

CONTEMPORARY TOURNAMENT DEBATING

A SECOND VIEWPOINT

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One of the tales of Boccaccio's Decameron tells of an unbeliever sent to witness first hand the debauchery and corruption of certain highly placed religious leaders. The observer returned from his trip resolved to join the church, explaining to astonished friends that any institution which could persevere in the face of such disservice must be of great and lasting value. I've sometimes thought that this story could be offered as analogy to academic debate. Competitive debate has prospered and grown, not because it has been above reproach, but because it has always been subjected to full critical analysis from a variety of sources -- from its participants, from other members of the broad speech discipline, from school administrators and from many others. That criticism, along with other factors, has enabled debate to continue to provide a nearly unique educational experience, an experience difficult to duplicate in the classroom,

an experience applicable to a broad spectrum of pedagogical goals. This does not mean to suggest that debaters or forensic directors should seek to make adjustments in response to any and all criticism (some has been shrill and unfounded); it does suggest, however, that we must be attuned to possible deficiencies so that academic debate can continue to justify the reputation it has achieved. Given contemporary pressures on educational finance, to do otherwise would court oblivion. Because I believe a recent essay in this journal may be based on some misunderstanding of certain types of criticism of debate, this brief article is offered in reply.

In the Fall, 1975, issue, Michael Hall defends contemporary competitive debate on grounds that it provides worthwhile training in the methods of public policy analysis. I agree both that this is a worthy goal and that debate does provide such training. However, that in no way means that debate is performing this role as well as it might. Failure to assess the true nature of the criticism of debate can only serve as a barrier to improvement, and Hall may have failed in his assessment. He assumes that a basic criticism of current tournament practice seeks to return debate to some point of time in yesteryear when tournaments were designed to provide training in "pleasing, persuasive communication of

very generalized concepts and values." I am uncertain that this can be a major intent of informed critics because I doubt that mere training for glib, popular, relatively cheap mass appeal was ever a goal of academic debate. In fact, a variety of evidence suggests the very opposite: debate has been designed to provide habits and skills in reasoned decision-making in the hope that those who profit from debate experience might as receivers and senders improve the quality of public communication.

Intercollegiate and interscholastic debate have their roots deep in the literary society of the 19th Century university campus. Those societies, which might better have been named debating clubs, deliberately sought to provide a more meaningful experience beyond the artificial syllogistic disputation and declamation of other speech training. They examined the issues and facts of the most controversial topics of their day. While it is true that communication theory began to reject the apparent classical dichotomy between motivational appeal and reasoned proof long before the experimental research of the contemporary behaviorist, it is nonetheless true that debate textbooks of the past four decades have sought to emphasize the rational capabilities

of man and to distinguish "argumentation" from the fuller body of persuasion of which it is a part and to contend that rational discourse remains not only an ideal but a pragmatic and necessary goal. The oldest debate textbook I've examined contains a discussion on the proper way to judge a debate, labelling the method a system of "paired comparison." That system seeks to recognize issues, to trace the development and extensions of argument for each, and ultimately to base a decision on the weight of documented evidence in these issue areas which have become ground for judgment. It differs in no significant way from the "flow sheet" analysis of the contemporary tournament.

None of the above means that competitive debating has not changed over the years; it has -- in a variety of ways. Nor does it mean that that evolution has gone uncriticized. In fact, some of the criticism may be of the kind which has led Hall to the assumptions he has made. A number of articles, beginning more than 20 years ago, have offered comparisons between so-called "British" debating and American tournaments, suggesting that American debaters are being trained and conditioned so that they are unable to apply what they learn in debate to another context, or another audience. More recent articles have occasionally bemoaned the demise

of occasional tournaments in which debaters were heard or judged by audiences other than the "expert" debate coach.

I doubt that even these suggestions were intended to imply that debate should concern itself largely with "persuasive communication of very generalized concepts and values" as Hall suggests. Or if they were, few have taken them seriously. I believe, instead, that these recurring comments have merely sought to suggest that debate could continue to provide training in research methods and in the full meaning of rational decision-making without losing sight of other educational goals as well. For instance, the shrill, incredibly rapid, loud, annoying delivery of the tournament debater has become so commonplace as to be almost universal. I'm sure other apologists of debate have had experiences similar to mine. Nearly every time a debate tournament has been held on our campus, faculty members of other disciplines have reported to me their bewilderment at the incomprehensible sounds they have heard emitting from the rooms in which debates were held. I have sought to justify the typical non-verbal communication habits of debaters by explaining that the activity seeks to emphasize the research, the analysis, the evidential

comparison of reasoned decision-making. This excuse has almost always brought the question, "But couldn't you train people in the components of reason and at least a minimal standard of effective oral communication habits at the same time?" I have been hard pressed to answer. Nor do defenses of debate like that of Hall's article provide me with an answer. Criticism of unfortunate delivery habits is not necessarily a hope that debate can be reduced to mere emotive appeal.

However, I have an even more important objection to Hall's defense because I believe the most viable criticisms of current tournament practice are suggesting that debate is not training in public policy analysis as it ought to be and as it could be. It is not enough to imply that current debate provides such training or that it may do so more fully than "mere traditional debating." Even if Hall is correct that the "valuable learning experience" of being able to "think quickly and respond effectively to interpretations of resolutions . . . that they had not considered in their preparation" was "rarely provided" in "traditional debating," an important criticism of the modern tournament goes unanswered.

I'm not only uncertain of the basis of Hall's perception of "traditional" debate, but also uncertain

as to whether he is saying that the ideal problem-solving situation for achieving the best public policy can take place in a framework which brings about acceptance of a policy simply because those who might have offered proof of deficiencies were trapped without evidence -- because of the "surprise" element. Obviously, Hall has no intention of making such a claim but his defense of debate practice doesn't consider whether modern debate propositions are stretched too thin. Certainly, a broad proposition with a variety of affirmative possibilities enhances research and other experience by demonstrating the complexity of public policy decisions. However, that experience is not improved if the chief issue of the debate is whether the advocates have assumed the burden given them in a specific proposition, nor is it valuable if opponents of policy cannot offer meaningful analysis simply because tournament practice condones extreme or tenuous extensions of the resolution. Nor is thorough research possible if it has no finite boundaries. I have no answer to offer here, nor can I contend that the problem is critical. I mean only to suggest that this line of criticism is better deserving of reply than those who might be suggesting a return to "traditional" debate, whatever that was.

Similarly, Hall implies that current debate experience is useful even though it is different in a variety of ways from public policy analysis in the real world. I agree, but, again, this may overlook an important line of criticism and possible improvement of academic debate. For example, Hall notes that the "cost issue is rarely decisive in a debate." That is perhaps true, but I wonder whether meaningful public policy analysis can be properly taught in a framework where such core issues can be ruled out of bounds by arbitrary general agreement. Public policy analysts must often wish for a world in which they could glibly say that expensive new programs would be funded by "closing tax loopholes, cuts in military expenditures, and deficit spending" (as tournament debaters so often do) without having to defend the incredible complexities of such a proposal. Again, I'm uncertain as to the importance of such criticism or what steps might be taken to improve the debate experience if this criticism is valid, but I think it a more prominent and viable consideration than the straw man: "critics argue that debating shows an increasing lack of concern for pleasing and persuasive communication of ideas."

Similarly, Hall notes that debaters need not consider political feasibility in the same way that public policy analysts must outside the world of academic debate.

Debaters can simply "fiat" a program into existence. Again an important criticism may be overlooked. Despite discussion of the affirmative "fiat" in modern argumentative theory, the matter has not been resolved to every critic's satisfaction. Even the "traditional" debate of bygone years to which Hall refers was built upon the premise that in a debatable proposition "should means ought to and not necessarily will." Thus, advocates of change were not asked to demonstrate that a current political majority favored their proposal; it was assumed that if the merit of the proposal could be demonstrated in academic debate that it could eventually be similarly demonstrated in the "real world." However, just because an affirmative team does not have to prove that its proposal will be adopted by a current or future Congress may not mean that an affirmative team should win if its proposal is completely incapable of implementation in the society in which we live. It may not be that the glib fiat approach to debate is misused but it might be, in my opinion, more important to see if debating could be even better training for public policy analysis than it now is by considering possible misuse than to believe that the primary critics of debate desire to turn our tournaments into "pleasing" but shallow oratory.

The barrage of criticism that I hear, from debaters and former debaters and from debate coaches and from other faculty members, expresses concern that contemporary debaters and judges put such a premium on multiplicity of argument that a danger exists that few are developed thoroughly. Critics contend that this multiplicity invites simplistic answers instead of meaningful analysis. They argue that this tendency toward the simplistic invites judgment on quantitative rather than qualitative grounds. They contend that this breadth creates a possibility that debaters are being trained in robot efficiency rather than in true analysis. They express concern over the use of the term "inherency," suggesting that it may prevent true comparisons of major options by creating a wrangle over whether the existence of some pilot program makes structural change impossible. Some critics deplore the growing practice of permitting an advocate of change to propose implementation of the resolution in several different ways, only to end the debate by defending the one plan facing the least negative challenge. These critics wonder if rational public policy analysis can take place in such a framework. It is by careful consideration of these and other criticisms that debate can continue to offer an important and nearly unique

educational experience. I commend Mr. Hall's defense of academic debate; I believe it to be worthy of defense. I think he is inaccurate in his perception of the academic debate tradition, and misled in believing that an appeal for turning debate into pleasing generalities is a basic or important criticism. I know Hall to be a perceptive critic; I would have liked to have seen his response to important challenges.

Debate has improved and grown in the face of an incredible barrage of criticism. I hope it can do the same in the face of an occasional friendly defense. In fact, I would hope that the difference between academic debate and public rhetoric continue to be narrowed in the future -- not by cheapening debate but by applying what is learned in competitive forensics to the larger society. It is commonplace to imply that rational discourse cannot take place in the larger society. This may be too pessimistic. "The fact that reason too often fails," Alfred North Whitehead said, "does not give fair ground for hysterical conclusion that it never works." There are some of us stubborn enough to hope that it often works.