in relation to other arguments. The more you can focus on

this—and make these logical relations clear to the judge—the greater your ability to win the important issues and structure your judge’s evaluation of the round will be.

(3) Big Picture: Constructing Voting Issues and Weighing

So, we’ve looked at how to select the appropriate issues to go for in a debate, and what’s more how to qualitatively use those most important issues to layer the round and pre-empt your opponent’s important arguments. But there are a couple components missing to tie everything together and make your offense as, well, offensive and effective as it can possibly be. And those components are crafting the voting issue, and weighing those voting issues.

The myth is that voters are only for old fogey judges, a relic of days past when debaters talked at a snail’s pace. Many debaters today seem to think that voting issues are great if you have time to get to them at the end of the rebuttal—but if you don’t, well then that’s OK, because it was more important to “win on the flow” anyway. Wrong! The truth is that voters are how you win the debate. Debaters package their voters differently, but ultimately, every 2NR and 2AR will (or at least, should) have voting issues in them—that is to say, issues which the debater claims are the most salient, offensive reasons why they should be winning the debate.

So how does one take an argument and turn it into a voter? It’s not just by recapitulating the substance of what that argument said (although you should be sure to do that too, in an efficient manner). To go from argument to voter, you need (a) an explanation of why you are winning the argument, (b) an explanation of why the argument should matter in relation to other arguments (like an opponent’s contention, your standard/criterion, etc.), and (c) an explanation of how the argument interacts with the judge’s ballot—why does it win you the round, whereas your opponent’s biggest arguments don’t win it for them?

The truth is, there’s nothing magical about turning an offensive argument into a voter—it’s just about putting that argument in the context of the rest of the debate, and being explicit about why it comes out as being so important to the judge’s ballot (and the more explicit you can be on how it affects the judge’s decision and the other arguments the judge will have to evaluate, the better).

Of course, a big part of making an offensive argument into a voting issue, and putting it in the context of the rest of the arguments flying around the flow, is **weighing**. Weighing is absolutely crucial—but it’s important not to get bogged down in the buzzwords, as debaters so often do. Most everyone knows the metrics for weighing one argument against another (magnitude, timeframe, probability, duration, reversibility, etc.), and it’s easy enough to come up with one word or another for something that your argument prevents more of, or what happens when your argument has a greater likelihood of happening than an opponent’s argument.

More important than memorizing those weighing buzzwords, however, is to simply step back and think logically about what the strength of your particular offensive argument is versus the

strength that your opponent's offensive argument brings. Different metrics will matter in different situations, so you don't want to get caught using the same one all the time! It's easy to fall in love with impacts that have a giant magnitude—but what will such impacts matter if they have an infinitesimal probability of happening? There's an occasion for the importance of almost any weighing metric. Take the sun exploding (or collapsing, or something bad like that). Probability? 100%. Magnitude of the impact? Pretty big if you're anywhere near the solar system. Reversibility? We aren't getting a new sun anytime soon. But timeframe? Well, that's where the difference is made—the huge amount of time until that impact happens renders it totally irrelevant to any practical issues debated on Earth today.

Rather than harp on the basics of weighing and when to apply a given metric to a given situation, I want to point to a specific weighing practice that always wins lots of rounds when it's done, but which is only rarely seen even in high level debate rounds. And that is, **meta-weighing between weighing standards themselves**. It should make perfect sense if you think about it—the whole point of weighing is to give a reason why your arguments that function on the same impact level as your opponent's matter more, resolving a deadlock between the arguments (whose relative importance otherwise goes unexplained absent such weighing analysis). Well, suppose you're both doing a beautiful job winning two totally different weighing metrics (magnitude of an impact, versus probability of an impact happening, let's say). What's the judge to do? Giving a reason why your weighing metric matters more in a given situation (as above with the sun example) is *just another way of effectively comparing your arguments to your opponent's so that yours come out as being more important*. And the more you can compare your arguments to your opponent's arguments on every level possible, the easier it will be to prove their importance and superiority.

One last tip on weighing: think about how you might be weighing your arguments *when you write your affirmative or negative cases*. You certainly won't know exactly which arguments your opponent is going to make before the round, or how they plan to attack yours, but it's usually not too hard to anticipate the stock arguments and be ready with ways to outweigh them. For instance, on the targeted killing topic in March/ April 2012, many negatives would argue against such killing by saying that killing is always immoral, even if it's a necessary tool to ensure national security. You can probably anticipate that it's going to be hard to outweigh such a claim, no matter how many lives your evidence indicates targeted killing will save—you're going to have to defeat their (presumably deontological) moral framework first. But what if the negative instead makes arguments that targeted killing fosters resentment among nations already disillusioned with the United States, and increases the likelihood of state-sponsored terrorism? Well, now you have a few different weighing mechanisms to work against—the probability of disaffected states actually giving to terrorist organizations, and the magnitude of what that harm would be. So, you can gear your strategy towards finding the best arguments and evidence possible for how many lives targeted killing can save on the whole, and why the probability of it saving those lives is strong.

The Weather Report

One technique that I think effectively ties these different roles of crystallization together—the issue selection, the layering and preemption, the construction and weighing of voters—is something I call the weather report. And the concept is really quite simple: think of yourself as the weatherman (or, of course, weatherwoman or weather-human) giving an update on what’s happening in the round at the start of the 2NR and 2AR, during those rebuttals, and briefly at the end.

So let’s see what this might look like in practice:

(A) You start the 2NR or 2AR with a brief overview of the round (around 15 seconds once you get the hang of it—longer for the 2NR, say even up to 45 seconds, since you have much more time). The overview previews what the key issues are going to be in the debate, and why you’re going to be ahead on them. Be sure to make specific reference to the judge’s decision calculus—what are they going to use as their standard/criterion for evaluating arguments in the debate?

For example, the start of a 2AR: “The story of this debate is that the AC contentions two and three are being substantively under-covered in every negative speech—a critical mistake that is going to cost them the round, since these key pieces of offense impact to both standards and will clearly outweigh all negative offense on magnitude of impact as well as timeframe.”

(B) As you go down the flow and deal with the line-by-line issues that need to be addressed for you to be actually ahead on the key issues (remember your issue selection), update the judge on your progress and how you are achieving the objectives you laid out in the overview. “So it’s clear from my extension of the AC contention two I’m already outweighing all their possible offense in multiple ways—that’s enough to sign the ballot, but in case you’re not convinced, look to contention three...” These periodic updates on the conditions of the round (or the weather during the day, if we’re going to stretch the weather-person analogy to annoying lengths) help bring the judge into your narrative of how the round should break down, and make it seem like your story of whose arguments matter and are correct is more credible. It also helps smoothly and logically connect ideas, so that even when you have lots of issues to cover, you appear less frantic and don’t have to resort to “jump to the third turn off the AC contention one! Now quickly on their framework! Now go to the off-case and extend my third response which said that...”

A big part of this goes back to not being afraid to use the rhetoric of “layers” and “pre-empt,” as discussed previously. Judges want to know how they should evaluate the round; telling them where the “first layer you should evaluate in the round” comes and why is a welcome assistance, not an intrusion. Being blunt with your thinking on how you see arguments and levels of the debate interacting is good! (Just as long as you’re not like me and tend to think out loud in a rambling way—the point is just to let the judge in on your thought process, so they understand your reasoning for how the round breaks down.)

(C) Now, when you get to the end of the rebuttal, you don't have to worry about fitting crystallization into your last 15, 10, or even 5 seconds; you've already been doing it throughout! All that's left to do is briefly reinforce that you did all the things you said you would do in your beginning-of-speech overview of the debate. Like a reliable weatherhuman, you haven't let your loyal viewer, the judge, down—you've made the conditions of the debate and what is important on what level clear throughout, with solid issue selection, layering, and well-structured and weighed voters.

Conclusion (and Drills!)

Crystallization can, due to its vagueness and yet extreme importance, be a dark, scary hole to descend into indeed. But with thoughtful flexibility and common sense on which issues are important, how those important issues interact, and how to maximize the relative importance of those issues in the debate round via weighing and comparison, the weather really isn't so bad at all. Just remember that crystallization is an exercise in decisively making issues clear for the judge in the debate—so towards that end, cut your losses in some places, move that time towards linking important issues together instead, and remember to be a good, helpful weatherperson in the 2NR and 2AR.

I'll leave you with some drills that I think will be useful for improving your crystallization. Enjoy!

Drill, Baby, Drill

Drilling is hands down, far and away, without the shadow of a doubt, the number one way to get better at virtually *any* debate skill at which you're hoping to improve. Whether the thing you hope to improve is your research, rebuttal efficiency, word economy, refutation, or cross-examination, practice via drilling is the way to go. The best part about drilling—you only need yourself and some will power to do it! (Good news for those of you with lazy bum teammates who never want to do drills, like I was.)

The Argument Map Drill

1. Pick an AC from a previous topic.
2. Give yourself 4 minutes to physically draw a diagram of the arguments in the case on a blank sheet of paper, giving each argument it's own box, bubble, triangle, etc. (there's no set way to do this—whatever makes sense to you visually and is different from merely a pre-flow of the arguments. You can link a bunch of boxes together vertically and horizontally, interconnect a series of Venn Diagrams, whatever floats your boat)
3. Give a 70-90 second speech based on your physical diagram where you essentially crystallize you're the entire AC; the focus should be on clearly explicating links and layers of the case, and emphasizing the impact story.
4. (Of course, this will be an entirely offensive crystallization of your position, so you don't need to worry about pre-empting, but you can still select the most salient issues from the AC advocacy to focus on, construct voters, weigh them against likely impacts from the other side, and give a weather report along the way.)
5. Give the speech again multiple times, gradually decreasing the amount of time you give yourself (see if you can get it down to 40 or even 30 seconds! If you're crystallizing an entire advocacy in that amount of time, you're doing really well).

Adrift in Foreign Lands!

Listen to and flow a round that you find in an online video—it can be any round within the past few or even more years. If you don't know the topic, even better! This will help you conceptualize arguments more quickly in unfamiliar situations. When you flow the round, pay almost *exclusive* attention to the issue selection, layering and pre-empting, and big picture components of the 2NR and 2AR (don't focus on what the substance of the arguments are as much, beyond what you need to understand the internal claim, warrant, impact structure of the arguments, and how the arguments work).

So here's what you'll do:

1. Watch the round all the way through, flowing the whole thing
2. As soon as the 2AR ends, take 4 minutes and write down how you think the affirmative did on the three items above (issue selection, layering and pre-empting, big picture), including references to specific arguments/places on the flow.
3. Give yourself another 4 minutes and do the same for the negative. How was the 2NR's crystallization?
4. Now you've thought a lot about both successes and failures for both sides—so it's your turn! Re-give the 2NR three times, focusing on making specific improvements each time. Then, give the 2AR three times (based on the 2NR from the original round).
5. Compare your crystallization decisions with those of the debaters, and interrogate why you made the choices you did and why they made the choices they did (were they in a time crunch? Did they seem to think certain arguments just didn't matter as much? Maybe their crystallization in the round was excellent—what made it that way?)
6. If you're feeling super ambitious, keep working on the same 2NR and 2AR from this round, or move on to a new one.

**Finding videos of LD rounds online shouldn't be hard, there's really no secret to figuring out where they are; a Google search of "LD debate rounds TOC video" (somewhat incoherently constructed, I'll be the first to agree—I'm a bad Googler, if there is such a thing) yields tons of useful results from the past few years. And keep in mind that's just one example; you certainly don't need to use TOC rounds for this drill.

The Unfamiliar Advocacy Drill

Read an advocacy piece (whether from a blog, or online news outlet like the Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Politico, Fox News, the New York Times, even ESPN.com, etc.) on a subject that sparks your interest. Something related to politics and/or international relations in some way would probably be the most useful, but any piece that makes a coherent, reasonably substantiated argument on a topic that you don't necessarily know everything about but find some interest in will do. Depending on the length of the piece, give yourself 5-10 minutes to read the article and digest its main points and flow/take concise notes if you want to.

Next, give a 1-minute speech that presents the big picture link chain from argument to argument in the piece. Repeat this twice more, then give the speech in 45 seconds three additional times. The idea is to understand how each argument in the opinion/advocacy piece conceptually links and be able to summarize it, even though you're not familiar with the subject matter—this will help you a) quickly grasp new arguments when your opponent makes them, b) more readily identify link chains that you can then take apart at the weakest points later on, c) succinctly explain the key components of an advocacy, even if it's not totally familiar to you.

*****Challenge*****

Give yourself less time, say 4-7 minutes, to read the advocacy or opinion piece, and don't take notes on it while you read it or before you give the 1-minute speech. (This cements the important skill of being able to internalize and conceptualize both the role of arguments and their link chains.) If you really want to push yourself after you've done this, try taking 3 minutes of prep time and writing down responses to the key arguments in the advocacy or opinion piece, and then give a 90 second rebuttal in which you make 3-5 arguments—including an explanation of how your arguments function to take out important links in the opinion piece's argument by undermining assumptions, turning links, refuting impact scenarios, providing counter-empirics, etc. The idea is just to practice some refutation in a format that demands close attention to the role of the arguments themselves (so you're outlining what your crystallization might look like were this an actual debate round).

Last, but *certainly* not least:

The Good Old-fashioned Redo Drill

There's something to be said for just whipping out an old flow from a round you debated that's still somewhat fresh on your mind—so, the sooner after the round, the better—and re-giving either the 2NR or 2AR (depending on which side you were on) with emphasis on the crystallization components outlined above. Often drills that draw from your own immediate experience will be the most effective at honing your skills; you know better than anyone what you said, and where your analysis and framing of the round was lacking. Be self-critical, hold yourself to a high standard, and don't be afraid to re-give that rebuttal more than just once or twice—often 10 or even 15 times is a better goal, since that way you know the habits you're forming will really set in for your future rounds.

With all these drills, it's best if you can get someone (a teammate or coach, or maybe a parent) to listen closely to you and give constructive feedback (this will help them too!), but it's not totally necessary as long as you make sure you're holding yourself to high standards and not letting yourself get away with lazily ignoring mistakes and bad habits that pop up during your drill speeches.

I sincerely hope that you find this to be a helpful guide as you hone your crystallization skills; please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. My email is mcneil(dot)david(dot)r(at)gmail(dot)com.

Cheers and best of luck in competition!

How to Beat Top Debaters as a Young Debater

By Josh Roberts

One of the biggest misconceptions in debate is that, as a young debater, the only purpose of tournament rounds against older debaters is to learn what they do, see it put into action, and imitate that in other rounds so that when you are their age you can be the best. There is no reason why you should not be going into these rounds ready and expecting to win debaters, or at the very least give them a run for their money. This article will equip young debaters with the skill set necessary to beat even the best debaters.

The Foundation

As a young debater, and as an older debater, there is one characteristic that is undoubtedly the single most important in determining whether or not you will be a successful debater, and it is having a solid work ethic. Having a phenomenal work ethic is how you overcome resource disparity, poor speaking ability, lack of experience, and, to be blunt, not being as intelligent as other debaters (a problem I certainly encountered).

If you do not have a solid work ethic, it doesn't matter how much natural talent you have because you will never reach your full potential. There are an innumerable amount of stories regarding freshmen and sophomores having incredible years and then they get lazy and/or complacent and never develop or get better. You do not want to be that kind of debater! Being a young debater is undoubtedly tough, but if you keep a solid, consistent work ethic, you will progress rapidly.

Your Novice Year

Your first year of debate is about building a foundation. Nobody expects you to immediately start dominating, and you shouldn't expect that either. If you go into tournaments with the belief that because you won your first novice tournament you will succeed in varsity, or even win the next novice tournament, then you have lied to yourself. Debaters that dominate early often reach their peak too early and wind up with mediocre careers because they have convinced themselves that they have learned all they needed to know, and never take the time to learn more.

As a young debater you should not be afraid to fail. This means that you should take risks in rounds; don't be afraid to implement a certain strategy. You'll never know whether or not something works until you try it out. You also need to learn, at a very early stage in your career, to rebound from losses. Even if you become the best debater in the nation, there are going to be some rounds where you just get beat. If you have never learned to rebound from your losses, then you will overthink the losses, and it will adversely affect your ability to develop.

If you implement the strategies that I am going to discuss in the upcoming sections, then I guarantee you that you will not peak early. Your goal should be to continually develop until you have reached that point where you are about to go into your last tournament and you are at your very best.

Learning the Fundamentals of the Game

Depending on your debate circuit, there are a few fundamentals you will need to have established. If you are going to be traveling nationally and speed is not an issue, then you must learn to go quickly at an early age – this will be your biggest weapon and equalizer. More generally, every novice, regardless of circuit, must establish a foundation for researching, cutting their own evidence, and argument explanation.

The first thing you should master as a young debater is the art of reading articles and research. The articles you read should contain a background explanation of the topic at the beginning. Although you should be well versed in common philosophies that appear in debate, the first reading on a topic should not be the cool philosophy book that you just bought. If your casing strategy relies solely on vague philosophical arguments, you won't have built the foundation and acquired the skills that effective research gives you.

The next thing you can do is give a ton of rebuttal redos. Look at rounds you lost, or even won, take the flows from those rounds and see what you could have done better. Maybe it was make better arguments, maybe it was make more turns against their case. Regardless, prepare the speech you gave again and time yourself giving a better version of that speech. This is a great way to ensure that you practice and don't make the same mistakes that you made for later rounds.

Another way that you can improve is by reading old cases. You shouldn't start by reading extremely confusing or complex cases – you should start by reading the cases that your captains read as novices so you can get an understanding of what these cases look like and you can emulate them. Another indispensable resource is circuitdebater.wikispaces.com, which will allow you to read the cases that some of the best debaters in the nation used at the Tournament of Champions.

You also want to make sure that you talk to old debaters that are still around, or even those that aren't, go to websites involving debate related issues, read the threads and posts that are written by people who have years of experience in debate. This is a great way to get a good understanding of the history surrounding debate, as well as an idea as to what judges are looking at when they are judging debates.

Finally, read debate articles. If you Google "The Debate Researcher's Guide" you will find a ton of articles that have been written over the past 15 years that will give you some teaching tips on all different kinds of arguments. In doing this, you will begin to slowly begin to immerse

yourself into the debate culture, and this is crucial. There is a history to this activity, and you'll find that the more you know, the better equipped you will be. Watch old debates online – there are tons of debates that have been recorded. You shouldn't just watch them though; you should also flow them, pick up on their good habits, and learn from their mistakes.

Competitive Spirit – A Fire That Burns But Does Not Consume

Success is not going to come immediately. If you refuse to listen to people, you will never get better. The people teaching you have been in the activity much longer than you, even if they weren't the best debaters, they know things you most certainly don't.

If you are successful early, do not let this satisfy you. Continually challenge yourself. It's one thing to continually be in elimination rounds, but never win a tournament. It's an entirely different thing to go into every tournament with the expectation that you can and should win. You have to develop the competitive will to win, and you have to persevere through the hard times. If you find yourself in a 2-0 or 3-0 round against a top debater, do not freak out or change anything. These are the best rounds that you are going to get, and you should be excited about the opportunity to get to see how the best do it. These rounds will allow you to see the flaws with your cases and learn how to fix mistakes, for example. If you don't have other people to debate, these are the best practice rounds you can get, but is important that you don't go into the round with the mindset that you have no chance of winning.

Keep track of every round in an excel sheet. This is an incredible learning tool. I like nine columns: Tournament, Round, Opponent, Side, Judge, W/L, Speaker Points, RFD, Notes/Comments. If you updated it after each round, it wouldn't take more than 5 minutes. Think about how much a debater could learn by picking up on trends early on (e.g., "I'm losing rounds when I'm neg because I'm missing aff framework args that exclude my offense"). Use this to target your needs, focus your drills during the season, and better diagnose your weaknesses when lab leaders ask them at camp.

Casing – A Young Debater's Best Friend

As a novice, one of the biggest mistakes that people make is that they think they need to rely on tricks to beat top debaters. This is wrong and will put you in a world of trouble. First, older, more experienced debaters have already seen all of the tricks. You aren't going to catch them by surprise. Second, you are not experienced enough to implement the tricks in an effective way that will put you at an advantage against these older debaters. You should master debating with stock positions your first two years. By stock positions, I mean arguments that are well founded and defended in the topic literature, even if they are more common than a lot of arguments.

Not only are stock positions more likely to win rounds early on in your career, but they are also the lifeblood to a successful senior campaign. While it is true that a lot of older students you watch win on theory, Ks, and other non-stock positions, this is because they have already built

the foundation for winning stock debates. It's incredibly frustrating and a waste of time to have to explain to debaters who are supposed to be the top in the nation how to debate stock cases because they never took the time to learn as young debaters.

When writing cases as a young debater, you should focus on a solid stock 1AC position that you can develop, delve into the literature, and be able to explain very well. This means that you should find the best evidence, have a better understanding of your argument than your opponent, and be ready to defend it against any kind of argument that could possibly come up.

When you are negative, you should have about 15-20 cards that make the best negative arguments and that you will be able to read in any given round. You should have read through these several times and have a solid understanding of all of the arguments within them so you can apply them appropriately when necessary. Your job is to put pressure on the 1AR. Nobody, regardless of how many tournaments they have won, is perfect. Your prep time before the 2NR should be spent figuring out which of the arguments the aff mishandled and preparing to make it well known to the judge that your opponent messed up.

You need to understand your arguments well enough that you can explain how your arguments interact with your opponent's arguments. My point is not that your strategy should rely on your opponent making mistakes, but rather, that you should deliver a crushing blow when they do make mistakes. Even if the affirmative, or negative, doesn't drop one of your arguments, you should be so comfortable defending those arguments that it's not a problem for you to explain why they are still losing.

Dispelling the Myths

There are a number of common misconceptions about what you, as a young debater, need to do to be successful. I am here to clear up the record.

Myth 1: Read a lot of a prioris/necessary but insufficient burdens.

No. Never. Ever. First, if you're debating on a circuit that allows for theory to be run, then you've put yourself in the worst position possible. If you're not, you've still put yourself in a bad position because experienced debaters will be able to handle these arguments with ease due to their better understanding of the technical nature of debate.

Myth 2: Give up, you can't win.

This is false, and a terrible attitude to have. Regardless of who you are debating, you should go into every single round with the belief that you can win it. If anything, you should be excited about debating top debaters because there is no pressure for you, so you should give everything you've got to beat those people.

Myth 3: Change up what your strategy has been and read a new case.

In these debates, you shouldn't change anything. Go with what you know best and have practiced the most – this will ensure that you're comfortable with the arguments that you are making and that you are prepared. I cannot stress enough how important it is to go into these debates making the arguments you are most comfortable with. If you walk into a round against a top debater with an argument you are not ready to defend, it will become very clear in cross-examination and the round will be over after that.

In Round Mindset – The Greatness Mentality

Muhammad Ali once said, "I am the greatest, I said that even before I knew I was." Without being cocky, this should be your mindset going into every debate. The moment that pairing comes out and you see who you are debating, you need to get into the competitive mindset. Shut out everything around you except for your coach and focus on this one round. It doesn't matter if you won your last round, lost it, or slept through it; that's all irrelevant.

If you find out that you've been paired up against someone that has a reputation as one of the best debaters in the nation, get excited. Believe it or not, top debaters get nervous when they don't recognize the name on the pairing. It puts pressure on them because they know that if they lose, it will look very bad for them. Also, they don't know what to expect from you. You aren't the debater that they have spent weeks studying and preparing for. You're a rogue.

You must go into the mindset that you are going to rock their world. In the 1NC you blitz the house – you make the 1AR as hard as you possibly can. Then, when the 1AR inevitably messes something up, you are there to clean it all up. You can say something like, "I know that the 1NC seemed a bit messy, but look, the 1AR has conceded..." and then tell a very clean story. When you're affirmative, survive the 1AR with at least 1 solid offensive way out in the 2AR, and then you can use that argument to weigh against whatever the negative decides to extend and make your argument a game winner.

Weighing is one of the most important things a young debater can learn how to do. Not enough older debaters do it, so if you can learn to weigh effectively then not only will judges truly appreciate it, you will have mastered a skill that some people NEVER learn.

Be ready to capitalize on the mistakes that they make. The best debaters are those that minimize their mistakes and take advantage of your own. You are going to make mistakes as a young debater (that is inevitable) but the only way you will win is if you refuse to let them get away with pointing out your mistakes. If they're going to point fingers, point them right on back. Young debaters have to be very defensive (in the layman sense, not debate sense). Any time their opponent accuses them of making a mistake, they should accuse the other side of making a worse one, etc. Defensiveness, so long as it's not patently unreasonable, is key to preserving credibility against a more experienced/talent opponent.

Your Second Year

If You Followed My First Year Advice Read This

Your second year should focus more on continuing to develop these fundamentals and taking risks. Your success will begin to develop and flourish a little this year, but you cannot let that make you complacent or get to your head. Stick to the basics, continue to learn the technical aspect of debate, and continue to stay interested in the activity.

If You Didn't Follow My First Year Advice Read This

You have a lot to make up, but it is not too late. Essentially, you should follow the advice given in the first section and adopt the exact same mindset. It isn't too late to learn to be great, you are just going to have to work extremely hard to establish that foundation that you missed by not taking advantage of your freshman year.

The Sophomore Slump

Inevitably you will come into sophomore year after what you would consider to be a solid freshman year, and you are going to lose some debates. You are going to start to implement strategies that you picked up from more advanced rounds, and they aren't going to work as well for you at first. Do not be discouraged by this, it happens to everyone.

When you encounter this slump, here are a few things you can do:

1. Do not give up. For you baseball fans, it's very analogous. Andre Ethier, a player for the Los Angeles Dodgers had a 30 game hit streak, which is incredible in baseball, and once the streak ended he only had 1 hit in his next 34 at bats. Slumps are going to happen; you just have to fight through them.
2. Try to record your rounds and figure out what you're doing differently. Sometimes you just get complacent and forget things.
3. Get back to the basics. Review the fundamentals, cut down on the complex strategies, and refine the foundation you have established for yourself.

Conclusion

Each and every one of you has the potential to be the best debater in the entire nation your senior year, but only a few of you will ever tap into that potential. It is going to take hard work, and a lot of it. To quote Muhammad Ali again, "I hated every minute of training, but I said 'Don't quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.'" That should be your mindset and approach to debate.

If you implement the lessons in this article, I guarantee that you will begin to see positive results very soon. Do not be frustrated if success doesn't come, but always remember to focus on the bigger picture. You win some, you lose some, but if you are able to focus on you career as a whole, you will see that the progress you made throughout your career was amazing. Have faith in yourself. Most of you don't realize how much talent you have, but it's there. Be confident and watch the accomplishments pile up as you begin to see your abilities materialize.

Mastering the Metagame

By Ryan Lawrence

While we tend to focus much on the things to improve upon in-round, coaches and debaters tend to put little emphasis on the metagame (that which occurs outside of or between rounds.) This essay discusses the importance of the metagame and how debaters may improve their performance at tournaments by taking a broader approach to competition.

Introduction: What is the Metagame?

To be successful at debate entails more than simply being technically proficient, well read, and well researched on the topic. This is true especially at the highest levels of the activity where skill levels in those areas tend to merge (meaning that the difference between debaters is small). To gain an edge over the competition, you also need to play the game better outside of the debates themselves.

The metagame is defined as “any strategy, action or method used in a game which transcends a prescribed rule set, uses external factors to affect the game, or goes beyond the supposed limits or environment set by the game.” In simpler terms, it is using resources and knowledge from outside of a game to affect one’s decisions in the game. For this term to apply to debate, we must first assume that debate is a game. Since each debate round is an iteration of the game, the metagame is composed of those things that we can do between rounds (or between tournaments) in order to improve our outcomes in-round.

Consider the example of a rock-paper-scissors match. You have been watching your friend play for a while and have noticed that she always begins a match by throwing “rock.” Armed with this knowledge, you challenge her to a game and decide to open the game with “paper,” since she always starts with “rock.” Much to your dismay, your friend instead opens with “scissors” and starts the match up a point! In this case, your friend has “leveled” you, meaning that she was thinking one level above you. While you were thinking only about her patterns, she was thinking about what you were thinking about her pattern and adjusted accordingly. Anyone who has seen the “locane powder battle of wits” scene in *The Princess Bride* should be familiar with the idea of multilevel thinking.

Since debate is more than a rock-paper-scissors match, we will not be focusing much on multilevel thinking but instead on other crucial metagame elements such as consistent performance, psychology and image control, and competitive mindset.

Part One: Performance

We will begin with ways to improve the consistency of your performance. These tips will also improve the quality of your debating, but as will be demonstrated below, consistency is the primary concern here.

Improving your “A Game,” Removing your “C Game”

Your “A Game” is when you are debating at your best. It represents the best that you can possibly perform in any given round. When you are debating at your best level of technical proficiency, making your best arguments and strategic decisions, and speaking clearly and persuasively, then you are on your “A Game.” However, you do not always perform your best. Certainly you have left debates and felt that you could have done better in some (or many!) ways. That is your “C Game.” You might be debating on auto-pilot, you might be tired, or maybe you were just having a bad day. Regardless of the reason, to improve as a debater you must recognize that there is a distinction between your *maximum potential* and your *average performance*. The more often you play your “A Game,” the closer your average performance will be to your maximum potential.

There are two primary ways to improve as a debater. One is to work on the A Game and improve your maximum potential. This usually comprises learning new concepts, improving technical skills, reading about the topic, etc. The second way to improve is to eliminate your C Game. Even if you do not get any better in terms of your maximum potential, if you can more consistently perform your best you will win more debates, guaranteed.

The key concept here is *consistency*. A focus on consistency is often neglected, but debaters that win championships do so by consistently performing well. Consider the following thought exercise. Imagine that we can calculate the probability of winning any given debate round. Even if you could consistently perform such that you won 90% of your elimination rounds, the combined probability of winning octafinals through finals is 65%. Now, if we were to imagine that in one of these four outrounds you do not perform your best and your chances slip to C Game levels – let us say 60% - the probability of winning the tournament slips to 44%. In other words, a single bad debate (but one that you were still a favorite to win) cut your chances of winning the tournament by almost one third.

A lack of consistency can be found in any element of your debating. Sometimes you may not always apply the arguments that you extend to other arguments, or maybe do so inefficiently or ineffectively. You know *how* to do it, you just don't *always* do it. When you practice making extensions, soon you will always apply the argument effectively. You have then effectively lopped off part of your C game. As another example, here is a drill to improve the consistency of word economy and time allocation:

DRILL: Consistent Time Allocation

This drill is a variant of the common “time reduction” or “countdown” drill. You will be redoing a 1AR from a round you debated. Redo the speech once to familiarize yourself with the speech. Now, your goal is to give the same speech in only 3 minutes without speeding up to compensate *three times in a row*. If on any of the three attempts you go over time, start over. The goal of the drill is to emphasize consistency in word economy and time allocation.

A saying goes as follows: “Amateurs practice until they get it right. Professionals practice until they cannot get it wrong.” Which do you want to be?

Health and Diet

Consistency is about more than just doing drills and becoming more technical as a debater. It is also about preparing yourself physically for the stresses of a debate tournament. While debate certainly is not the most physical activity, it is nonetheless incredibly stressful on the body. The days are an adrenaline roller coaster (high peaks during round followed by a cool-off time in between debates), missing meals can be common, and the nights are often late. If you are ignoring the demands of your body, then you are not debating your best, period.

First up is exercise. Exercise has been found to trigger elevated mood states and an overall improved sense of well-being and helps to keep stress, anxiety, and depression to a minimum. Now a new study published in the psychological journal *Acta Psychologica* shows that various forms of exercise actually can help us to think more clearly. It was found that steady-state aerobic exercise improved the brain’s ability to solve problems and make decisions fast and effectively. After exercise, people seemed to be able to concentrate and focus much better than before. They were better able to block information that was irrelevant to the task at hand, and responded much faster to information relevant to the task. So exercise both in between and during tournaments. The energy gained from exercise will outweigh the 30 minutes earlier you need to wake up to do it.

Second, never underestimate the power of sleep. One study found that losing one hour of sleep was the equivalent of having one alcoholic beverage. It amazes me how little debaters sleep at tournaments. If you aren’t sleeping because you need to do work, then you probably were not prepared enough before the tournament. There is no excuse for that. However, whatever marginal work you will get completed in the extra two hours you stay awake is probably not worth the hit to your performance. If you aren’t sleeping because you are socializing with friends, then you need to reexamine your priorities.

Third and finally is diet. In the chaos of a debate tournament, your diet tends to be the first thing that gets sacrificed for the sake of expediency. However, your diet at the tournament probably has the largest impact on your performance among these three (unless you are

woefully sleep deprived.) I am not going to suggest that you bring with you a meal of asparagus and tofu in order to win at tournaments. Often we are forced to deal with whatever food the tournament location allows for us. However, there are some simple tips that will keep you feeling better throughout the day. Skipping meals has been proven to impair mental performance. It will also make you get tired and can cause serious headaches. Eating large meals will make you feel tired or sick. Usually debaters skip meals because the epinephrine released functions as an appetite suppressant and then get super hungry and eat a large meal some time later in the day (or at the end of it.) Instead, you should attempt to eat smaller amounts in between each round to maintain a steady intake of calories.

I would suggest avoiding energy drinks and foods that are artificially high in sugar or caffeine. The crash will kill you. I used to only be willing to drink an energy drink before the last round of the night so that the crash would not impact my debating. Keep in mind that caffeine takes twenty minutes to metabolize, so plan accordingly.

Part Two: Psychology and Image Control

Time for another study. Researchers examined the effect of uniform color on major league soccer teams and found that “winners wear red.” Controlling for other variables, teams with red uniforms had a higher win rate than those wearing other colors. I am not going to suggest that you stock up on red clothing to wear at tournaments; that would be quite silly. However, your image and interactions with your opponents and judges can have a significant impact on your win rate. When you look like a winner, your opponents perform worse. This has been proven time and time again.

Information Reciprocity

One way to gain an edge in the metagame is to win the war of information. Information is power. The more you know about your opponent the better you can prepare to debate them and exploit their weaknesses. The less they know about you, the less they can do the same. To this end, the fundamental rule is to *conceal, not reveal*. Here I want you to imagine professional poker players you may have seen on TV. While some of the more colorful characters take this precept to the extreme (sunglasses, hats, etc.), you will find that good poker players seek to conceal information about their cards from their opponents (enter the “poker face.”) While debate is less of a war of information than poker is, you still want to conceal what you can. Do not talk about your arguments with other debaters, unless the exchange is going to be net-beneficial for you. This should not be confused with disclosure. It is okay to disclose your arguments, just don’t discuss your views on arguments with the opposition. Do not engage in pre-round conversations about your level of experience, argument preferences, side preferences, etc.

The flipside of this is to read the enemy. There are many ways to get information about your opponent that will help you in the debate round. The most obvious is scouting. Asking prior

opponents, judges that you know, etc. for information on your opponent can give you important insight about how they debate. You should be looking for more than “what are they running?” Instead, try to find out what arguments they go for in the rebuttals, how proficient they are at different skills, etc. Beyond scouting, you can try to figure out some things about their style before the round by asking them where they are from, what year they are in school, etc. Some basic biographical information can go a long way in painting an image of a debater.

Going back to the opening example of rock-paper-scissors, this is the equivalent of observing your friend always start with “rock.” Having more information about your opponent than they have of you is a key advantage that will give you an edge in your rounds against them. Also, learn from your failure in rock-paper-scissors. We also need to be aware of what they know about *us* and adjust accordingly. This is especially important if you debate the same individual frequently and therefore engage in what are called repeated iterations of a game. If you do the same exact thing against the same opponent multiple times, you should eventually lose, so mix it up!

Judge Relations

Etiquette – (n) – The customary code of polite behavior in society or among members of a particular profession or group. Debate tournaments have their own rules of etiquette and not everyone in the community agrees on some of its finer points. Good etiquette is not a requirement, but it is an advantage. Here are ten general rules of etiquette that will improve your image with your judges, and consequently help you to win rounds:

1) Be prepared. Have at least two timers so that you can provide one to your judge or opponent if need be. Have enough paper so that you can always provide it to your judge and will never have to borrow any. Bring a ream of plain white copy paper to tournaments for this purpose. Have ample pens. Bring a flash drive that is readily accessible for electronic evidence exchange and be familiar with using it. Have an extra paper copy of your case to provide a hard copy to opponents or to judges after the round. Do you want to be seen as the debater that is prepared or the one who seemed to pack for the tournament in a hurry?

2) Be on time. In fact, be early. If you arrive after your judge for your round (unless you are flight B) then you have made a small mistake. Arriving and finding both your opponent and the judge in the room is a catastrophe. This counts for your speeches as well. Do not go overtime and do not steal prep time. Once you stop prep, you should be prepared to begin your roadmap and start your speech.

3) Do not make uninvited small talk with the judge. You are there to compete, not to schmooze. I've labeled so many debaters as tools prior to the start of a round based on small talk. Protect yourself from tom-foolery. Do not delay the start of your round by talking with anybody else in the room.

4) Do not ask overly broad paradigmatic questions of judges. When someone asks me "do you have a paradigm?" I usually reply with one word: "Yes." Plan ahead of time specific questions you will ask and avoid asking questions that are answered by a published paradigm. To this end, have copies of the published paradigms for all of the judges in the pool accessible without internet access. There is no excuse for not having access to such valuable information, and it will avoid violating the rule above.

5) Do not ask overly broad questions of judges after the round. "What could I have done better in this round?" "Uh, you could start by winning it..." Never begin a question with, "Didn't you think..." Obviously I did not think that. If I had thought that, then we wouldn't be having this conversation. Usually questions framed that way are an attempt to passive-aggressively point out that the judge missed an argument. OK, maybe they did. What does asking them about it get you? You get nothing! You lose! Good day, sir! Only ask questions that will have educational value. Limit yourself to one or two questions after the round. Asking no questions is fine. Respect everyone's time, especially since your opponents do not want to be rude and leave early. Speaking of which,

6) Do not leave early. If your opponent is still talking with the judge, remain and listen patiently. While the judge is making a decision, step outside and remain by the door. Do not get post-round wanderlust and go off to discover the building's secrets. If you can be suave about it and it seems natural, try to get your opponent to go outside with you.

7) Do not ask judges if they need any evidence from you. They will ask you.

8) Do not publicly complain about judges. Or debaters. Or anything really. Nobody wants to hear your complaining and you risk alienating people. Sitting with the rest of the team in a hall counts as being in public. Any time anybody outside of the team can hear you, it's public. Do not make thinly veiled comments that suggest you lost due to a bad decision. If asked about a round, inform the questioner the result and do not volunteer a bad beat story. Nobody likes bad beat stories. Always be a gracious loser; there is always next round.

9) Be capable and efficient with electronic debate. Be familiar with how your flash drive works and where the files you need are. Keep the flash drive clean before the round starts to assist in effortless use. Practice copying disparate parts of different documents into a new file, saving it, and uploading it to your flash drive. Remember, amateurs practice until they get it right; professionals practice until they cannot get it wrong.

10) Do not start fights. Really, do not argue over anything unless it is *really* worth it. Getting the big desk isn't worth it. If your opponent wants it, let them have it. Have an extra copy of written material so that you do not need to fight your opponent for custody. You timed prep at 1:45 used, your opponent timed it at 1:35 used. Is 10 seconds of prep worth an argument?

And finally, #11 is that the judge is always right when it comes to running the round.

Part Three: Competitive Mindset

Thus far we have discussed things that you can *do* to improve your metagame. We will now move on to how you should *think* in order to become a better player in the debate game. It is in the area of competitive mindset that I have seen some of the biggest flaws in debaters, including my own.

Tilt

Mental or emotional baggage of any form is going to make you debate worse. We call this tilt. I've seen all kinds of tilt: losing tilt, winning tilt, I-just-got-a-bad-decision tilt, I-just-made-myself-look-stupid tilt, etc. In poker, I have seen players tilt off ridiculous sums of money. When we are on tilt, we are by definition not playing our best. Tilt pushes us into C Game territory by virtue of our mental state rather than our skill level. Instead you want to tilt less, or to play with the word, be *tiltless*. This will ensure that you are always in the best possible mental state to debate.

Balance

When it comes to emotional baggage that comes from your life outside of debate, all that I can tell you is that you need to do your best to clear your mind. Meditation or whatnot may help here, as would exercise as discussed prior. If you do not have a life outside of debate, that can be a major problem in and of itself.

A balanced lifestyle is generally considered to be a critical element of happiness. If we are too invested in any one thing, then our emotional state is going to be tied to our performance in that aspect of our life. For example, if debate is the only thing that you do, then you are going to be happy when you win and depressed when you lose. By having a more balanced lifestyle that includes other endeavors, you will be better able to handle the swings of the activity.

Process-Oriented Thinking

Presuming you are not bringing emotional baggage from your life into rounds with you, you also need to avoid allowing prior rounds to affect your current debate. In debate you only have the here and now; if you live in the past, you will lose out on the present. Regardless of whether you won or lost the last round, the next debate must be insulated from those results.

The major way in which people get hung up on past debates is from results-oriented thinking. To be results-oriented is to focus on the outcome of your decisions instead of the quality of the decisions themselves. Process-oriented thinking is the exact opposite. You must embrace the randomness of debate. Often you will make the right decisions and still lose. Sometimes you will make the wrong decisions and pull out a win. It is a grievous error to think that you are

debating well because you are winning or that you are debating poorly because you are losing. Instead, consider the quality of the decisions that you made:

DRILL: Post-Round Recap

Take the flow from a prior debate that you still remember well, preferably one that happened recently. Identify some of the most important decisions that you made in the round. For example, in one round this might be “Running theory in the NC and allocating half of the NR to the AC.” Then grade yourself on the quality of those decisions. To do this, ignore the outcome of the debate and instead compare it to other possible options. Make a list of all alternatives and identify the best one if your choice was not best.

This sort of post-round analysis is the way that you should be thinking about debates rather than just looking at wins and losses. As you become more process-oriented, the outcomes of debates will cease to affect you much. Instead, you may beat yourself up about bad decisions, which you will have to learn to not do, but that is easier than beating yourself up about results.

Becoming Spock

All of the above builds up to the idea that emotion is your enemy in all games, including debate. If you can avoid being emotionally invested in your debates then you can avoid tilt entirely. This is by no means easy, especially when debate is something that is very important to you. However, the benefits are clear. “Love your opponents – they hate that.”

Conclusion

This is by no means an exhaustive discussion of metagame elements, but it’s a good start for improving your results. The metagame is something that you can have an advantage over your opponent in just like any other skill. All other things being equal, the debater with the better metagame will win. Whether that means being more consistent, being better rested, eating better, having better etiquette, or thinking about debate more productively, there is always room for improvement in the “game outside the game.” If you want to actualize your success, you need to begin preparing for debate in a more holistic way that takes into account the effects of outside factors on your performance and results. So, next tournament deploy the tips in this article and I guarantee that you will debate better.