

**Richard Weaver's Hierarchy of Argument:
An Instructional Model for Parliamentary Debate
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Each year, many students are drawn into the forensics community for a variety of reasons. Among the benefits of forensic participation, students and coaches find it to be an enjoyable activity, a rewarding social function, and an excellent forum for developing communication skills. While there may be numerous advantages to forensics participation, it is the educational function of the activity which should precede all others. As forensics educators, we must continually seek the best means of instruction available to our students through the various speech and debate activities we encounter.

It is this concern which has brought the attention of many to parliamentary debate. A growing dissatisfaction with previously existing forms of team debate has caused some forensics educators to seek other communication forums. (For a partial listing of these opinions see my "Works Consulted.") Epstein addressed many of the reasons why parliamentary debate has become attractive to those who are dissatisfied with current CEDA and NDT practice. The advantages she lists include: the variety of topics, the variety of styles, the use of topics which are taboo in CEDA and NDT, audience participation, and the understanding that reasoning, argumentation and public speaking are more important than evidence. Epstein summarizes that "parliamentary debate, I think, is better suited

toward achieving the goals most educators think of when they consider the importance of debate to a college or university" (56).

However, while parliamentary debate continues to grow and develop, we must recognize the importance of guiding the activity in a direction which maintains an emphasis on education. Lest we forget, CEDA was originally developed to avoid many of the practices which some now condemn it for. Therefore, in this paper, I will offer a means for evaluating argumentation in parliamentary debate, and I hope to provide some insight for instructors who are in search of educational approaches to coaching this event. Following an initial review of the judging criteria for the National Parliamentary Debate Association, this essay will then demonstrate how Richard Weaver's work on argument can be used to evaluate arguments being presented in a parliamentary debate round.

According to the National Parliamentary Debate Association constitution, several factors can affect a judges' decision. In the most general sense, the NPDA Constitution notes "debaters must win the hearts and minds of their audiences. Persuasion is key" (Appendix C, para I, 1993). This guideline places the judge in a position to weigh equally the debater's content and delivery skill. Judges are furthermore reminded that humor, emotion, vocal variety, gestures, and movement should be used in the evaluation of a speaker's delivery. During the progress of a debate, a speaker's ability to answer questions and propose points of information also become focal points for evaluation.

While the criteria for delivery are fairly specific, there is more room for interpretation regarding the evaluation of argumentation. Most parliamentary judges would not need training or insight into what constitutes superior vocal and physical delivery. The differences between superior and inferior argumentation, however, may not always be readily apparent to judges who are new to parliamentary debate, or to lay judges. Therefore, the evaluation of argumentation is an area in which theory and practice must work together to form a useful set of criteria which will uphold the educational purpose of the activity.

In two of Weaver's primary works, "Language is Sermonic" and *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, he developed a hierarchy which distinguishes between four types of argumentation. Weaver addressed argument by genus, similitude, circumstance, and authority to demonstrate how they differ in strength and what they reveal about the individual who employs them. Weaver's insights are useful, both as a source of instruction and as a criteria for judging parliamentary debate.

Argument from genus, or definition, according to Weaver, is at the top of the hierarchy. "All arguments made through genus are arguments based on the nature of the thing which is said to constitute the genus" (Weaver 56). The argument from definition attempts to capture the fixed and unchanging qualities of a subject and then base the claim upon one or more of those qualities. Weaver provided the example of a speaker who defines man as a creature with a right to freedom. If this truth was then used to

argue that a certain person or group was entitled to freedom, the speaker would be arguing from definition. In an analysis of the rhetoric employed by Abraham Lincoln, Weaver wrote in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* that Lincoln based his arguments against slavery on a fixed genus of human nature. Weaver places this type of argument at the top of the hierarchy, because it deals with absolutes and is the closest to knowledge of truth.

If a debater were to argue that freedom should be valued more highly than prosperity, she might attempt to base the contentions on a thorough examination of the concept of freedom. An initial argument from the government could attempt to establish the genus of freedom and then show what intrinsic and extrinsic benefits link to it.

Parliamentary judges should consider whether debaters are identifying key issues in the proposition and basing their arguments on an accurate and adequately defended interpretation of that issue. Evidence of this approach demonstrates an attempt to employ valid argumentation, and superior use of argument from genus should weigh heavily in the judging decision. Argument by definition should also be the starting point for coaching students in this event. It would seem critical for coaches to emphasize instruction on how to quickly analyze a topic to determine the key issues and then thoroughly define them.

Argument from similitude ranks second in Weaver's hierarchy and introduces the element of correspondence. Whereas argument from genus uses a fixed class or definition, the argument from

similitude will compare one class to another. The use of analogies, metaphor, and cause-effect relationships are components of this level of argumentation. By including in the argument an element of the unknown, the speaker is moving away from truth and thus employing an argument form weaker than argument from genus. Weaver did make a distinction in this level by addressing a particular weakness of causal argument.

Those who are partial to argument based on effect are under a temptation to play too much upon the fears of their audience by stressing the awful nature of some consequences or by exaggerating the power of some cause. (qtd. in Johannesen, Strickland, and Eubanks 214-15)

Using the example of arguing that freedom would be valued more highly than prosperity, a debater may propose that prosperity has many qualities similar to addiction. The debater could go on to suggest that, like an addiction to drugs or alcohol, once prosperity is experienced, some develop an unhealthy greed for more. This addiction to prosperity can lead to an abuse of self and others to acquire more wealth.

While argument from similitude is not the strongest form of argumentation, parliamentary judges should recognize it for its persuasive power. This type of argument is effective, because the comparison or relationship which is offered helps the audience visualize the debater's contention. Judges can distinguish between superior and inferior uses of this argument strategy by evaluating how strongly the debater makes the connection between the two

classes (i.e. prosperity and addiction). Parliamentary coaches should approach the use of argument by similitude as a means of explanation, as well as persuasion. The actual coaching could involve exercises in developing analogies and metaphors for topics selected at random. Coaches should strongly consider having their students practice, if not compete in, impromptu speaking. The analysis used in impromptu speaking is generally conducive to the use of similitude.

Argument from circumstance is Weaver's third level of argumentation. This level is characterized as an expedient approach to argument, as evidence is accepted as truth, and conclusions are drawn quickly. This type of argument uses facts or apparent facts which are readily available, regardless of their relationship to the argument at hand. Weaver noted "such argument savors of urgency rather than of perspicacity; and it seems to be preferred by those who are easily impressed by existing tangibles" (qtd in Johannesen, Strickland, and Eubanks 57). Weaver also warned that this type of argument is the least philosophical and amounts to a surrender of reason.

A debater might use argument from circumstance to claim that because new democracies are emerging in different parts of the world, freedom must be valued more highly than prosperity. This argument merely makes note of new democracies and assumes a relationship with the value of freedom. A second assumption is then made that this suggests that freedom is valued more highly

than prosperity. There is actually little, if any, relationship between these observations.

Coaches should certainly identify the weakness of this type of argument strategy. Students should also be taught to examine opponents' arguments to identify instances of argument from circumstance. This would involve some basic insight into the analysis of arguments and possibly the use of Stephen Toulmin's classic work, *The Uses of Argument*. Judges should view skeptically any argument which employs the approach of argument from circumstance. However, judges should recognize the skill of a debater who is able to detect an opponent's use of argument from circumstance.

Argument based on testimony and authority is the final level addressed by Weaver. Arguments which rely on the strength of an external source (authority) require special attention. Weaver noted that as specialized fields of knowledge continue to grow, the use of argument based on authority will continue to increase. Weaver offered the maxim "an argument based on authority is as good as the authority" (qtd. in Johannesen, Strickland, and Eubanks 216). This would seem to call for some discrimination among authorities in a time when too many sources are afforded the title of expert.

The implications for the use of argument from authority in parliamentary debate are clear and critical. Weaver's designation of this argument form at the bottom of the hierarchy suggests that parliamentary judges should not be swayed solely by the use of an

expert's opinion being used to support a debater's contention. For example, if a debater used testimony from a noted economist to support his contention that prosperity is more important than freedom, the judge should consider this to be only marginally effective. If the argument from authority is the primary form of argumentation, the judge should note this as a weakness in the case.

The weakness of argument from authority suggests that coaches should stress the importance of learning how to recognize and critically evaluate this argument strategy. This would involve teaching the student how to judge source qualifications, accuracy of the opponent's use of the source, and the relevance of the source's information to the resolution and the opponent's particular arguments. In addition to learning how to evaluate these issues, the student will also need to learn how to use this information to identify the weakness of the opponent's argumentation strategy.

Richard Weaver's hierarchy of argument provides a useful focus for the development of parliamentary debate theory. When an activity is in its relative infancy, it is easy to establish virtuous goals and hopes for an educationally superior program. However, it is critical to establish parameters and practices which are consistent with those goals. Weaver's argument hierarchy would offer three general advantages to parliamentary debate.

First, the hierarchy would keep the focus of the activity on the practice of argumentation and persuasive speaking. Much of the

appeal of parliamentary debate is this focus and its deemphasis on the use of excessive research and evidence. The argument hierarchy is compatible with this view, and it would condemn the debate practices which have driven some coaches and competitors away from other forms of debate.

A second advantage is that the use of Weaver's hierarchy as an instructional and evaluative model would compliment the delivery component of parliamentary debate. Proper presentation of these argument forms depends on effective oral presentation. The focus on the type of arguments, instead of number of arguments, will not tempt debaters to speak faster than a normal rate of delivery. The focus on argument form will also put a premium on explanation and clarity of the arguments, which will lead debaters to work on their delivery skills.

The third advantage with Weaver's hierarchy is that it would facilitate a beneficial connection between instruction and judging. If parliamentary debate coaches recognized Weaver's hierarchy as the primary model of argumentation, we could help ensure that students would be able to practice at tournaments what they are taught in coaching sessions. This should enhance the educational function of the activity, because it will specify a view of argument quality and provide an arena in which students can practice and develop that approach to argumentation.

Tournament directors may wish to consider the possibility of including a brief written description of the different levels of argument when giving ballots to forensics and lay judges. While

forensics coaches would, ideally, be familiar with this spectrum of argumentation, lay judges could quickly be informed of the general criteria which could be used to judge students' arguments.

This essay has suggested the use of Richard Weaver's hierarchy of argument, as both an educational tool for teaching argumentation and one set of guidelines for judging parliamentary debate. The intent is not necessarily to prescribe the types of arguments which should be employed in parliamentary debate. The concern is, however, with the development of a parliamentary debate theory and practice which is both educationally beneficial and consistent with the purpose of the activity.

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