

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE VALUE PREMISE

by Jason Baldwin

One important but confused and confusing area of Lincoln/Douglas debate is the nature and use of a value premise and criterion. These terms, or ones like them (e.g., value, core value) are intended to signify standards which should ideally clarify the debate; in practice, they often muddy the waters even more. The meaning of values and criteria varies from region to region, and the result is that L/D rounds at large national tournaments (for instance, NFL's) can be very confusing. It is my conviction that there are better and worse ways to employ the language of values in values debate. This article is an attempt to sketch out what I believe to be a sensible and useful approach to value premises. I will consider, in turn, the purpose of the value premise, its selection, its integration into a case, and its treatment in rebuttals.

Purpose

The purpose of proposing a value premise and supporting criterion is to provide a standard for the judge to use in deciding who wins the debate. For in any given L/D resolution, there are many possible grounds of argument on both sides. I might argue for a position on the grounds that it is morally obligatory, or that it is progressive, or that it has worked well in the past, etc. . . . The approaches one may take to a broad question of values are almost limitless. Obviously, many approaches will be incommensurable with one another; what moral duty requires may not always be in my self interest. And just as obviously, there is not time in a 35 minute debate round to consider all the possible approaches to a resolution. The value premise narrows the field of play. It attempts to identify what the most important value at stake in the resolution is. When a debater says, "My value premise is X," he is in essence saying, "Out of all the angles from which you, the judge, could evaluate this resolution, X is the most important angle, and should therefore be the angle from which you decide the winner of this debate." The value premise, then, should clarify the muddy resolutional waters for a judge. It

provides a common standard by which to weigh widely disparate arguments. If freedom is the value premise, then an argument that the resolution is good because it promotes equality will be irrelevant. A debater will be successful to the extent that he proves his side of the resolution better conforms to/promotes the value premise, unsuccessful to the extent that he fails to make those connections. So the purpose of the value premise is to function as a sort of yardstick by which the multiplicity of arguments on a given resolution may be measured.

The purpose of the criterion, in turn, is to define the nature of the value premise. Value premises tend to be broad and general themselves, requiring further specificity to make for a truly useful standard. For example, it may be correct to suggest that justice is the most important value in a given resolution, but this immediately raises the question of how justice itself should be understood. There are many theories of justice, and for a judge to weigh arguments, he needs to be presented with one of these specific theories. Perhaps John Rawls's distributive theory is the best standard, or John Locke's natural rights theory, or one of the hundreds of others which have been proposed through the ages. Of course, a criterion need not be identified with a particular philosopher's work, but philosophy provides a rich array of thoughtful possibilities for criteria, and reference to a great mind can also enhance a debater's credibility. The criterion is, quite literally, a criterion for the value premise, detailing how the judge will recognize when that broader value has been adequately supported.

Selection

Let us turn our attention to the selection of a proper value premise and criterion. Understanding the purpose of these elements gives us some guidance already. Because the value premise is to be used by the judge to evaluate the arguments offered by both sides, it should be a standard which is fair to both sides. It is utterly pointless, and also abusive, to propose a value premise

that only your side can win. On the resolution "*That liberty is more precious than law*", neither liberty nor law would be an appropriate value premise. For if you are affirmative, and you argue that your side of the resolution better upholds liberty, all you have really argued is that your side of the resolution better upholds your side of the resolution. And there is no possible way for the negative to uphold such a value premise, so it hardly provides a fair standard for the judge to use it in weighing the competing arguments. Your value premise and criterion must together be a reasonable, neutral standard that either side has a fair chance to win. If you are writing a case with a value premise you could never win from the opposite side, you should choose a different value premise. Good debates are won in the contentions, not with the value premise alone.

A second requirement of the value premise is that it be relevant, and preferably central, to the resolution. Some resolutions will state outright the fundamental value at issue, for example, "*That the possession of nuclear weapons is immoral*." Clearly, both sides are to debate the morality of nuclear possession. It would be foolish to propose social progress as a value premise in this resolution, because social progress is peripheral, at best, to the debate over the morality of deterrence. Many resolutions are not so clear about what the most important value is. As we ponder whether "A business's responsibility to itself ought to be valued above its responsibility to society," it becomes apparent that any number of possible values premises and criteria might be relevant. But even on these more open-ended resolutions, some values are obviously out of bounds. Values such as peace or the sanctity of life are not central issues in determining the locus of a business's responsibility. There is admittedly a degree of connoisseurship involved in picking a good, relevant value premise. But my hunch is that most irrelevant value premises are chosen on the basis of their compatibility with an argument the debater has already decided to make. Value premises

should be chosen with reference to the resolution, not simply because they work with a particular argument.

A third thing we can say about the value premise and criterion is that they should be narrow enough to be really useful in deciding a round. To say, "My value premise is morality; my criterion is duty," will not clarify very much for a judge. Ditto for, "My value premise is justice; my criterion is rights," and, "My value premise is progress; my criterion is growth." These are all vacuous statements. They provide nothing hard and fast for a judge to grab hold of. A good way to think about the proper specificity of a value premise is in terms of falsifiability. This concept, borrowed from the philosophy of science, tells us that a statement or standard is meaningless if it is so broad and flexible that no possible set of circumstances could falsify it. A bad value premise can be over-broad in just this sort of way. What argument cannot claim that it produces growth of some kind, and thus contributes to progress? Growth and progress, by themselves, thus cease to be useful standards for decision. A value premise and criterion must be specific.

What I have said about value premise selection thus far has been primarily negative in tone: *do not* pick a value premise that is one-sided, irrelevant, or vague. Even when these conditions are observed, much freedom remains for debaters to select from a variety of possible value premise/criterion combinations. There is no sure-fire formula for deciding how to pick a value premise. But for those debaters who find themselves at a loss for the proper value, I will make one suggestion: read. I cannot think of a much better way to choose an intelligent standard for an argument than to see what standard the experts seriously engaged in that argument appeal to. Perhaps you know that morality is the natural value premise on a resolution dealing with a controversy in medical ethics, but you cannot decide on a criterion. Do some reading on medical ethics to find out what types of moral standards Daniel Callahan, Peter Singer, Leon Kass, and other medical ethicists believe are important considerations. Very rarely, in my experience, do debaters create

apt value premises and criteria *ex nihilo*. Resourceful debaters will take advantage of the published sources in selecting useful value standards.

Integration

Our focus now shifts to the integration of the value premise into a constructive speech. Typically, the statement of value premise and criterion occurs between the definition of terms and the first justification or contention. The value premise should be stated outright, in a form something to the effect of, "My value premise is X." Many debaters have picked up the odd habit of saying, "My value premise is *that of X*." The "that of" construction is unnecessary and archaic. It makes no more sense to say, "My value premise is that of X," than it makes to say, "My favorite color is that of blue." Following the statement of value premise should be an equally straightforward statement of value criterion. Note that the singular is "criterion", the plural, "criteria", do not confuse them.

Because the proposal of a value premise implies that that value is the standard by which every issue in the debate should be judged, you should offer a brief explanation of why you selected the value premise and criterion you did. Where a central value is clearly stated in the resolution, this explanation may be as brief as a phrase appended to the statement of the value premise, for example, "Because the resolution uses the language of 'moral justification', morality should be the value premise for today's debate." When, as is more often the case, the resolution does not explicitly favor one value premise, you may need to explain in a sentence or two why you believe your value premise is the best one. In formulating such an explanation, you may wish to think about why the nature of the underlying conflict appeals to one value or another, again making use of what you have gleaned from your research on the topic. It is acceptable to offer a brief quotation to clarify the explicit connection between your value and the topic, but generic value quotes of the "Justice is the first virtue of social institutions" sort are best avoided.

It is equally important to offer some explanation for your criterion. Many criteria will require you

to perform the dual task of defining the criterion and defending its selection. For example, to propose a criterion of utilitarianism, you should both define the meaning of utilitarianism and explain why it, as opposed to, say, a categorical imperative, offers the best understanding of morality. It is not enough to simply declare by *fiat* that morality or justice mean this or that. The meanings of big values are controversial, and you need to defend your selection of one possible understanding of these values over all others. You obviously cannot offer an exhaustive defense of any value premise or criterion, but you should offer enough explanation to show that you have thought carefully about what values are the most fitting standards for the debate. The entire process of stating, defining, and justifying your value premise and criterion should probably not take more than twenty seconds on either side.

If you are negative and have substantially the same value premise and criterion as the affirmative, you can simply say, "I accept the affirmative's value premise of X and criterion of Y, and my case will show why this value is more consistent with a negation of the resolution." There is no reason to spend time defining and defending a value which the affirmative has already covered. If you do decide to read your value premise analysis when you share the affirmative's value, you should at least make some acknowledgment of the commonality; do not appear oblivious to the fact that your value is the same as your opponent's.

The initial statement of the value premise and criterion are only the beginning of their integration into the case. You create a burden for yourself and your opponent when you offer a value premise; you are in essence saying, "Here's a standard, hold me to it." This means that your value premise and criterion must figure prominently into the subsequent contentions. Each argument that you offer must be offered with reference to the value premise, because any arguments that do not argue for or against the resolution *via* the value premise are irrelevant to the debate. If you propose to defend a business's responsibility to itself over its responsibility to society by means of a value

premise of liberty, and then proceed to offer a contention that the priority of a business's responsibility to itself will increase the GDP, your contention is irrelevant. One common L/D error is to propose a value premise and criterion at the top of the case, then offer two or three contentions, only one of which is explicitly linked to the value premise. Each of your main arguments should be structured around proving how your side of the resolution better upholds the value premise as defined by the criterion. You should begin and end contentions with thesis or summary statements which explicitly reinforce the connection of the argument to the value premise and criterion. And of course, the body of the argument should develop this connection in detail.

Rebuttals

Naturally, the value premise discussion must not end in the constructives; rather, it must permeate the development and clash of arguments through all the rebuttals. In practice, there are roughly three areas of value premise impact in rebuttals. First, there is the possible conflict of the value premises and/or criteria proposed by each debater. If your value premise and criterion are different from your opponent's, this difference must occupy some of your time in cross-examination and rebuttals. It is no help at all for a judge to have two different people each arguing successfully that their positions conform to two different standards; both debaters must aim to conform to common values. Here are three approaches to take when your opponent's proposed value premise differs from your own. (Of course, differing criteria may prove just as large an impediment, and will require similar responses.)

First, and most simply, if the values are very similar to each other, or if one value is clearly a larger case of the other, you may attempt to subsume your opponent's value under your own, or you may conflate the values. If both you and your opponent are driving at the same meaning with different words, appealing to the same values under different labels, then there is no reason to spend valuable time quibbling over semantics. Second, if your values are truly different but not incompatible, and you be-

lieve they are both important and fair, you may propose that both values be accepted, i.e., that both debaters be held accountable for both values. If you choose this strategy, you must be careful to stress your opponent's value as well as your own throughout the course of the rebuttals, for you have accepted it as your burden as well. Third, if the values are radically different or incompatible, you may argue that your value should be accepted as the standard for both sides, and your opponent's, thrown out. If you take this route, you must offer compelling reasons as to why your value premise is better, e.g., because it is more relevant (explain why!), or because it is fairer (explain why!). You *must* offer reasons for your objection; it is unacceptable to merely assert that your value premise is better. Your opponent, of course, is likely to bite back, and this is the most difficult and contentious of the three strategies. It is, however, possible and sometimes necessary.

While competing value premises must be addressed, they should not drain a lot of time from the arguments themselves. I believe that the affirmative has a weak prerogative to determine the value premise, so that if his is fair and relevant, the negative should probably just accept it. Debates over whose value premise is better are tedious and contribute nothing to the question of which side of the resolution is better. Remember, the value premise is not an end in itself, but a means to arguing effectively through contentions for or against the resolution. The 1AR who spends a minute arguing over the value premises alone has wasted thirty seconds. Keep value premise conflicts, when they arise, brief.

The point-by-point refutation and defense of the contentions is the second, and most important, area of value premise impact in rebuttals. In a good debate, the contentions are where the round is won or lost, and the value premise and criterion should play just as prominent a role in your extemporaneous attack and defense as they do in your planned constructive. I do not want to suggest formulae by which the value premise may be addressed through the treatment of contentions. I will, however, offer two brief observations. First, the

language of the value premise should be explicit. Do not trust your judge to make even the simplest connections between your points and the value premise and criterion. It is your job to make the connections. Second, do not flinch from attacking your opponent's argument solely on the ground that it is not relevant to the value premise. No matter how good the argument sounds, and no matter how topical it may be by itself, if it doesn't match the value premise(s) you agree upon, it has no place in the round.

The third place the value premise may work its way into rebuttals is in the final summation or crystallization that many debaters present at the end of the last speech. Personally, I find such summations superfluous if the contentions have been argued clearly, rigorously, and selectively up to the end, but when a crystallization is offered, the value premise should be central. The value premise and criterion should be explicitly related to each point you reiterate. Just as the value premise in the constructive should not be relegated to one contention of three, so the value premise in crystallization should not be relegated to one point of three; the value premise is not a point unto itself, but is every point. Be very careful of your handling of the values in crystallization. A bad crystallization can do more harm than good.

The above is an attempt to articulate what I believe to be the dominant and most coherent understanding of the role of the value premise and criterion in L/D. It makes no pretense to be exhaustive or uncontested. And while I believe the value premise is one useful and reliable way to approach L/D argumentation, I do not see any reason why it ought to be only way. In particular, I believe arguments based on history maybe just as fruitful an area of dispute as arguments based on values. The important thing for debaters to understand is that once the value premise enters a given round, it makes claims and creates burdens on both sides through the entire round.

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