

VALUE DEBATE RESEARCH

by Rich Mercadante

While policy debaters typically amass a plethora of evidence and deploy an arsenal of experts, Lincoln-Douglas debaters usually accumulate few sources and employ philosophical argument as their primary defense. The distinction between policy and value debate research centers on the kind of evidence that constitutes proof in each debate format. Since debating values differs in kind, not degree, from debating policies, the L.D. debater is challenged to develop a research strategy appropriate for value inquiry and argumentation. The following guidelines suggest a systematic strategy for value debate research. I will begin with ethical history, discuss philosophers and their works, then offer some hints on synthesizing ideas and researching resolutions.

History of Ethics

Begin value debate research with a history of ethics. Remember, ethics is one branch of philosophy, therefore, avoid general philosophy texts which cover epistemology, logic, aesthetics, and metaphysics, but do not stress ethics. Start with short, readable histories focusing exclusively on ethics.

Several sources provide good ethical histories. Sahakian's *Ethics: An Introduction to Theories and Problems* or Feldman's *Introductory Ethics* clearly explains each major ethical system. The *Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* article "Ethics, History of," is concise and readable. *The Companion to Ethics* provides summaries of ethical theories as well as discussions of typical problems in ethics, while the *Chronological and Thematic Charts of Philosophies and Philosophers* visually identifies connections among various ethical systems. Finally, the most recent addition to researching values, the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Ethics*, is an exhaustive reference work. These sources will help you distinguish a utilitarian from a Kantian, or a pragmatist from a Platonist. Good ethical histories acquaint you with pivotal ethical ideas and thinkers and prepare you for more focused study of specific philosophers.

Philosophers and Their Works

Typically, the worst introduction to ethical ideas is to read original philosophical works. The following example might clarify this odd observation. Harvard philosopher John Rawls is a favorite of L.D. debaters and is considered one of the more "readable" ethical theorists. However, I would not recommend reading his 587 page book, *A Theory of Justice*, in preparation for an upcoming debate. Like many philosophers, Rawls can be intimidating. I recently spent a whole semester graduate seminar on *A Theory of Justice* in which we read one chapter per week. Adding to the difficulty of reading

Rawls, there are hundreds of books and articles interpreting Rawls' theories. Keep in mind that, compared to other thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant, Rawls is relatively easy reading (I once spent a semester course on the first half of one of Kant's books). In addition to being long and verbose, many philosophical works tend to address issues which are tangential to value debating. Rather than begin by reading an original philosophical work, start with a synopsis of the book in Frank Magill's *Masterpieces of World Philosophy*. The four-volume set covers 225 philosophical works from Anaximander to Rawls. Additional recommended readings and criticisms from other philosophers are also included at the end of each summary.

Before you accuse me of advocating a "Cliffs Notes" research approach (by the way, Cliffs Notes and Monarch Notes are often excellent introductions to ethical works), let me move to the next step in exploring philosophical works - find an anthology of ethical writings, such as Johnson's *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers*. Scholars arrange anthologies by selecting short sections of a text that represent a philosopher's thought. By combining a summary of the work with an anthologized selection, you can access valuable knowledge quickly.

Remember, you are not studying philosophical works to master the entire thought of Rawls or Kant. Your goal is to discover how philosophers and their works lend themselves to value debate. Try to gain a good grasp of several noteworthy ethical thinkers and works rather than struggling through the magnum opus of a few philosophers.

Synthesizing Ideas

Value debate places ideas in competition with each other. A good debater is not only familiar with the social contract, but can compare and contrast it with other theories of society. One good source for putting ideas together is the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, which traces the genealogy of constitutionalism, democracy, equality, justice, law, pragmatism, utilitarianism, and over 200 other ideas. These articles highlight the clash of ideas among thinkers throughout the centuries.

The ultimate source for discovering the threads that weave themselves through the "great conversation" of human history is Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*. At the heart of this collection is the *Syntopicon* - a collection of essays on 102 great ideas that permeate 443 works on philosophy, science, literature, mathematics, and history. Each essay compares and contrasts the thoughts of significant thinkers on one great idea. For example, the article on "liberty" uses original quotations from Tolstoy,

Hegel, Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, Augustine, Aristotle, Plato, Montesquieu, Kant, J.S. Mill, and Socrates. At the end of each article, an extensive index identifies the page number (and quadrant on the page) in which the idea is discussed in the original works. The inventory of 1800 terms serves as an enormous table of contents, while 2600 "other works" listed as additional readings are guaranteed to keep the most avid seeker of knowledge occupied.

Researching the Resolution

Any discussion of value debate research would hardly be complete if it ignored the "cutting edge" of high tech research. Although many great philosophers, whose names are so casually mentioned as if they were close personal friends, are dead, by no means has dialogue on the great questions of philosophy ended. Contemporary, living philosophers carry on the tradition of debating ethical ideas. Some of these thinkers publish books easily found by a "keyword" search on a library card catalogue database. Many others publish articles not indexed in library catalogues.

Several options exist at this more sophisticated level of research. Some college libraries carry computerized "academic indexes" which allow you to search academic journals for scholarly articles by combining major terms in the resolution. Some on-line computer services offer similar indexes, which you access through a computer modem.

Perhaps the best source for researching specific terms is the *Philosopher's Index*. In book form, on CD-ROM, and as a computer on-line service, this source indexes articles in philosophy publications over the past 50 years. Take the following resolution as an example, "Resolved: That obligations to others ought to take precedence over obligations to self." By combining the terms "others," "self," and "obligation" in the keyword search of the *Philosopher's Index* CD-ROM, you are given several articles: "We Can Have Moral Obligations to Ourselves," from the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*; "Duties to Oneself and the Concept of Morality," from the *Norwegian Journal of Inquiry*; and "Eisenberg and Self Obligations," a reply to the previously mentioned article in *Inquiry*. The resolution-specific discussions will allow you to participate in the dialogue surrounding the resolution with some insightful thinkers.

Scholarly articles often represent highly selective and advanced thinking from the philosophy profession. Consider that the *Journal of Value Inquiry* accepts an average of twenty percent of the articles submitted to them, while the journal *Ethics: An International Journal of Social, Political and Legal Philosophy*, accepts

only five percent. While these articles are typically found only in college libraries which support philosophy programs, the advent of computer on-line services are making access to this material easier for people who do not live near university libraries. Researching scholarly articles is challenging, but also can be invaluable to the competitive debater and serious student of ethics.

By recognizing that good debate research is not only for policy debaters, you can enhance your own appreciation and knowledge of debating values. Whether you are a novice debater needing an introduction to ethics, or an advanced debater prepared to grapple with scholarly articles, good value debate research can give you a competitive edge.

Recommended Sources for Value Debate Research

Edwards, Paul. "Ethics, History of" in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

Encyclopedia Britannica. *Great Books of the Western World*. University of Chicago, 1955.

Encyclopedia of Ethics. New York: Garland Publishers, 1992.

Feldman, Fred. *Introductory Ethics*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978.

Hunnex Milton D. *Chronological and Thematic Charts of Philosophies and Philosophers*. Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Publishing, 1986.

Johnson, Oliver, ed. *Ethics: Selections from Classical and Contemporary Writers*. 6th ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989.

Magill, Frank, ed. *Masterpieces of World Philosophy in Summary Form*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1961.

Philosophy Documentation Center. *Philosopher's Index*. Bowling Green Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1967 - Present.

Sahakian, William S. *Ethics: An Introduction to Theories and Problems*. New York: Harper and Rowe, 1974.

Singer, Peter. *A Companion to Ethics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell Reference, 1991.

Wiener, Philip P. *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973.

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PROMINENT AUTHORS

DONATE BOOKS

Professors Diana Prentice Carlin and David Snowball have each made significant book contributions to the Phillips 66/NFL Urban -- Rural Outreach Program.

Prentice Carlin, whose successful book, *Mastering Competitive Debate*, is entering the fourth edition, has for the second time donated the unsold copies of the earlier edition to NFL for distribution to urban and rural programs and urban institutes. The book is known for its excellent, student exercises.

Prentice Carlin teaches at Kansas University, works with Clark Publishing and is campaigning for her husband, former Kansas Governor John Carlin, who is running for Congress in Kansas's second district.

Professor David Snowball has been Associate Professor and Director of Debate at Augustana College since 1984. A recipient of the Sears Foundation Teaching Excellence Award, Snowball wrote *Theory and Practice in Academic Debate* an impressive but portable wire bound handbook which is noted for its user friendly writing style and examples from actual debates.

Augustana College has long fielded premier debate teams and is one of the nation's oldest and finest programs. Augustana Dean Arne Selbyg noted: "Augustana College has an outstanding history in debate, and wants to promote the idea that excellence in debate should never need to take a backseat to athlete excellence.... Augustana College is proud to support the National Forensic League's efforts to expand and strengthen the high school forensics community."