

## Four Fallacies of Debate Education

### A Supportive Framework

By Jason Baldwin

A fallacy is a mistake in reasoning. Anyone who has spent much time performing or coaching or judging debate has probably gained a certain facility in spotting fallacies in debate rounds. But fallacies, unfortunately, can be found almost anywhere, including in the reasoning people do about debate itself. Since debate changes students' lives, flawed reasoning about it can have serious consequences.

In this essay, I want to expose four common fallacies about debate education. I shall represent each fallacy as a form of argument (hence the use of capital letters as variables—e.g., “V” can stand for any verb) and explain why the argument form is invalid—why the premises of the argument do not entail its conclusion. Unsurprisingly, I have seen students make such arguments more often than professional debate coaches, but coaches sometimes make them, too. If you are attracted to these forms of argument, I hope to change your mind. And even if you are not attracted to them, I hope that reflecting on them explicitly will tend to strengthen and clarify your existing educational commitments.

#### **Fallacy 1: Appeal to Student Preferences**

- 1.1. Debate is for the benefit of students.
- 1.2. Students prefer to V.
- 1.3. So coaches, judges, and tournament directors should do nothing to discourage students from Ving.

Some very smart people have fallen for this style of argument, but it is clearly invalid. From the facts that a practice exists for the benefit of some person and that the person has certain preferences, nothing follows about whether or how the practice should accommodate those preferences. Consider vaccines for children: Surely children are vaccinated (at least in part) for their own benefit, and just as surely, many children prefer not to receive vaccinations. But it does not follow that the adults responsible for children should allow them to opt out of vaccines.

More germane for present purposes is the fact that educational enterprises (of which I take debate to be one), while properly for the benefit of students, are rarely properly determined by student preferences. Students rarely know what they need to know, and they almost never seek their own educational best interest without external incentives and constraints. This is why adults compel children to go to school and why teachers in the various disciplines dictate what students will study and how they will be held accountable for it. The teaching of Latin grammar may well be for the benefit of students, and students may prefer not to learn the subjunctive mood, but it does not follow that Latin teachers should not encourage students to learn the subjunctive mood.

The same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, for many practices in debate. Debate training is for the benefit of students, and students may prefer to speak using ambiguous pronouns instead of unambiguous nouns, but it does not follow that debate coaches

and judges should do nothing to discourage students from using ambiguous pronouns.

Of course, if one believes, in addition to 1.1 and 1.2, that the way debate is supposed to benefit students is by satisfying their current preferences, then one will have the materials needed to derive 1.3. I think this view of debate is unbecoming a grown-up, and I doubt that many professional debate coaches hold it. But if any debate coaches do hold it, they should be honest with themselves and with the people who foot the debate bills (probably parents and school administrators) about their view of debate: that debate is merely an expensive amusement and that it is not answerable to the norms of academic excellence that characterize genuinely educational pursuits.

#### **Fallacy 2: Appeal to Bare Possibility**

- 2.1. It is conceivable that someone could debate well while Ving.  
(Alternately: Someone, namely S, has debated well while Ving.)
- 2.2. So debate coaches, judges, and tournaments should not do anything to discourage students from Ving.

To see the problem with this way of making educational decisions, consider a parallel way of making decisions about smoking: It is conceivable that someone could live an extraordinarily long and healthy life while smoking two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day. (Alternately: Someone, namely S, has lived an extraordinarily long and healthy life

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while smoking two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day.) So doctors and public health officials should do nothing to discourage people from smoking two packs of unfiltered cigarettes a day. What the smoking example makes obvious is that practical counsels in a domain are made on the basis of general observations; the existence, possible or actual, of exceptions to such generalizations does not invalidate the counsel.

As every literate person knows, it's possible to write well in the passive voice. But as every English teacher knows, almost no high school students write well in the passive voice, and it makes perfect sense to discourage, even prohibit, students from using it. The same is true for many practices in debate. Is it *possible* to speak quickly and clearly at the same time? Yes. Do students who speak quickly also *actually* speak clearly? Almost never. Should the rare student who does manage to speak both quickly and clearly lead judges and coaches to treat speaking speed as a matter of indifference? Obviously (I hope) not. Pedagogical advice is framed for the generality of debate students—what Jim Menick has memorably called “the little gray army”—and not for the savant.

A related point is that a practice that is compatible with good debate may itself still detract from, or contribute nothing positive to, the quality of debate. A debater may be great *in spite of* speaking from a laptop computer, not *because of* speaking from a laptop, or even *regardless of* speaking from a laptop. That other factors may outweigh the badness of a given practice in our final estimation of a speaker should not lead us to ignore the practice.

### Fallacy 3: Appeal to Real World

- 3.1. Debate should prepare students for the real world.
- 3.2. Debaters might encounter Ving

(or its non-debate analog) in the real world.

- 3.3. So debate coaches, judges, and tournament directors should do nothing to discourage Ving.

This fallacy is especially alluring because it seems to appeal to a healthy educational impulse: preparing students for real life. But consider: Debaters might encounter evidence fabrication in the real world. Yet surely no one would conclude that debate coaches, judges, and tournament directors should do nothing to discourage evidence fabrication. The problem is that the real world is an ugly place full of immoral, dishonorable practices. While it's true that debate should prepare students for the real world, it's not true that debate functions best as a microcosm of that world. Debate should provide incentives to make *every* participant a better thinker and speaker. That the real world is full of shoddy thinking and speaking is no reason to sacrifice the education of some students so that they might provide examples of shoddy thinking and speaking for the benefit of other students.

Furthermore, debate should not merely train students to take up established roles in the world we now inhabit. Today's debate students will determine, in part, the shape of tomorrow's world. And since education determines, in part, what students will make of their world, all education is a morally weighty enterprise. How much good or bad thinking and speaking there will be in the world that debaters grow up to inhabit depends partly on the contribution they themselves make to that world. And the contribution they make depends on the habits they form in response to the incentives coaches, judges, and tournament directors provide. No far-sighted educator should condone, even if only by silence, inferior modes of thought and speech on the grounds that the real world of today is chock full of poor thought and speech.

A corollary of what I am claiming about debate and the real world is that the mere fact that an audience of a certain type exists in the real world is not by itself a good reason for coaches to let that audience judge high school debate or for debaters to pander to that audience. The real world contains close-minded people for whom loyalty to political party trumps all. The real world also contains close-minded people who regard talking fast, using undefined jargon, and quoting opaque European literary critics as marks of profundity. I think both of these types of people, and many more besides, should not be catered to by debate coaches and students, regardless of their presence in the world outside of high school debate.

### Fallacy 4: Appeal to Participation

- 4.1. Policy P will discourage some students from debating or judging or becoming debate coaches.
- 4.2. So policy P is bad.

This fallacy is tempting to people who think of debate as a wonderful activity that can benefit any student and that needs all the support it can get. As someone who gained much from debating in high school and who has taught a fair number of debate students, I sympathize with the enthusiasm most debate coaches have for the activity, and I share their desire to see it flourish.

But the Appeal to Participation overlooks several salient facts, among them: (1) Any rule, standard, or norm of excellence or integrity will be off-putting to some people. (2) Practiced in unfavorable circumstances, debate can make students *worse* thinkers and writers and speakers. (3) An excessive attachment to high school debate can stunt the intellectual and social development of college students and damage them in other ways as well. (4) Some high school students, even if debate benefits them, make debate a

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worse (by which I do not mean merely *less enjoyable*) activity for other students. (5) Some judges, even if debate benefits them, make debate a worse activity for students. (6) Some people who might be willing to become debate coaches would make debate a worse activity for students. (7) A coach's first responsibility is to the welfare of his or her students, not to the popularity of the activity he or she coaches. (8) Many people lead rich and intellectually impressive lives with no involvement in high school debate.

Taken together, these facts suggest that the popularity of debate should not be the overriding consideration of the adults who administer it. More important is the academic and personal value of debate for those students who do participate in it. Students and young judges will not preserve that value on their own.

They need guidance, and sometimes firm directives, from adults who see the educational forest for the competitive trees. Some people would rather leave debate than accept such guidance, but debate is better off without them. Other students may confront irresistible competitive incentives to practice what they or their coaches know to be poor debate. Hard as it may be for coaches to admit, those students may be better off without debate.

In challenging the relevance of student preferences earlier and of popularity and participation now, I risk coming across as an authoritarian kill-joy. To clarify, I am all in favor of debate being a fun, popular activity. But I believe that fun and popularity are dangerous when they are pursued without any higher educational or ethical constraints.

Some contemporary debaters

seem to believe that more adult leadership would make debate less fun than it is today. I disagree. I debated in an era when adults exercised more authority (at least on the "national circuit") than they do today, and my competitors and I had a lot of fun debating. Moreover, I have known of a number of recent students who quit debating or opted never to start because they did not enjoy the educational anarchy they perceived in contemporary debate. Authority rightly exercised need not be burdensome or antagonistic. It can instead provide a supportive framework within which students are free to practice and experiment in academically constructive ways.

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