

The Ethics of Argumentation in Intercollegiate Debate: A Conservative Appraisal

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Sometimes only an outsider sees clearly the problems of the insiders. A comment in a recent *Time* article about intercollegiate debate hit painfully close to the truth: "Success at on topic [debate] demands fetishistic research, note cards by the hundred gross and the rhetorical felicity of an armored truck."¹ Organized debate is so far removed from reality that its very survival seems remarkable. While intercollegiate debate teaches less about many things than we would like, least of all does it teach ethics.

By one interpretation ethics in debate involves questions such as whether or not case-scouting or introducing counterplans in the second negative constructive speech are conscionable acts.² There is, however, an entirely different sense in which the ethics of debate can be discussed. To what extent does debate make students aware of the values which underlie their choices, and to what extent does it show them the ethical differences among arguments?

Richard Weaver, whose works on rhetoric are guided by the assumption that the methods an arguer chooses reveal his ethics, provides an avenue for such inquiry.³ Weaver claims that every rhetorical use of language, because it involves intention and choice, has an ethical dimension. He illustrates this dictum through an analysis of the essential argument forms: authority, analogy, principle, and consequence.

Weaver expresses preferences among these forms of argument on the basis of their philosophical status. His is a reflection on

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¹Kurt Andersen, "The Best and the Glibbest," *Time*, 15 March 1982, p. 10.

²Edward L. McGlone, "Attitudes about Debate Practices," in *Directing Forensics: Debate and Contest Speaking*, ed. Don F. Faules and Richard D. Rieke (Scranton, Pa.: International Textbook Company, 1968), pp. 346-48.

³Richard M. Weaver, "Language is Sermonic," in *Contemporary Theories of Rhetoric: Selected Readings*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), pp. 163-79; *The Ethics of Rhetoric* (South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1953), especially chs. II, III. Interpretations of Weaver's views, except where otherwise noted, are based principally on "Language is Sermonic."

argumentation from which debaters would profit. The preferences he articulates are not those of most debaters. Intercollegiate debate seems almost to reverse his ideas of what ethical argumentation is. Debaters learn from experience what kinds of arguments work within the highly formalized context of intercollegiate debate, but they do not learn what separates a merely effective argument from one that has enduring value. Debate habituates students to lines of argument which teach them less about their own beliefs and values than they do about those of other people. This, however, is only part of the problem. Debate coaches have accepted what passes as reasonable argumentation in the tournaments and have fostered a type of argumentation which philosophical conservatives like Weaver would reject as symptomatic of modern, fact-oriented culture.

One need not be a conservative or a Platonist to appreciate Weaver's analysis, though it helps. He claims that arguments from definition or genus are philosophically preeminent to other forms since only they seek to establish principles and ideals. Thus, Lincoln, though a political liberal, argues like a philosophical conservative.⁴ In the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, for example, Lincoln's stand against the extension of slavery into the territories was based not on the material consequences of this act, but on a definition of the nature of humanity. At their best, arguments such as Lincoln's provide timeless *a priori*, which serve as the basis for future arguments and which illuminate some facet of the human condition. Arguing from principle requires debaters to reflect upon what ought to be, rather than on what is. It makes them think in terms of ideals and essences and so puts them closer to their own beliefs and values. One might say, it makes them think ethically.

But what is the reality of intercollegiate debate? Debaters rarely argue from their own principles. In fact, they quickly learn that debate is not a contest between the quality of ideas, but rather the volume and credibility of evidence. Debaters, even if their coaches teach them otherwise, learn from experience to place the highest premium on hard fact, rather than on nebulous propositions. Even the most noble and enduring sentiments of the constitution's framers become items of data that can be used to win arguments, rather than ideas which they can incorporate into their own thinking. For example, the principle of states' rights is frequently reduced to a stock argument which can be made against any case calling for federal encroachment on powers traditionally granted

⁴Weaver, *Ethics*, pp. 91-94.

the states. Although nominally this is an argument from principle, in practice it is more like a tactical move learned from experience. Such arguments are seen as no more or less significant than other arguments. Educational debate tends to reduce all arguments to tactics. It does not ask students to assess the ethical superiority of any given argument, only its relative potency in the mind of the judge. Since debaters cannot always predict the basis on which a given judge will decide an issue or a debate, many debaters simply make as many arguments as possible hoping that one will work. No argument, then, is accorded a higher status than others. Some arguments work and some do not. This is all most debaters seem to care about.

If debaters tend not to argue from principle, what types of arguments do they use? One that enters into virtually all debates is the argument from cause and its two subspecies, the arguments from consequence and circumstance. In debate, arguments from consequence are used to support or oppose a policy proposal because of its perceived advantages or disadvantages. Weaver would claim that although it is philosophically less important than the argument from principle, the argument from consequence certainly has its place. He points out, however, that an aberrant version of it, the argument from circumstance, does not deserve the same approbation. The argument from circumstance proposes that existing conditions demand whatever action the speaker favors. So, for example, debaters might claim that runaway inflation leaves no choice but to pass a balanced budget amendment. Weaver dislikes this sort of argument because it is completely relative. It assumes that we should respond to whatever stimulus the present supplies. It short-circuits reason. Such arguments ask the audience to act on the basis of what is rather than what ought to be. They are grounded in reality, rather than in principle. Since material reality changes constantly, the value of such arguments endures only as long as do the circumstances which gave them rise.

Arguments from circumstance appeal to a fact oriented culture in the way that sensationalistic journalism does. Intercollegiate debate manifests sensationalistic tendencies. Debaters consistently exaggerate the harms and disadvantages of the problems they discuss. Thus they might argue that the United States' lack of a civil defense program invites the spectre of nuclear war. Inevitably they do not leave it at this, but go on to describe in unnecessarily vivid detail the loss of life and suffering which would result. Their litanies of destruction sound invariably like tabloid report which under ordinary circumstances we deplore. In debate, though, sensationalism is accepted as common course.

Debaters also use arguments from analogy, although not as often as they might. Analogical arguments, like arguments from principle engage the creative faculties of debaters. They stem from perceptions of the similarities among things. A liberally educated student with an imaginative mind might be expected to produce analogical arguments. Debate as an activity which should both use and enhance a liberal arts education ought to be rife with them. Yet, rarely do they emerge.

Instead there are countless arguments from authority. Authority is fine as a source of argument as long as it is not overused and the authorities are properly selected. The excessive reliance of debaters on arguments from authority, however, makes them subservient to the opinions of others. In the ideal, debaters evaluate evidence for its credibility and its correspondence with their own beliefs. In practice, they often fail to read the context of their evidence, do not know the credentials of the sources, nor even at times understand the evidence they read with such lightening speed. An over-dependence on authority depersonalizes the process of debate. It makes it far less humane or humanizing. Debaters, to use a phrase of Weaver's, become "logic machines," programmed to match evidence against their opponents' evidence.⁵ While the process of selection and organization this involves no doubt improves debaters' logical abilities and skills in gamesmanship, it does not necessarily make them aware of their own humanness, that is, of their individual character and ethics. Ethics, after all, grow out of feeling and choice and not simply the complex operations of mind we refer to as logic.

Even among the very best debaters who habitually inquire into the credibility of their evidence, few look beyond the source's expertise in his or her area of specialty. The kind of authority preferred in debate further documents debate's removal from ethical concerns. Anonymous researchers whose objectivity is insured by the scientific method they use are perceived as more credible than great minds who have been tainted by having a point of view. On all counts testimony of fact is preferred to testimony of opinion. Yet facts are not ethical claims, and from scientists and social scientists one rarely learns how facts should be used in making ethical decisions.

The model debater is a speedy processor of factual information and a master of debate commonplaces and form. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported that the debate coach at Randolph Macon College has developed a computer program to

⁵Weaver, "Language is Sermonic," p. 167.

train debaters. One program teaches them cross-examination. Asked the right questions the computer will make damaging admissions to its case.⁶ Presumably, perceptive debaters intuit the computer's program to defeat it. This suggests the extreme formalism of debate. Effective debaters are not contemplative scholars willing to engage in soul searching speculative discussions. They are highly trained, conditioned agents who respond to arguments with speed and prolificity. Only by internalizing the structure of debate and its commonplaces can they react quickly enough to win a debate. The more second nature their responses become, the better they will fare. For the sake of quick response, knowing the form is all important. Like debate's emphasis on fact, its overwhelming concern with structure puts students no closer to ethics.

Nor does one detect in the language of debate any reason to rejoice at what we are teaching debaters, or at what they learn at tournaments. Though debaters are prolific in the number of points they make, they express each laconically. They speak in shorthand with truncated phrases and anagrams which would try the patience of a government bureaucrat. Their vocabulary could well comprise a computer language. It cannot be understood by those outside the inner circle. What eloquence there is in debate is ordinarily reserved for the first affirmative speech and an occasional peroration. Otherwise debate discourse comes to the audience as spurts of noise which a judge impassively transfers to a legal pad.

The disembodied language of debate may be ideal for presenting fact and logic, but not for proffering the results of ethical choice. The subjectivity of the debater is suppressed. The exigencies of debate make it impossible for him to express the ideas and feelings which make him an individual. His language strains to represent facts rather than conviction or emotion. In debate one is more likely to hear language used referentially rather than evocatively. It reveals neither feeling nor ethical choice. No wonder that it fails to move us and that contemporary debate as a whole has been criticized as being unpersuasive.⁷

Debaters' lack of subjectivity is also revealed in their delivery. Good delivery addresses the audience as emotional as well as rational beings. The nature of debate makes participants unconcerned about genuinely influencing the judge. Though they want to

⁶Zoe Ingalls, "Ideas," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 (September 1982), p. 20.

⁷Weaver, *Ethics*, pp. 7-8. In his analysis of the *Phaedrus*, Weaver maintains that Lysias' speech uses "the language of notation." The same might be said of debate.

win, they care little about changing the judge's mind. Their recitation of colorless fact and logic sounds like the frenzied whirl of the computer. Often no one fact or argument is vocally emphasized over another since all arguments seem to be valued equally. Rather we hear the well practiced but artificial cadence by which a torrent of words is released in a steady and uninterrupted stream. The natural rhythms of the human voice as it expresses the thoughts and individual personality of the speaker are replaced by a monotonous intonation which allows speed at the expense of reflection. If *Time* reporter Kurt Anderson was right when he called intercollegiate debate "secular self mortification," the style of debate delivery is one evidence of it.⁸

Debate at its worst is an activity which promotes self abnegation rather than self discovery. Intercollegiate debate ought to educate students in more than structure, credibility, and logical reasoning. It should teach them the effective use of arguments from definition as well as arguments from consequence, circumstance and authority. Definitional arguments, better than others, orient students toward their own beliefs and principles. Logic, fact, and authority wither without ethics, and debate without ethical judgments sounds hollow and contrived.

I am not proposing that debaters only make arguments they believe in. Students also learn from articulating the principles which underlie positions they oppose. To ignore principle as a line of argument and focus instead on mere fact and authority makes debate less effective as a method of exploring one's own preferences and values.

It might be argued that debate is not dialectic, and that my criticisms require debate to be something we cannot make it. After all the sophists, not Plato, gave birth to debate. Protagoras saw it as a lesson in sophistic relativism. If one believes in the relativism of the sophists, it would be absurd for debaters to search after principles upon which to base their arguments. Of what use, one might ask, are the eloquently expressed propositions of a bygone era to a scientific age which bases decisions on calculable fact? For today's neosophists it would be foolish indeed to think of debate as a philosophical or ethical enterprise. But in this case, why talk about the ethics of debate at all? If the term only means observing the rules of the game, it is not particularly significant. Debate should be a thoroughly ethical enterprise. It should educate students in ethics, as well as requiring them to follow the rules.

⁸Andersen, p. 10.

Ultimately, it comes down to a matter of choice. Should we as coaches and judges permit the steady dismantling of debate as a means of educating students? Ought we to praise students for making sensationalistic arguments, and for relying on appeals to authority, while ignoring arguments from principle? Should we give ballots to speakers who are the most adept at parroting back the commonplaces they have learned and to those who can read evidence with the greatest speed and the least visible understanding? Should we encourage debate as a contest of evidence rather than as a meeting of minds? No matter how much lip service is given to the educational values of intercollegiate debate, it cannot now be claimed as an activity which forces students to reflect upon or use their ethical beliefs in the formulation of arguments.