

DRINKING FROM OUR OWN SKULLS: THE RHETORICAL INVERSION OF LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATE

by
Jason Baldwin

I had hoped to write something kinder, but LD is in a bad way, and there is no point in pretending otherwise. In its supposedly most competitive and elite venues, it is degenerating into an inarticulate jumble of bad thinking, bad speaking, and bad manners. Many of the coaches closest to the meltdown seem unaware or, worse, untroubled by it. In the case of many of the students I observe, it is no longer clear to me that participation in LD does them more good than harm. It is absolutely clear to me that many of the parents and schools who pay for LD

skills we taught. But increasingly, we see and hear from students confronting an ugly dilemma: if they practice the skills we have worked hard to teach them, they will lose to students who are less informed, less thoughtful, and less eloquent but who are more willing to exploit often inane debate conventions and to pander to increasingly clubby LD judges. Like most teachers, it pains me to see my students forced to choose between developing bad habits and losing. I am eager to see them grow and prosper as intellectually skilled people, and I want the incentives of LD to encourage rather than discourage their progress.

This essay attempts to sketch (very roughly) the nature of LD's problems, to challenge the mistaken beliefs behind those problems, and to motion toward possible solutions. Although my goal is constructive (I would not write if I did not hope that doing so might help), my tone is critical, at times harshly so. In order to minimize the amount of personal offense generated by my criticism, I write at a regrettably high level of generality. I believe the problems I write about are widespread enough to merit widespread concern,

....."LD requires a combination of skills not found in any other activity, and learning to do it well is a unique kind of achievement"

on account of its supposed educational value are being conned.

My interest in this subject is two-fold: First, my four years of LD were the most academically valuable experience I had in high school. They made me a better researcher, reader, thinker, writer, and speaker. I got more out of college than many of my fellow undergraduates because, thanks to debate, I came in with a huge head start. And while I cannot say that debate has made my graduate career easy, it may be true that debate has made it possible—without the skills I honed in LD, I would probably not be able to hold my own in a field (philosophy) where most students are smarter and more knowledgeable than I am. So LD gave me abilities and therefore opportunities which I wouldn't otherwise enjoy. For this reason, I value "the activity" and am jealous to see its value preserved for other students. I am also grateful to the coaches and judges who structured my LD experience around the right educational ends, and I want to see their honorable legacy preserved. My second interest is for the students I have had the privilege to teach as a summer LD lecturer and sometime coach. My colleagues and I have focused more on teaching the kinds of skills I mentioned above than on teaching "how-to" tips for winning LD rounds. Until fairly recently, we trusted that, on the whole, the course of a student's debate career would reward the mastery of the

but I have obviously reached this conclusion on the basis of experiences which are, from the reader's perspective, merely anecdotal. I would be delighted if this essay is irrelevant to most *Rostrum* readers because it responds to conditions that do not obtain in their neck of the forensic woods. But it is difficult to say if those who reject the picture I am painting do so because they view a different landscape or because they view the same landscape through different (and I would say diseased) eyes. And I do not apologize too much, because the ready agreement of *all* of my intended audience would suggest that I had failed to make myself clear.

I. Rhetorical Inversion

Many readers will already have noticed some of the symptoms of perverted debate in LD: First and most obviously, the quality of speaking has declined dramatically. Many LD students now speak too quickly to be understood by normal educated listeners, and they speak in broken strings of ungrammatical pronouns, jargon, and generic debate phrases. Little to none of the speech in a typical elimination round makes any clear claim about the truth of whatever resolution is being debated. Some of the worst speakers and their fawning judges openly celebrate poor speaking as a mark of deep and nuanced thought, although I have never heard the connection between the two explained; my teachers, who have in-

L
D

D
e
b
a
t
e

cluded at least a few (by my lights) deep and nuanced thinkers, have consistently criticized obscure or slovenly expression.

A second symptom of LD's decline is the increasingly successful appeal to topic-dodging arguments as the basis of decisions. Winning has now become a matter of exploiting petty debate conventions or impugning the character of one's opponent rather than offering straightforward reasons for or against the given resolution. Some debaters spew out coach-written lists of trivial objections, hoping that one or another of them will be "dropped" by an opponent due to time limits. Some debaters fabricate elaborate and abusive definitions and statements of burdens to distort the clear sense of a resolution to their own advantage. Some debaters quibble over their opponents' diction for its lack of political or debate-culture correctness. In many rounds, these extraneous considerations replace serious reasoning about the resolution being debated; that is, a normal educated listener would say after hearing such a debate that neither speaker had offered good reasons to conclude that the resolution was true or false.

To the extent that debaters do offer arguments about the resolution, they are often very poor arguments, little more than assertions claiming "bad impacts" to such hopelessly vague notions as "societal welfare," "democratic legitimacy," and "rights trivialization." The prevalence and success of these sorts of arguments are a third symptom of LD's woes. Such phrases have become the unchallenged currency of LD, and their vacuity is disguised, in part, by the elaborate chains of asserted empirical causation leading up to them. That is, action-type A is asserted to cause effect B is asserted to cause effect C is asserted to cause effect D is asserted to cause a decrease in societal welfare. By making these causal chains sufficiently long, convoluted, and numerous, speakers deflect the scrutiny that might properly attach to any given link in any given chain. Speakers seem unaware that such arguments are often narrowly utilitarian, and they also seem unaware that there are powerful non-utilitarian arguments for this or that moral or political proposition, arguments which are often more intuitively plausible and less causally baroque than their utilitarian alternatives. Speakers rarely support their ambitious empirical assertions with the detailed empirical evidence those assertions require. Any evidence that is presented is reduced after its first hurried reading to the author's last name ("extend the Bozo analysis"—some of the "best" LD judges now treat such empty commands as reasons for decision); its content and quality are rarely scrutinized. Many students, coaches, and judges seem to believe that such arguments are just what LD is supposed to be about, and they debate, coach, and judge accordingly.

A fourth symptom of LD's deterioration is the increasing reliance, even by well-established teams, on mail-order evidence and arguments. These briefs are generally of poor quality, but since many of the undergraduates who produce them were successful debaters, it is assumed that the briefs must contain material as good or better than what current LDers could generate for themselves. The result is the atrophy of research skills and the homogenization of arguments made on a given resolution. (Some people might also wonder if judging students who are using arguments one has sold them involves some conflict of interest, but several prominent LD judges apparently do just that.) The growing financial support of this trend by students and coaches may suggest that they are more concerned with keeping up with the competition or with winning for the sake of winning than they are with developing the research and argument skills successful debaters once ac-

quired. (In many non-debate contexts, the practice of passing off other people's work as one's own is called "cheating" or "plagiarism," and it is still frowned upon by academics.)

No doubt careful observers of the LD scene could identify other symptoms of debate gone awry. What such observers may not recognize is that these are symptoms of a single disease. I could catalog and dissect many of the individual symptoms, but that is not my goal here. If we want to kill the hydra, we must attack its body rather than swinging at the hideous faces it sprouts. The body of the LD hydra is a set of beliefs about the nature and purposes of debate. Most of the people who hold these beliefs do so unreflectively, so the beliefs might be thought of more as an outlook than as a creed. It is the largely unreflective character of this outlook which gives me hope that some of those who presently hold it will reject it if they reflect on it. I am going to summarize the outlook as best I can in the mouth of an imaginary adherent; thus the quotation marks. To be clear, what follows is a statement of beliefs I reject; Part II will discuss my reasons for rejecting them. Behold, then, the body of the beast:

"LD is properly pursued as an end in itself. It requires a combination of skills not found in any other activity, and learning to do it well is a unique kind of achievement. The standards of excellence in LD evolve with the practices of those whom the debate community identifies as the best LD debaters. Members of the LD community are uniquely competent to decide what counts as good LD. In this respect, LD is no different from other complex organized human practices: gymnasts are uniquely competent to decide what counts as a good dismount, surgeons are uniquely competent to decide what counts as a good suture, and LD coaches and judges are uniquely competent to decide what counts as a good 1AR.

"Sadly, LD has for much of its short history been treated like the neglected stepchild of forensics, left to the care of mere 'sponsors' rather than professional debate coaches, and judged by parents, bus drivers, and other rustics. But at least in its upper echelons, LD has come into its own, with a circuit of elite national tournaments where the most skilled and forward-looking LDers, coached by professional LD coaches and fortified by the genius of professional LD evidence peddlers, can be judged exclusively by a pool of chipper young LD experts. Any competitive activity should be run by its best and brightest, and LDers should be grateful that their activity now has the resources to chart its own future rather than answering to demands imposed from the outside by people who prefer dueling oratory to real debate and who (among their other incapacities) are unable to wipe their slates of feeling and opinion blank enough to be good judges. If such people question the value or even the intelligibility of high-level LD, they are merely exposing their own ignorance and presumption in criticizing an intellectual discipline which they do not understand and which is really none of their business. Nobody would ask a bus driver for his opinion of a commercial real estate appraiser or an abstract painter, and likewise, no one should ask him for his opinion of an LD debater. Good LD debaters and judges are a lot smarter than the average Joe or Joanna, and no one should be surprised when smart people invent new ways of doing things (like debating) which less smart people cannot understand."

II. The Proper Place of LD

The above-summarized view of LD as an autonomous, specialized discipline is an inversion in two senses: first, it is a turning inwards of the LD community away from the larger world of human

criticism and concern; this type of inversion is rapidly transforming LD into a kind of intellectual incest and producing predictably ugly progeny. This first type of inversion is an instance of the second, more general sense of inversion—that sense in which current LD has inverted the proper scale of educational value and authority, allowing the temptations of prideful ignorance and self-congratulatory obscurantism to trump the educational goals which have traditionally been cited as debate's reason for being. In this section, I want to sketch a better picture of LD, commenting on problems with the inverted picture along the way.

LD is an educational game. It is not an autonomous guild or discipline with its own unique task or subject matter. Its only justifying purpose is to teach the students who practice it skills and knowledge which will improve the quality of their actions and lives outside the game. The skills are debate's primary aim and include the abilities to research thoroughly and read carefully, to think critically about important moral questions, and to write and speak precisely and eloquently. The accompanying knowledge may include a familiarity with important theories in moral and political philosophy and a basic acquaintance with the facts and issues relevant to a variety of important ethical controversies.

None of the issues LD confronts, and none of the tools it deploys to confront those issues, is the special province of high school debate. Neither debaters nor their coaches invented the standards of valid reasoning or persuasive rhetoric. The resolutions selected for discussion raise questions of the broadest human concern, questions which no professional expertise alone can answer. Defenders of the inverted outlook typically behave as if there were arguments so subtle and advanced that only the jargon and conventions of debate could express them. This is not a very plausible suggestion, for it entails that there are good arguments for or against the truth of moral and political propositions which cannot be understood by people outside the world of scholastic debate. It entails, for instance, that there may be arguments about distributive justice which neither Thomas Aquinas nor John Locke nor Robert Nozick could have understood without first learning about high school debate. (Anyone who can take this suggestion and its implications seriously is not going to be persuaded by anything else I have to say.) There is no unoccupied chunk of intellectual turf which the academy has left to debaters to colonize, and no special method of investigation which LD employs to give it a lock on some fraction of the truth.

One might think that cutting-edge LD seeks to function not as its own academic discipline but as the high school surrogate of some other established discipline, a discipline with complex theory, forbidding jargon, and specialized professional norms. One likely candidate discipline would be philosophy, but as someone who knows a little about that subject, I can vouch that current LD does not much resemble what philosophers do. Philosophers strive for clarity and logical soundness, and they do not try to “dump” as many “turns” as possible on anyone's “flow.” Friends in political science tell me that LD does not much resemble what they do, either. I suppose there may be corners of “literary theory” or “education theory” which approach the jargon-caked pretension, intellectual vacancy, and rhetorical inversion of some current branches of high school debate, but these are not fields I would wish for students to emulate.

The value of debate is purely instrumental, to equip students to lead more thoughtful, informed, critical, and eloquent lives. There are other (and arguably better) ways to acquire every one of

the skills debate can teach, but good debate training is distinctive in teaching so many important skills at once and in using a competitive format to motivate students to pursue those skills intensely. Once the purely instrumental value of debate is acknowledged, the inverted picture of LD collapses in on itself. For there are no standards of argumentative excellence peculiar to debate, no sense of “good LD” intelligible apart from such mundane (if rarely exemplified) notions as “critical reading,” “sound reasoning,” “clear writing,” and “polished speaking.”

And so, likewise, there are no LD experts uniquely qualified to judge the excellence of LD speakers. Any person of sound and open mind can listen to an exchange of arguments on a topic of widespread moral concern and criticize the logical and rhetorical skill of the speakers. I have met a fair number of bus drivers, and I would welcome many of them as more honest and reasonable critics for my debate students than some of today's “top” LD judges. (I would also try to avoid talking in ways that demean the value and intelligence of people who earn an honest living driving buses, especially if I were sensitive to the stereotyping of other sorts of people.) This is not to suggest that all people are equally acute listeners or equally effective teachers, but it is to suggest that there is no magic in being a professional debate judge or coach which equips one to comprehend and criticize a high school LD round.

Like all educational games, healthy debate must accommodate two perspectives. On the one hand is the internal perspective of the players of the game, from which it appears that the point and purpose of the game is to win in whatever artificial terms the game defines. In the case of LD, this first perspective is that of the debaters, whose immediate aim is to win ballots, trophies, and (in extreme cases) TOC bids. On the other hand is the perspective of the teachers who design and administer the game. From this external perspective, the point and purpose of the game is to teach students something they might not otherwise learn. The rules of the game create a framework in which the players will learn what they are supposed to learn by pursuing incentives such as grades and prizes, incentives which are connected, via the rules of the game, to the game's deeper educational goals. In a well-functioning game, the prizes are reliably attached to educational achievement, and vice versa.

When educational games become inverted, prizes and educational achievement come apart, because the second, defining perspective of the game becomes obscured. This may occur either because the teachers who define the game lose sight of its original educational purposes and themselves take on the internal, prize-focused perspective of the student players, *or* because the teachers cease to administer the game, ceding control to people who do not understand or respect the game's defining educational purposes. I will say more about the second of these failures in Part III, but the recent degeneration of LD involves both failures, and any blame rests finally on the adults who have, wittingly or not, abandoned their responsibility to administer the game their students are playing. No one should blame students for acting on the incentives their teachers have provided them. (The purpose of these last remarks is to excuse students. Anyone tempted to deflect criticism by accusing me of hypocrisy should understand that I am more committed to the truth of what I am saying here than to my own innocence.)

As the players' perspective becomes the only perspective, an inverted game takes on a life of its own and evolves into an

ever-more-specialized and irrelevant community. It rejects its original responsibility to game-independent standards of excellence. The game comes to resemble the sort of self-justifying, autonomous practice characterized by the inverted picture of LD sketched above. The beliefs and suggestions of those outside the game are denigrated as uncultured and inferior to those of insiders. And, of course, the game ceases to be an effective educational tool, because its incentives train students in habits of no positive value (and sometimes of negative value) outside the game. This is how things stand in LD, at least in that ingrown, infected segment of LD which I am trying to lance.

III. Toward a Restoration

If my diagnosis of LD's ailment is correct, the obvious solution is to restore a proper sense of LD's instrumental character and of the extra-debate ends it serves. Such restoration would require much more than a vague assent to educational platitudes of the sort we debate types are apt to chant when pumping outsiders for money; it would require many specific and, in the current climate, difficult changes by coaches in the way they coach and the way they run tournaments. Many more experienced coaches are better placed than I am to recognize and implement the needed changes; I would be delighted if interested coaches began to exchange ideas about this subject with me and with each other, perhaps through the pages of this magazine.

But before I turn to some specimen proposals of my own, I want to call attention to the value of general reflection of just the sort which I am saying cannot by itself solve our problem. I suspect that the inversion I am criticizing would never have gained a foothold if more of us had spent more time asking ourselves why we do what we do. Coaching is demanding enough to fill every waking moment (and then some!) with the demands of the here and now—this topic, this student, this round, this judge, this phone call, this paperwork. One need not make a grand or evil resolve to invert the educational order of debate in order to slowly but surely be driven off the right course. Perhaps the best single thing coaches could do for the welfare of their students and of debate would be to practice asking the question, "How will this [action, habit, advice, decision, silence] affect these students' education as thinkers and speakers in their lives after debate?" It is an obvious truth that reflective, self-aware coaches are more likely to achieve their educational goals than are coaches who react only to the contingencies of the moment with the resources of the moment.

And now, a bit (but only a bit) of detail. I argued above that a well-administered educational game must key its rewards to its educational goals. In the case of debate, the rewards are ballots, speaker points, and trophies. And so it follows that the judge's role is crucially important in effective debate education. Yet judging is an area where the teachers who should control the debate game have too often ceded their authority to people with no clear sense of debate's purposes. As a result, the rewards and the educational purposes have separated, and students must now often choose between arguing well and winning LD rounds. (Times were when I would tell students frustrated with a loss that *they* were the ones to blame; those times are sadly past.)

How have even very good LD coaches ceded their power to not so good judges? By hiring ex-debaters to do all their judging. As a group, college-age judges are much less likely than are older coaches to have an appreciation for standards of rhetorical excellence outside the latest fads of high school debate. (To be clear, the comments below do not apply to all college-age judges, and

they do apply to some post-college-age judges, and even [unfortunately] to some coaches.) Many younger judges have spent their entire intellectual lives inside the debate bubble, and they have no larger educational perspective from which to assess this or that student practice. They are, however, extremely bright people who have become bored with the first-order issues relevant to specific resolutions and who have therefore developed an aesthetic attraction to debate theory and to "non-standard" arguments as ways to continue their intellectual diversions within the worlds of high school and college debate. Uninterested in the basic skills which LD was originally designed to teach and which LD students still desperately need to acquire, these young bohemians work, through their decisions, their critiques, and their hired-gun coaching, to move LD in a theoretical direction which they find interesting and which confirms their status as the vanguard of an intellectual elite, regardless of how silly the result may look to the wider (but, of course, benighted) world. One specimen of the sort of judge I am describing has recently written in defense of LD jargon that "Jargon solidifies our existence as an elite group that excludes the uninitiated from our ranks."

My point in saying these things is not to attack college judges; many of them (Thank goodness, and thank them!) are exceptions to my generalizations, and for many who aren't, it's not their fault they lack the eyes of seasoned educators (or even the uncorrupted eyes of bus drivers). They are doing what they are asked and paid to do by the coaches and tournament directors who hire them. Their involvement is celebrated as "giving back to the activity," and it saves overworked coaches from the exhausting chore of listening to (increasingly bad) debates. So my first suggestion is that regular adult coaches judge debates whenever they can and that tournament directors prefer coaches to college students as judges, *especially* in high-profile elimination rounds. Of course, my hope is that coaches will in their role as judges encourage educationally valuable practices and discourage educationally harmful practices.

And when coaches cannot judge debates themselves, my second suggestion is that they try to include more parents, teachers, and community members from outside of debate. Such people do *not* need, and should not receive, extensive training in the conventions of LD in order to be effective judges. The very point of including them is to make students accountable to the ordinary norms of good speaking and argument which LD now often ignores. There's no harm in offering new judges some tips on optional note taking, but they should be made to understand that it is the students' job to persuade them, not their job to conform to the students.

I am well aware of the unfair partiality which "lay judges" sometimes display; I am also well aware of the similar partiality which professional debate judges sometimes display. But I cannot make any sense of the notion of a "*tabula rasa* judge." Such a person would, among other unfortunate traits, be unable to understand spoken English, or even to use a bathroom. (I have wondered how much of the phrase's debate appeal might vanish if it no longer bestowed the thrill of casual Latin-dropping.) The only hint of sense I can detect in those judges who advertise their own mental blankness may be summed up in two (and perhaps the only two) instructions which every new judge should be given: (1) Recuse yourself from any round in which the winner would be a foregone conclusion for you. (2) Do not make your decision on the basis of arguments unrelated to those presented in the round,

even if such arguments *are* related to the resolution at hand. Note that this second counsel does not preclude what many LD types would consider “judge intervention.” It allows judges to evaluate for themselves the claims students make, as any intelligent listener and responsible teacher should. Within these wide boundaries, judges ought be preserved in as pure a state of pre-debate good sense and innocence as possible.

A third suggestion is that judges begin to take speaker points seriously. What were once 30- or 50-point performance scales have now been reduced to 3- or 4-point scales—every student is rated as “excellent” or “superior.” A soft-hearted judge could do a lot of good by availing himself of only the top half of the points scale, and a hard-hearted judge could do even more good by availing himself of all of it. Many tournaments make some to-do about penalizing the students of “low-point judges,” thus discouraging the honest and direct evaluation of student speaking. Such tournaments should rethink those policies, but until they do, friends of LD should do their best to ignore them.

A fourth and final suggestion is that tournaments not allow students and their coaches to rank and strike judges. The very notion of student competitors selecting their adult judges is almost laughably perverse, and it has provoked dropped-jaw, incredulous stares from the sampling of educated non-debate adults to whom I’ve mentioned it. But it is a notion increasingly popular at the biggest and most prestigious “national circuit” tournaments. The effect of such policies, intended or not, is predictable: judges from outside the tribe, including any prone to question the emperor’s attire, are rigorously excluded from the pool. An acquaintance of mine who has had the temerity to criticize some of the LD trends I have discussed recently found himself struck from every panel on the last day of a large Texas tournament where he had volunteered his time to judge—a tournament which he had won as a competitor. As one jaundiced student observed afterward in an online forum, “Round after round, the behavior contin-

ues and nobody on the panels says anything. When they do, ‘strike.’” The immunity to outside challenge and criticism which judge preference and strike policies provide is the antithesis of the ideals of public reasoning good debate should promote. Any judge who cannot be trusted to recuse himself from conflicts of interest should be removed from the judging pool altogether; any judge good enough to be in the pool should be good enough to judge any students to whom he is not specially connected. Once again, the players inside the game cannot be faulted for availing themselves of an officially sanctioned chance to rig their juries. It is the sanctioning officials who should revise their policies to better align them with the game’s educational purposes. Barring responsible changes by tournament directors on this issue, concerned judges can simply (but vocally) refuse to judge at tournaments which practice such exclusionary tactics. For my part, I will not waste my time judging at any tournament which trusts debaters to evaluate me more than it trusts me to evaluate debaters.

There are doubtless other and important ways the current LD situation could be changed for the better, to align it more closely with the right educational ends of the game. And judging is not the only area for reform. My aim in this essay has hardly been to give a full prescription for the ways LD might be cured. I have simply tried to call attention to a problem and to gesture, however feebly, toward its solution. My hope is that some of the many talented and dedicated coaches who share my educational ambitions for LD students will correct, enlarge on, and refine the ideas I have presented here. If nothing else, some other concerned teacher may be encouraged to learn that he or she is not alone.

(Jason Baldwin is a Ph.D student in Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame and the longtime LD coordinator of the Kentucky National Debate Institute. In the early 1990’s, Mr. Baldwin compiled the most “national circuit” titles in the history of LD, among them St. Mark’s, the Glenbrooks, Emory, and the TOC. Many of Mr. Baldwin’s articles can be found in the NFL’s online archive.)