

# INHERENCY, STRATEGY AND ACADEMIC DEBATE

by  
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According to most debate text authors, judges, and coaches, there are four stock issues, or burdens of proof, that an affirmative team must meet to have a prima facie case. These issues are topicality, harms, solvency, and inherency. Topicality is simple to understand, as it only asks whether the affirmative team is upholding the resolution. Harms (which includes significance) is also not difficult to comprehend. It only asks if the problem is serious enough to act on. Solvency asks whether the affirmative plan can fix the problems. Inherency, however, is much less clear. Not only is inherency a poorly defined issue, but there is also a question of whether or not it is an issue at all. This article will attempt to define the issue of inherency and identify when inherency is or is not a voting issue in a debate round.

## Definitions of Inherency<sup>1</sup>

To begin this discussion, it is necessary to define what inherency is. There are several views as to what "inherency" means. The most simplistic view, meaning easiest and clearest to understand, defines inherency as why smart and reasonable people allow dumb or bad things to happen (Grassmick, 1995). This provides a basic understanding of what inherency is, but it is not enough. While this definition does cover the basic question, it leaves out a few important points such as a bright line, a method of proof, and standards. More precise views of inherency make these distinctions and make inherency into a usable debate argument.

The first view asks if the affirmative plan is the only way to get the advantages; that is, are the advantages inherent to the plan? This falls under the general definition as asking why, if the plan is so good, does the present system not act on it? The affirmative would claim that there is that there is

something preventing the present system from accruing the advantages. This view of inherency merges the issues of inherency and solvency. If a plan *uniquely* gains an advantage by implementing a *particular* strategy and that is the *only* strategy that will work, then the advantages are linked with the plan so much that they have become inherent to the plan. If this claim is made, the negative can attack inherency by removing solvency. If the plan cannot solve, it cannot gain the advantages, and therefore the advantages are no longer inherent to the plan.

A **second** specific view of inherency asks, "can the problem be solved without resolutive action?" Sometimes there are problems that must be solved before it is too late. This does not mean, however, that the resolution is the *only* way to do so. If the negative chooses to admit that there is a problem in the real world, it has three options. The negative can counterplan. A counterplan admits that there is no mechanism in the present system that can solve and that major action must be taken (i.e. it admits that there is inherency). A second option is to perform a minor repair: to take some action that does not adopt the resolution, but still fixes the problem. This does admit some level of harms, but if the harms can be solved for without adopting the resolution, then there are no inherent barriers to change. The third negative strategy is to say, "a change to solve the problem is already in the works." This was popular with the national health insurance topic. Many negatives would say, "if we wait for X number of years, the Clinton plan will be passed, and there will be insurance for everyone." Such a claim, if true, would mean that there would be no reason to choose the resolution over the present system, since any resolutive action would be done by the system anyway.

The **third** view of inherency is unrelated to the effects of the resolution or of the plan. It asks instead, "what blocks the

plan from being done now?" There are three levels of inherency accepted in today's debate community. The first is also the oldest. It is structural inherency. This type of inherency identifies laws, treaties, court rulings, or executive orders that prevent the proposed affirmative plan. If for example, the affirmative wanted to import avocados from Mexico, current laws that say the United States cannot do so would provide a clear structural barrier (i.e. a law that must be repealed first). Also under structural inherency are structural gaps. Although no current laws blocks the plan in the present system, the current actions of the present system do not go far enough in what they do. If, for example, the United States limited its use of weapons of mass destruction toward Russia already, but the treaty did not mention China, there would be a structural gap when it came to limiting use against China. The second level of inherency is attitudinal inherency. This identifies any deep-set feelings that would prevent the plan from being done now. For example, if the plan were to enact more species protection laws, the attitudes of many congresspeople would prevent them from approving the plan in the present system. Structural inherency is easier to prove but attitudes are almost as strong, although they do have the propensity to change. The final type of inherency is existential inherency. Existential inherency states that if the harms exist and the plan has not been done, there *must* be *something* blocking action, even if we do not know what it is. Existential inherency relies on several assumptions:

- 1) no one is acting on any level.
- 2) no one is interested in acting now.
- 3) there is no propensity for any level of change.
- 4) there are no alternate solutions being proposed now.

Each of these assumptions is faulty, as there is undoubtedly someone trying to do the plan, especially if the authors for the sol-

<sup>1</sup>See Cox, 1975 and Cherwitz & Hikins, 1977, for an expanded discussion of the definitions of inherency discussed in this section.

veny section actually advocate the plan. Even if a minor official in an obscure branch of government writes a memo on the affirmative plan, then the present system has taken some level of action on the plan, making claims of existential inherency illegitimate.

### Practices of Inherency

Although inherency has been defined as a theoretical issue, this has not been the way that inherency has been used in debate rounds over the years. Inherency has been around since the beginning of formal academic debate. In this time, its role in the activity has changed substantially. According to Meredith Garmon, inherency has been an issue that has never carried much weight in a debate round. According to his post to CEDA-L,

Coaches up through the 60s almost universally told their students that [inherency was [a voting issue]. And INs during that period used to scream about inherency on the assumption that it was a v.i. ...But a careful analysis of **all** debate ballots **ever** written will reveal that the only time a negative team ever won a round on an inherency issue was in 1957 -- Abner Sidlebrow from a small Midwestern college voted for Northwest Iowa's second team over Southern Idaho A&M, and his ballot comment was, "The minor repair the negative proposes would solve the problem, thus making resolitional action unnecessary." (Garmon 1995)

While this story is a humorous one, it does underscore a serious point: some people do not believe that inherency is important. Other judges, however, consider inherency to be an important issue. Also, several debaters have found that inherency can be made into a winning issue in today's debate rounds. A brief overview of inherency, though, shows that the actual history of debate has been one of devolution of the inherency standard from a prime issue to one that is largely ignored.

Just after the turn of the century, inherency was considered an essential issue. According to Glen Strickland (1995), structural inherency arguments were the heaviest burden for affirmative teams to carry at this time. As such, many teams were able to argue that there was nothing in the present system stopping the plan, making

resolitional action was unnecessary. During the 1950s and 1960s, negative teams were successful at arguing this point, and many won national level tournaments on inherency alone. During the 1970s and 1980s, the importance of inherency declined. While it was still possible to win the inherency argument, the issue was held to a higher standard and was rarely used in close rounds (McGee, 1995). Lower standards for meeting the burden of inherency were due to the introduction of new modes of inherency. As attitudinal and existential inherency became more popular, structural barriers became a kind of "pseudo-inherency" and were no longer necessary for a prima facie case (Schunk, 1978). In the 1990s, though, judging philosophies were less and less likely to view inherency as a central issue in a debate (Pettus, 1991).

Inherency still has a place in debate rounds. Rather than being a jurisdictional issue like topicality, inherency is now used to gain strategic advantages in the debate. Inherency attacks commonly set up disadvantages in the following way:

**1N:** The plan has already been done, so there is no need for plan action, right?

**2A:** No, nothing has been done in the present system. Nothing at all. The plan is the only way to get advantages.

**2N:** Aha! So, your plan makes this new disadvantage unique and this uniqueness comes from your own answers! (Cackles with glee).

Obviously, this dialogue is oversimplified. Yet, when it comes down to an actual debate round, this tactic is one way to link a largely irrelevant (to the plan) disadvantage to the affirmative. Whatever the affirmative claim as the inherent barrier can be turned into proof that there is no risk of disadvantages occurring in the status quo.

The other use for inherency today seems to be to waste as much of the affirmative team's time as possible. While there are a few judges who will consider inherency to be a vital issue, a randomly selected judge from the national judging is unlikely to vote on inherency. Rather, she will probably allow the negative to drop the discussion of inherency because, even if the affirmative shows it is inherent, winning a single stock issue does not win an entire debate round. Because time will have to be spent answering inherency, this leaves less time for other issues, making it easier for the negative to capitalize on strategic er-

rors. There may be, however, more effective forms of inherency argumentation, a subject explored later in this article.

Since inherency is a voting issue with some judges, we must ask how a judge should react to an inherency argument. Again, there are three basic ways for a judge to react to an inherency argument: accept it, reject it, or let the debaters fight it out. The last of these reactions is probably the most common and the most acceptable to both judges and debaters. Following the basic guidelines of a tabula rasa judge, in this setting inherency is debatable, just as topicality is debatable. If inherency is purely debatable, then there are no preconceived notions as to the worth of the argument going into the round. The judge will look at her sheet at the end of the round and, if enough of the inherency attacked is carried across the flow, then her only justifiable decision would be to vote on inherency. If the negative presents the inherency violation as a voting issue, and if the affirmative fails to respond adequately, then just like a dropped topicality argument, the negative could win on this argument alone.

There are also some judges for whom inherency is, was, and always will be an absolute voting issue. The judge who automatically accepts inherency as a voting issue would operate along a stock issues paradigm. Because she assumes that there is a set of arguments the affirmative must win to have any place in the debate, each one be independently proven for a prima facie case. For this judge, a lack of inherency is as important as a lack of solvency or being non-topical is. If a list of negative inherency answers were read, this judge would automatically assume the impacts of these arguments without requiring the debaters to make it for her. While this does assume some level of intervention by the judge, if she makes her paradigm clear at the beginning of the round, then all debaters should be aware that this third party intervention may happen and should adapt accordingly. Perhaps the most interesting part of this judge's philosophy is, however, that technicalities on inherency may be enough to win, regardless of how the team fares on the rest of the argumentation. If the affirmative can provide even a smidgen of inherency, the affirmative has technically passed this text. Alternatively, if the negative can supply a single point that shows the plan is being done, that one thing may be enough to sway the judges ballot on inherency.

The third reaction to inherency is to automatically discount it. Tim Mahoney argues that inherency is not a voting issue and actually makes the negative team look worse for running it (1995). According to him, inherency is not a voting issue because the attack can be answered on the existential level. Additionally, if a plan is expected in the future, as in the NHI example discussed earlier, there will always be the option of claiming that the plan is needed because a few days more of solvency is naturally better. When time issues are examined this way, inherency loses meaning because, even if the plan will be done *soon* by the present system, the one day's advantage of having the plan *now* is a net benefit to the affirmative case.

In addition to giving the affirmative this added weight, the inherency arguments may also discredit other negative arguments. If the plan is already going to be put into effect and the negative claims that the plan also will not solve, then either the inherency argument or the solvency argument is illegitimate. This occurs because one cannot claim that a plan will both solve for the problem and will not solve for the problem; the two contradict. Also, inherency arguments injure the uniqueness of disadvantages. If the present system will already do the affirmative plan, then it will also accrue the disadvantages that are applied to case (with the exception of time-delay disadvantages), making the status quo no less harmful than doing the affirmative plan.

### An Alternative Interpretation

There is, however, an alternative to viewing inherency as either valid or invalid in all cases. Because inherency is a debatable issue, there are times when inherency is always a voting issue and other times when inherency is never a voting issue. The conditions for each type will be described under what I call scrolling inherency theory. Under scrolling inherency theory, all of the previous inherency arguments are included as legitimate. There are no changes in the levels of inherency. The only change is whether or not inherency argumentation is a legitimate tactic for a particular case and plan. Unlike conventional inherency theory, which examines whether the plan will be implemented in the status quo, scrolling theory asks if the present system will act *before the impacts of the advantages occur*.

There are two types of advantages: single impactful advantages and continual

impactful advantages. The first assumes that at a given time a given impact will occur once, such as a nuclear strike or an invasion from space with disastrous consequences. This single impact will be large enough on its own so that it does not need to happen again and again to have great physical, social, or moral impacts. The second type of advantage assumes that a continuous problem, such as murders, acid rain, or heart disease, is the impact. These impacts occur repeatedly and each time the harms grow collectively worse.

Under scrolling inherency theory, inherency would be a voting issue on single impactful advantages, but not on continuous impactful advantages. This happens for the same reasons as why time-delay counterplans also solve for the affirmative harms. In the following scenarios, I will use scrolling inherency theory to explain why inherency is or is not a voting issue in the round.

**Scenario 1:** 1AC claims that global warming will destroy the planet if United States emissions standards are not adopted by 2010, the cutoff date for taking effective action. The affirmative plan is to cut emissions today. 1NC grants the advantage scenario and makes the argument that the United States will adopt emissions standards in 2006. A disadvantage claims emissions standards hurt business growth by 10 per cent each year. 2A claims that this is non-unique because of inherency argumentation.

Under scrolling inherency theory, the inherency argument is a winning one for the negative team as the warming advantage has a single impact and the present system will take action before that impact occurs. Since affirmative evidence indicates that there is a specific date by which action must be taken, any solvent action put into effect *before* that date will avoid the harm. Since the present system will adopt the standards for global warming before the date indicated in the affirmative evidence, the present system will solve for the catastrophic impacts. Although the affirmative does implement emissions standards before the present system does, there is no net benefit, as no other advantages are identified. The disadvantage does apply to both sides. Since the affirmative acts 5 years before the present system does, the net disadvantage is that the affirmative hurts business for one year longer than the negative

will. The fact that the United States will meet the time-frame (i.e. there is not inherency) is key to the success of the other arguments in the negative strategy.

**Scenario 2:** 1AC claims that every day 5 children die of child abuse. The affirmative plan is to conduct child abuse prevention education which will solve the problem immediately. 1NC claims that the federal government will implement the same program in 2005, so there is no inherency. Both teams win their solvency arguments. An economics disadvantage is placed on case by 1N. 2A claims that the disadvantage applies equally well to the negative.

Under scrolling inherency, the negative inherency argument actually helps the affirmative in this round. Since the advantage has a continuous impact, every day that the plan or status quo future plan is not in effect is equal to five more deaths. Since both teams solve equally well, the time period becomes very important. Since there are five more years worth of deaths prevented by doing the plan now and not waiting, this serves as a net benefit to the plan. The disadvantage applies to each team equally well, but the negative hurts the economy for five fewer years. At the end of the round, the judge must weigh the economic scenario against 6,750 lives. Although this is a difficult decision in real life, the assumed sanctity of human life should win this round handily for the affirmative.

**Scenario 3:** 1AC presents a case with two advantages. Advantage 1 is that Americans are not learning enough now, more funding will better educate them. Advantage 2 is that if students are not adequately funded within the next ten years, the United States will lose its global leadership. 1N claims that Bush's educational reforms will adequately fund schools in 2006, and therefore there is no inherency. No disadvantages are presented.

Under scrolling inherency theory, the inherency attack injures one of the advantages, but lets the other go through unscathed. The inherency argumentation on Advantage 2 is enough to rebut this part of the case. Since the United States has 10 years to shore up its position as a global leader, and since Bush's new funding will be fully in place in 2006, there is no inherency for this advantage. Since global leadership

can be preserved, there is no need to adopt the plan to gain that advantage. However, on Advantage 1, the inherency argumentation still leaves the affirmative with a case. Since every day of education is important, the increase in funding will improve the overall quality of education over a longer period. Since there is no threat of the status quo implementing more funding before 2006, the affirmative gains at least five years of added benefits over the status quo. This, given no disadvantages to weigh against it, provides no reason to vote for the negative -- not even on the grounds of inherency.

### Conclusion

Inherency is an issue that is constantly evolving (or devolving depending on your view). Scrolling inherency is a logical step in the progression of debate, as it becomes more focused on specialization of cases and farther away from whole resolutional issues. Scrolling inherency provides the opportunity to focus both on the case specific area, the topic in general, and a higher level of debate theory. Indeed, only by combining these elements can a scrolling inherency argument make sense and effect the round in a positive manner for both teams. Instead of cards read from a

generic inherency list, scrolling inherency forces the debater to ask when impacts are coming, how they weigh, and if the evidence on her list meets the time-frame offered by the affirmative evidence.

Inherency is currently at risk as a viable debate argument. It was a strong issue in the 1950s and 60s. In the 1970s and 80s declined in importance, but was still used as a strategic position. In the 1990s, inherency skirted the borders of irrelevance. Today, debaters and judges can choose the future of inherency. It can be allowed to disappear or it can be reasserted as a mighty argument. As this choice faces debaters, scrolling inherency could become part of that second option.

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