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AUTHOR Herbeck, Dale A.
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ABSTRACT

Despite literally tens of thousands of rounds of debate competition over a number of years, little insight into argumentation theory has resulted. Debate as practiced by college debating teams has become a laboratory for perfecting itself. Permitting the divergence of debate from argumentation forfeits an ideal opportunity to study argumentation. The use of conditional argument can be assessed as it relates to argumentation theory and practice. Conditional argument, defined as a contention that is developed hypothetically, can be dismissed at any point in debate, irrespective of how such a claim has been argued. As such, conditional argumentation is inappropriate and undesirable in debate competition because it: (1) fails to satisfy the minimum preconditions necessary for meaningful argumentation; (2) results in shoddy advocacy in absolving the debater of intellectual accountability; and (3) cannot be evaluated meaningfully. Allowing conditional claims would not make for more rigorous comparison of policies, while barring such arguments would neither render debate unreal or artificial nor unfairly restrict negative options. Conditional argumentation should be discouraged in academic debate. (Nineteen footnotes are included.) (SG)

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THE CASE AGAINST
CONDITIONAL ARGUMENTATION

by

Dale A. Herbeck
Assistant Professor and Director of Forensics
Department of Speech Communication
Boston College
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167

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THE CASE AGAINST CONDITIONAL ARGUMENTATION

It has become fashionable of late to claim that debate is a laboratory for practicing argumentation. Unfortunately, few findings of any sort have come from this laboratory. Despite years of competition and literally tens of thousands of rounds of competition, we have produced few insights into argumentation theory. There are, of course, several notable exceptions to this generalization. Wallace, for example used the stock issues in debate to establish a topoi of values.¹ Rowland used the tabula rasa paradigm of debate to illustrate some of the problems implicit in a dialectical approach to argument.² Nonetheless, these examples stand virtually alone. Fritch has lamented that few scholars "have attempted to use the debate forum as an arena of research data."³ Indeed, Goodnight has gone so far as to note that "a significant gap seems to be developing between theories of argument and theories of debate."⁴ Debate has, quite literally, become an end unto itself. If

¹Karl R. Wallace, "The Substance of Rhetoric: Good Reasons," Quarterly Journal of Speech 49 (1963): 240-249.

²Robert C. Rowland, "Tabula Rasa: The Relevance of Debate to Argumentation Theory," Journal of the American Forensic Association 71 (1984): 76-88.

³John E. Fritch, "The Relationship Between Debate Theory, Practice and Pedagogy," paper presented at the 1989 Central States Speech Association Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, p. 10.

⁴G. Thomas Goodnight, "The Re-Union of Argumentation and Debate Theory," in Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer

we use the laboratory metaphor, we are forced to conclude that debate exists as a laboratory for perfecting debate.

The divergence of debate from argumentation is problematic. First, to the extent that we allow debate to become an end unto itself we forfeit an ideal opportunity to study argumentation. Goodnight suggests the following possibilities: using debate to study the nature of argument fields, analyzing debates to assess changes in social structure, assessing the political implications of policy choices, studying how values are defined and linked, and using debate to test the continued acceptability and worth of social knowledge.⁵ Fritch, also recognizing the potential of debate to serve as a laboratory, claims that debate could be used to re-evaluate traditional concepts within a relatively pure setting, to study the relationship between the purpose and the practice of argument, and to study the standards for assessing arguments and the decision making process. Second, and perhaps more importantly, when we recognize debate as an end unto itself we legitimate a host of practices and procedures which may be antithetical to acceptable principles of argumentation.⁶ Debate becomes an end in and of itself, meaning that one does whatever is necessary to win debates even if the result is "bad" argumentation.

Conference on Argumentation, edited by George Ziegelmüller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1981), p. 415.

⁵Goodnight, pp. 426-428.

⁶This position is developed more fully in Karla K. Leeper and Dale A. Herbec', "Policy Debate and Argumentation Skills: An Unsuitable Forum?" paper presented at the 1989 Central States Speech Association Convention, Kansas City, Missouri, April 1989.

In this paper, I wish to assess one practice, the use of conditional argument, as it relates to argumentation theory and practice. Sometimes, such conditional claims are explicit as when debaters advocate multiple hypothetical counterplans based on inconsistent mandates and premises.⁷ Other times, conditionality is implicit in that no attempt is made to indicate which arguments are conditional or what those conditions might be. Rather, the debaters proceed through rebuttals on the implicit assumption that all arguments are conditional. At the last possible moment, the debaters decide which set of arguments to defend and dismiss the other claims. Perhaps the best example of this strategy occurs when the negative team grants out one or more counterplans in rebuttals and attempts to win the debate on disadvantages to the affirmative case.

Although conditional argument may take a variety of forms, Patterson and Zarefsky have accurately defined it as follows: "the conditional argument is one developed hypothetically, so the debater need not be committed to it."⁸ Consequently, such conditional claims can be dismissed at any point in the debate irrespective of how they have been argued in the debate. Despite the popularity of such claims, there are legitimate concerns about the appropriateness and desirability of conditionality in academic debate. Consequently, the first section of this paper develops the case against

⁷I use the vocabulary of policy debate throughout this essay as I am more familiar with this type of debate. Condition claims could, however, exist in value debate and I have in fact observed value debates in which the negative has defended inconsistent positions.

⁸J.W. Patterson and David Zarefsky, Contemporary Debate (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1983), p. 232.

conditional argumentation. Having made the case against conditionality, the second section briefly critiques some of the common arguments offered in defense of conditional argumentation. Throughout, this essay argues that conditionality claims are inconsistent with sound argumentation.

The Case for Consistency

Although a variety of objections have been raised against conditional arguments, most of these objections can be reduced to one of three discrete groups of arguments. The first argument against conditional claims is that they are essentially non-arguments because they fail to satisfy the minimum preconditions necessary for meaningful argumentation. When advocates argue conditionally, they commit themselves to nothing. Those who argue conditionally seek not to argue, but rather to obfuscate. If they were truly concerned with argumentation, they would be willing to risk a commitment to the claim they are offering for consideration. Consequently, it is impossible for them to participate in argumentation, which necessarily requires all advocates to be self-risking.

This objection becomes more compelling if we consider how conditional claims are actually used in a debate. Advocates argue conditionality not out of a commitment to principle, but rather because it is a convenient strategic ruse. For example, a negative team could advocate three conditional counterplans in the same debate. In virtually every instance the negative does this not because they believe that each of the three alternatives is superior to the affirmative plan, but rather because it is difficult for the affirmative to answer all three counterplans effectively. If the affirmative

mishandles one of the counterplans, the negative quickly drops the defeated counterplans and goes for the poorly answered one. If the affirmative miraculously answers all three counterplans adequately, the negative will drop all of them and go for a disadvantage. In each of these situations conditionality is invoked because it provides a tactical advantage, not because it guarantees a better test of the affirmative plan.

Second, conditional argumentation results in shoddy advocacy to the extent that it absolves the advocates of any intellectual accountability. By definition, debaters are not responsible for conditional arguments. Absent such accountability, debaters lack the incentive to develop cogent claims. As Strange has observed, "the debater who does not believe a single policy alternative is likely to present one alternative, then another, and so on, without ever developing a rigorous test of his adversary's policy position."⁹ In the process, conditional argumentation allows the debater to avoid addressing the essence of the issues being debated. By way of contrast, Willard has argued that "disputants who are forced to defend clear consistent policies will be directed into relatively sophisticated research into the issues behind those policies."¹⁰ Enforcing argumentative accountability on all debaters would necessarily improve the quality of argumentation. It would force advocates to defend consistent positions thereby encouraging more detailed

⁹Kenneth M. Strange, "An Advocacy Paradigm of Debate," paper presented at the 1981 Speech Communication Association Convention, Anaheim, California, p. 4.

¹⁰Charles Arthur Willard, "The Nature and Implications of the 'Policy Perspective' for the Evaluation of Debate," in Advanced Debate, 2nd ed., edited by David A. Thomas (Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Company, 1979), p. 443.

preparations and focused advocacy. Accountability would lead to "more careful and sophisticated analysis of competing policies."¹¹

Finally, it is impossible to meaningfully evaluate conditional claims. Consider for example, a debate in which the first negative argues that the capitalistic system is flawed as part of a socialism counterplan, and the second negative argues that the adoption of the plan would destroy business confidence. The inconsistency in the negative position makes it impossible to evaluate it. At face value, these two arguments seems to cancel themselves out in that changes in our capitalistic economic system would surely wreak more havoc in the business community than virtually any affirmative plan. In fact, it is even possible that the disadvantage applies more to the counterplan than to the affirmative plan. Yet, by arguing these two positions conditionally, the negative represents them as a consistent position against the affirmative. The difficulty in this stance should be obvious. While we understand (and maybe could even debate) both of the negative claims, it is impossible to evaluate them because they are inconsistent. Willard has observed that "consistency is a relatively dependable cognitive lens through which the policy critic may view options and arguments."¹²

Taken together, these argumentative and pragmatic considerations prove that conditional argumentation is inherently flawed. From an argumentative perspective, it is apparent that conditional argumentation is really not argument at all. Even if conditional argumentation could be considered to be meaningful argument, there are good reasons for not

¹¹Willard, p. 443.

¹²Willard, p. 441.

allowing such argument in debate. Conditional claims encourage shoddy advocacy and necessarily lead to inferior decisions.

A Critique of the Case for Conditionality

In response to such a restrictive view of conditionality a variety of different claims might be advanced. First, it might be argued that such a restrictive view results in an inadequate test of the affirmative case. After all, a more rigorous test would result if the plan was evaluated against a variety of different negative alternatives. Zerjav argues:

Presently, the affirmative needs only to provide a solution which is better than that of the present system unless a counterplan is offered. If the counterplan is offered then no analysis of other issues has been permitted. Use of the conditional counterplan, however, requires the affirmative to prove their proposal is the best solution to the problem. This type of argumentation provides a more rational approach to the decision-making process in that the scope of the discussion is increased to cover more than one solution (the resolution) to a given problem.¹³

¹³Debbie Zerjav, "An Examination and Extension of Conditional Negative Argument," in Proceedings of the National Conference on Argumentation, edited by James I. Luck (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1973), pp. 62-63.

After all, if the negative were limited to a single policy the debate would only prove that policy A was better than policy B. If, however, the negative could defend more than one policy option the debate would prove not only that policy A was better than policy B but also that it was better than policy C and policy D. Such a conclusion, it might be argued, would produce a better decision.

The problem with such a criticism is that it confuses the quantity of comparison with the quality of the comparison. Allowing the negative to defend conditional arguments would undoubtedly increase the breadth of the comparison. It would, however, inevitably discourage the depth of that comparison. Given the time limits of debate rounds, such a tradeoff is inevitable. Moreover, such analysis is misleading in that it assumes that each debate produces a definitive judgement on the broader resolution. A more accurate view regards each debate as a comparison of two competing sets of arguments. Seen in this light, each debate should focus on the arguments being compared.

Second, it might be argued that such sequential argumentation may be possible within a debate. After all, debaters could proceed through a series of claims in a sequential process just as the Congress does. Zerjav makes such a claim by reference to a legislative analogy:

When a bill is introduced, many people will speak against it for different reasons. Often these reasons will include not only arguments directly denying the need for a new policy or the capabilities of the proposal in question, but also alternate policies which offer preferable solutions. It is not sufficient in this case

for an affirmative speaker on the bill to merely indicate a contradiction in the negative speeches. Different people will make their decisions for different reasons, and it is therefore critical to present all the best reasons for rejection of the bill.¹⁴

Given that conditional argument is acceptable in Congress, it is argued that it should be accepted in the debate context, as well. Making essentially the same argument, Isaacson and Branham have observed that "Congress frequently considers a wide range of amendments and substitute bills. If we seek to mimic real world policy-making then multiple conditional policies should be permissible logically."¹⁵

Unfortunately, such a view misconstrues the inherently bilateral nature of argumentation. Only two alternatives can be considered at the same instant. If more than two alternatives are to be compared, the argument must proceed through stages, in a series of bilateral comparisons. Ehninger argues that "argumentative interchange which at first appears to be multilateral or unilateral actually consists of a series of bilateral encounters conducted consecutively."¹⁶ Advocates work from argument to argument, they do not consider all possible arguments simultaneously.

At this point it might be claimed that debaters could simultaneously consider multiple policies just as Congresspersons do when the body

¹⁴Zerjav, p. 58.

¹⁵Thomas Isaacson and Robert Branham, "Policy Fiat: Theoretical Battleground of the Eighties," Speaker and Cavel 17 (1980): 90.

¹⁶Douglas Ehninger, "Argument as Method: Its Nature, Its Limitations and Its Uses," Quarterly Journal of Speech 37 (1970): 107.

considers legislation. Admittedly, the whole Congress does consider a multiplicity of alternatives through sequential argumentation. Each individual legislator, however, can only defend one position at a time. No legislator can simultaneously defend inconsistent positions. So too, there is a big difference between Congress and academic debate. It is difficult, however, to conceive how debaters and judges will be able to thoroughly evaluate two evolving policies that constantly change from within a single debate. The key distinction is that Congress has the luxury of modifying the debate format to allow detailed preparations and discussions. Congressional debates can span weeks or months, with lengthy breaks to study options and formulate new positions. Such detailed scrutiny is not possible within the present debate format. As Rowland has cautioned, "there is not time in the one hour of a debate to compare the affirmative plan and case against a wide variety of alternatives."¹⁷ And, while realism is an important consideration, it is necessarily subordinate to debatability concerns.¹⁸

Third, it might be argued that such a view of debate unfairly restricts negative options. Although not arguing for equity, Zerjav has argued that "the result of expanding the use of conditional argumentation is to expand negative options."¹⁹ This would, presumably, have the effect of greatly

¹⁷Robert C. Rowland, "Debate Paradigms: A Critical Evaluation," in Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation, edited by George Ziegelmüller and Jack Rhodes (Annandale, Va.: Speech Communication Association, 1981), p. 461.

¹⁸Robert C. Rowland, "The Relationship Between Realism and Debatability in Policy Advocacy," Journal of the American Forensic Association 22 (1986): 125-134.

¹⁹Zerjav, p. 60.

increasing the negative's chance for winning any debate. This argument takes on new meaning given the breadth of recent resolutions and the affirmative's ability to defend but a single example of the resolution. If anything, a case could be made that recent trends have only accentuated the need for allowing the negative more flexibility.

The argument from fairness lacks compulsion. At face value, debate can never be unfair so long as all advocates have a chance for the competitive advantage. Since the present format forces debaters to switch sides, any advantage implicit within either side of the resolution will eventually even out. Consequently, any advantage is transitory at best. Moreover, such an argument works only if one presupposes debate to be nothing more than a game. However, debate is more than a game. We should never be willing to tolerate inferior quality arguments on competitive grounds.

None of the common defenses offered are adequate to sustain the case for conditional argumentation. Allowing such claims in debate would not make for a more rigorous comparison of policies, it would not make debate unreal or artificial, nor would it unfairly restrict negative options. Upon closer examination it becomes apparent that conditional arguments are non-arguments. Conditional argumentation can also be rejected on purely pragmatic grounds. That is, even assuming that conditional claims could constitute meaningful argument, such claims should not be allowed within academic debate. For all these reasons, conditional argumentation should be discouraged in academic debate.