

I have talked about arguing the resolution off and on on my blog, and I've been thinking about it again, so I thought I might put forth some new discussion. I think it's important enough a subject that I'm saving it as a pdf and recording it as a podcast for easy access in the future.

Lincoln-Douglas resolutions come to us, most of the time, from the NFL. Every June, at the national tournament, a committee puts forth ideas that they have collected one way or the other, and that committee selects down to a manageable few, and polishes the wording of that few. Eventually ten resolutions are presented to the NFL membership. In the subsequent autumn, the membership votes, and the top five resolutions are used in the following calendar year.

The nature of the resolutions is that they concern an ethical consideration. Without going into the vast depths of analysis that are available, let's look at ethics in the simplest way possible. One definition of ethics, and a perfectly good one, is "a set of principles of right conduct." The study of ethics is the study of what to do.

There is an implication in the word ethical that we wish to choose the so-called correct path of action. An "ethical" action implies a "correct" or "right" action, much in the same way the word moral implies moral correctness: he did the moral thing, or he did the ethical thing. This language presumes the rightness of the action despite the root linguistic neutrality.

Right or wrong, correct or incorrect, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical—these dichotomies represent an approach to understanding an action. There is no particular reason why our approaches must be either/or. In fact, as Nietzsche pointed out, we may only think about actions through these dichotomies because we are caught in the limits of our language. Good implies evil, linguistically, but good is not necessarily the opposite of evil absent language. Further, regardless of determining ethical behavior however the problem is framed, there is no objective standard of good that we can use as a measuring tool. Philosophers have argued since day one about how to measure good, and they continue to argue it today, and they have not come up with a definitive answer. For that matter, for a variety of reasons they also argue if there is a good.

Still, for whatever reason, thinking people think that acting correctly is important. Determining standards of behavior is inherent to the process of culture. That is, culture is not some inflexible thing that is dumped on us at birth rigidly defining the parameters of our personalities. Culture is a collection of ideas that changes over time, maybe quickly, maybe slowly. It is the shared ideas of the individuals that comprise a group. If we all disagreed about everything, or had individual ideas completely removed from everyone else's individual ideas, we would be a planet of inherent sociopaths (in a world where there would be no socio to be path about). Our shared ideas, and our valuing of those ideas, is what makes cultures. Different cultures can have the same general ideas valued differently, or have totally different ideas completely. Again, vast depths of analysis are possible on this subject; we'll stick to the basic concept of groups valuing ideas in a similar fashion.

So let's get back to the LD resolutions. What these resolutions attempt to do is propose an area of ethical conflict, where different choices of action/behavior are possible. Sometimes they will query whether a certain action, e.g. capital punishment or civil disobedience, is right or wrong. These actions can be broad or narrow; capital punishment is fairly narrow, civil disobedience is fairly broad. Sometimes they will compare actions: should we do this or that? For instance, when we have to make a choice, should we favor environmental protection over financial development? This sort of decision-making arises from real world concerns: in lesser developed nations, it is a question that must be answered, and with serious consequences either way. As a general rule, the LD resolutions address a specific area of concern (free speech rights, eminent domain, race/gender/age) and ask us to provide courses of actions. Occasionally the resolutions provide purely philosophical constructs, for instance, the desirability of no government over abusive government. These dig deeper into the processes of ethics than the more specific resolutions that suggest that we simply apply those

processes.

The better resolutions offer a choice, explicitly or implicitly, of two actions. I use the term better advisedly. By this I mean that, given either one course of action or another (usually opposite) course of action, and being forced to choose between them, limits the scope of the discussion in such a way as to fit more easily into the time constraints of the activity than does allowing unlimited courses of action. We have only a few minutes to make a case. If the possible cases on either side are more narrowly defined, and therefore restrained, those few minutes can be used to better advantage than if there is no definition, and therefore no restraints. But some resolutions do indeed provide no inherent restraints. In these cases usually the affirmative must support something clearly stated in the resolution, whereas the negative has no clearly stated burden. (Personally, I feel that in these cases the negative should provide an offensive advocacy, rather than simply not supporting that clearly stated thing, but that is a subject for a different essay.) So the possibilities do sometimes go beyond the simple either/or. It depends on the resolution.

Debaters face two choices, when studying a resolution and deciding how to argue it. They can accept the resolution, and figure out some way to argue it on its own terms. This is what most of them do. Or they can reject the resolution, and argue on some other terms. Let's look first at accepting the resolution.

If you are going to argue a resolution, you are going to have to offer a choice of action suggested by the resolution. There are a variety of ways of doing this, and usually those ways depend on the actual resolution, that is, the specifics of what you're arguing. You would not argue for or against capital punishment, in other words, exactly the same as you would argue for or against eminent domain for private use. The subjects are different enough that they require different approaches. But one can step back and see a general range of strategies. Remember, we are being asked to make a choice based on ethical principles. So we need to explain those principles, and we need to show how they apply here. Why are we using this approach to ethics rather than that approach? Why is this approach more applicable than that one? In making these arguments, we can concentrate on the ethics per se, and how they apply, or on the application, per se, positing the ethics as something of a given. Between these end points on this scale, there are plenty of possibilities. The best arguments find the best point on the scale to begin, and develop from there.

Rejecting the resolution is an altogether different business. That rejection raises many questions, primary among them being why one is bothering to debate in the first place, since one is not accepting the premises of the activity. That is, there is a structure in place for selecting and honing resolutions, and that structure does not include debate rounds themselves. There is an inherent logical contradiction in rejecting something by doing it; rejecting a resolution, and still debating, is analogous to attempting to logically disprove the applicability of logic—if you succeed, you have proved that you shouldn't have made the attempt.

But most debaters who reject the resolution do not do so from a position of debate being not worthy of their time—most people who feel that way have already voted with their feet and joined some other extracurricular activity—but from the standpoint of debate strategy. They wish to win this round not by not debating it, but by proving its undebatability. They will apply the standards of logical analysis, which are the tools of debate, to that issue of undebatability. To do this, they have two choices. Either they must contend that this particular resolution is undebatable, or that the subject of this resolution is undebatable. Since that latter possibility is merely the extreme of the former, and a not particularly likely extreme, we'll concentrate on the former idea, the contention that a resolution is undebatable.

In the debate, you are being asked to choose between paths of ethical action. In rejecting the resolution, your response is that you can't choose. This would be either because the choice is not acceptable, or the ethics are unacceptable. What does that mean?

Let's go back to the beginning, where we said that what resolutions attempt to do is propose an area of ethical conflict, where different choices of action/behavior are possible. We also said that determining standards of behavior is inherent to the process of culture. In other words, the resolution, the result of a process of creating resolutions whatever that process might be, asks us what is right or wrong in certain situations, and does this because our values are a key functional aspect of culture, with a presumption of our desire to do the "right" thing. If you reject the resolution, you must address the process of creating resolutions, proving that this is inherently ethically flawed (or at least the process of creating this resolution), you must prove that there is no right or wrong in this situation or else no way to determine right or wrong in this situation, or you must prove that ethically correct actions are not important to the process of culture.

How can you do these things?

1. Proving that the process of creating resolutions is inherently ethically flawed:

The process of collecting ideas for resolutions is unethical

The process of honing down resolutions is unethical

The people on the wording committee are unethical

The people voting for the top five are unethical

The NFL has no inherent right to propose resolutions

This tournament has no right to offer this resolution

This resolution is abusive on the basis of race/age/creed (which implies the lacks of ethics listed above)

*You do have to prove one of these, or something comparable. Somewhere, someone along the line is either unethical or, I guess, ignorant. You must use the tools of ethical analysis not to analyze the resolution but to analyze the resolvers.*

2. Proving that there is no right or wrong in this situation or else no way to determine right or wrong in this situation:

Because there is no usable objective standard of correctness in all of philosophy, it is impossible to prove the correctness of an action.

Because there is no usable objective standard of correctness in all of philosophy that applies here, it is impossible to prove the correctness of an action.

Although there is/are usable objective standards of correctness in all of philosophy, they do not apply to this situation.

*Well, this sounds to me simply as if one is throwing up one's hands because one doesn't want to accept generally accepted ethical principles by claiming that there are none, or that they just don't work for some reason. But there are generally accepted ethical principles in any culture: their existence is inherent in the concept of culture. And those principles are all anyone in that culture has to go by when making choices of action.*

3. Proving that ethically correct actions are not important to the process of culture:

Culture is X, and X does not include valuing actions perceived as right or correct

*Not a lot of options there. You've got to take the generally accepted view of culture and substitute some other not generally accepted view.*

So when you reject the resolution, you must prove either that the structure of the organization of the NFL is unethical or ignorant, that ethics are not a part of culture, or that the generally accepted view of culture is incorrect. Or worse, you are rejecting the entire idea of debate and debating that you are correct in rejecting it.

None of these sounds like a good business to be in.

There are plenty of arguments out there about why LDers ought to (or ought not) debate the

resolution. I have famously maintained that the debate round is not the place to argue whether or not a resolution is acceptable, for the simple reason that no action will result that will affect that resolution. That is, even if you win the debate you still have to go on to the next round and debate the same resolution again. Often debaters point out in rounds that the words spoken here will have no effect on the real world and are therefore somehow pointless or jejune. but if one were challenging the resolution itself that pointlessness could be resolved by simply refusing to debate, unlike the (claimed) pointlessness of arguing, say, international politics, where there really is nothing one can do about it outside of the round, and all of the benefit (if any) has been in the students' preparation of ideas and arguments in aid of their general education. (Although I'm not here to play the education card; I believe in it, but it is not the point of this essay. I would imagine that if you could prove that culture is something inherently different from the generally accepted model, you would have educated yourself (and your audience) quite a bit in the process.) And there is, in fact, a correct place to argue/change resolutions, and that is within the resolution-choosing process very openly conducted by the NFL. Efforts there would result in real change, and people who seriously believe that resolutions are flawed should work within that process.

The other issue worth mentioning is the expectations within a debate round. The posting of a resolution at a tournament presupposes that this resolution will be addressed. At least this is generally accepted as true, and the majority of debaters act on this supposition and prepare cases that do address the resolution and, to the best of their abilities, arguments on all sides of that issue. Given that most resolutions are limited in scope (e.g. eminent domain, economic development, internet speech rights), those debaters limit themselves to that scope. Debaters who reject the resolution have no such limitations. Since they reject the resolution, they are free to reject the expected scope of the resolution, and can offer arguments of any sort whatsoever, with little or no textual relevance to the issue at hand. Indeed, often debaters reject resolutions entirely to free themselves of restraints. As a result, while one debater has, in good faith, prepared to argue the topic at hand, the other debater is, for all intents and purposes, arguing at random. Normally one would expect this to put the rejecter at a disadvantage, since presumably the expectations of the judges would, like most debaters, be that the resolution would be the issue at hand, but often judges do not make a demand that the resolution be addressed, and are willing to listen to whatever is presented. At the point at which a debater arguing at random thinks his judge will accept random arguments, that debater is at a distinct advantage over the debater arguing in an orthodox fashion, because the orthodox debater has no way of preparing for random arguments. (And I am not talking here about unorthodox approaches to a resolution, which are fine for the most part, but the unorthodoxy of not addressing the resolution at all). So at the point that we allow those debaters not to argue the resolution, and understanding that they will only reject the resolution when they feel they will gain the advantage of surprise (they know their judge's willingness to listen, their opponent's orthodox approach, and they have a variety of cases in their briefcase to choose from), we are no longer supporting the free exchange of and debate over ideas in a round, but instead supporting whatever strategy wins, even if that strategy is demonstrably unfair.

So it seems to me that rejecting the resolution even in a seriously respectful fashion forces one to argue relatively inarguable positions. By its very self-contradictory nature debating that we shouldn't debate is pointless, in an activity that thrives on finding the point of things. And finally, it can be a tactic of pure stealth bombing, used with pinpoint accuracy only when it is relatively guaranteed to succeed, and as such is unfair to the debater who, in preparation, followed the generally accepted rules and restraints of the activity.

And anyone who wants to say that rejecting the resolution in a round is following the rules and restraints, needs to offer an essay about as long as this one to prove to me, at least, how that can possibly be.