

Chris Duerringer
 PhD. Candidate: Hugh Downs School of Human Communication
 Arizona State University
 MA: Stephen F. Austin State University
 BA: Stephen F. Austin State University

Apples and Oranges: Advocacy for a Postmodern Interrogation of Weighing Mechanisms

Abstract

As the IPDA has grown, the weighing mechanism has become an expected part of advocacy. Often, weighing mechanisms are seen as instrumental parameters which aid both debaters and judges in assessing the merit of arguments offered. In this essay, the weighing mechanism is recast as a mechanism which legitimates statements that conform to specific worldviews while restricting all others. From postmodern perspective, the weighing mechanism threatens to submerge important arguments and potentially mislead interlocutors as to the efficacy of the prima facie advocacy. The essay concludes by imagining how this perspective might inform case rebuttals.

A famous consumer advocacy magazine recently published a study examining the relative merits of the myriad toothpastes available to consumers. The article concluded that, although there was little difference among the competitors, a relatively cheap toothpaste was the best at whitening smiles. Though the study sought and found the product which whitened smiles best, it ignored the fact that the winner was significantly more abrasive than other competitors. Highly abrasive toothpastes, when used with frequency, can erode significant quantities of tooth enamel. Unfortunately for consumers, abrasiveness was not a weighing mechanism used in judging toothpastes. This bit of trivia should, I hope, help tease out the importance of weighing mechanisms in evaluation.

In this essay, I will note the types of weighing mechanism analysis I encountered in my career as a debater. Next, I will offer a postmodern perspective on the value and utility of weighing mechanisms. Finally, I will close with a proposal for the application of this perspective in public debate.

Praxis in the IPDA

I once estimated that I had competed in over three hundred IPDA preliminary rounds between the 2000-2001 and 2006-2007 seasons. In that time, I observed three general approaches employed by debaters when dealing with the affirmative's proposed weighing mechanism: appeasement; competition; and critique.

The first approach, and by far the most common, is to simply accept the weighing mechanism as offered and attempt to win the debate within the confines established by the affirmative. If the affirmative has proposed a cost-benefit-analysis, for example, the negative simply begins looking for ways to cast their arguments as costs which are to be weighed against the affirmative's benefits. The debater representing the negative might simply tell the judge that she will abide by or accept the affirmative's weighing mechanism. This sort of admission is typically followed with a statement like, "now let's get into the arguments." The unfortunate effect of this approach is that the negative advocate is forced to restructure her arguments in such a way that they may lose their original salience. Imagine being possessed of an excellent argument about the potential of the affirmative advocacy to infringe upon privacy and restrict free speech. Now imagine listening in horror as the affirmative begins her closing speech by telling the judge to ignore those important points because those arguments, though interesting, are non-topical because the weighing mechanism for the round demands that those harms be quantified in finite ways so as to be weighed in the cost-benefit-analysis. At this point, some readers may be clamoring that a good negative advocate will somehow spin their arguments to fit inside this weighing

mechanism. While this may be true, I still believe that this conformity to the affirmative weighing mechanism weakens the strength of the negative debater's arguments and, therefore, her chance at victory. More importantly, it may lessen the educational value of the round for the judge.

A second approach, which seems to have crept in from Lincoln-Douglas competition, occurs when the negative reiterates the affirmative's preferred weighing mechanism and proceeds to offer her own. Typically, the negative case proceeds under this weighing mechanism without attention to the original. Savvier interlocutors attempt to refute the usefulness or appropriateness of the affirmative weighing mechanism while leaving their own to be judged as preferable. Other less capable orators seem happy to simply articulate their own weighing mechanism and never really address the original. This is the prototypical "two ships passing in the night" example. At best, the savvy debater has destroyed her opponent's weighing mechanism and established yet another weighing mechanism which undoubtedly also serves to limit and restrict the kind of arguments and evidence which are to be taken as proof in the round. The result is a win for the debater, but perhaps less for the judge.

A third, and thankfully less common, approach to dealing with weighing mechanisms has been application of the critique (more frequently spelled kritik among debaters). The kritik, which finds its origins in German and French criticism, poststructuralist philosophy, and more recently in speed-reading policy types of debate, argues that there is something inappropriate or harmful within the thinking of the affirmative's advocacy that should prevent a thoughtful judge from voting in favor of the proposition. These arguments are typically treated as *a priori* calls for judgment, regardless of the actual claims made by the affirmative. Possibly because some come to the IPDA out of allergic reaction to speed-reading policy debate or perhaps because explaining these arguments to lay judges proves difficult, this kind of analysis has, until now, been a relatively rare occurrence. As Bennett (1996) notes, critics have leveled several important complaints at this style of refutation. The first argues that kritiks serve as one-trick-pony wrecking balls, which knock down constructs but establish nothing helpful themselves. This line of thinking suggests that if the negative has no better solutions, then we would be silly to throw out the affirmative advocacy simply because it is not perfect. Critics also have argued that the result of this type of argument is that the judge is urged to vote against something rather than voting for anything. Members of the debate community have also voiced concerns that the kritik unnecessarily adds density and esoteric vernacular to a pursuit already brimming with technical jargon. In addition to understanding the code debaters use to refer to their arguments, novices dealing with kritiks must begin to wrestle with the fabulously abstruse wordplay of Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida if they hope to defend against them. Still others wonder if the affirmative is obligated to fix every related social problem before their advocacy can be accepted. An advocate encouraging the judge to vote in favor of a policy to double funding for law enforcement, for example, should not have to solve the problem of sexism in law enforcement (a preexisting problem to be sure) in order to prove that higher levels of law enforcement are warranted. These are just the tip of the iceberg, but should suffice to show the amount of discomfort the kritik has created for some in the debate community.

At bottom of any of these approaches lies the assumption that a properly selected weighing mechanism does the work of effectively valuing arguments for or against any given resolution. However, a postmodern approach to weighing mechanisms will suggest a more complicated understanding of the relationship between weighing mechanisms, arguments, and judgment.

A Postmodern Perspective

Postmodernism: the definition of the word is perhaps as contested as that of rhetoric. Postmodernism is not just that which follows modernism in temporal order, but that which opposes modernism. Thus, readers may profit from a brief recapitulation of modernism's tenets.

Modernism, which relies upon Enlightenment-era notions of the rational human subject and the empirical nature of reality, encourages the systematic interrogation and improvement of existence through the application of rational scientific techniques. According to Lucaites and Condit (1999), "In the modern worldview, the universe is a relatively simple, stable, and highly ordered place, describable in and reducible to absolute formulas which hold across contexts" (p. 11). The fruits of modernism can be found in projects such as the industrial revolution, Marxism, and humanism. Each of these projects claims that successful application of their principles will result in the betterment of life. Unfortunately, this progress which was to extend our lives and grant us comforts also

delivered pollution, urban sprawl, processed food, structural unemployment, corporate conglomeration, the dissolution of the nuclear family, and an astounding number of new ways to kill others: mustard gas, machine guns, automatic weapons, napalm, Agent Orange, and the atomic bomb readily come to mind.

Many were horrified when the events of the middle and late 20th century brought them to see science, one of modernism's most sacred cows, as the means by which humans achieved their most barbaric and deadly deeds (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 3). Sarup (1989, p. 123) explains, "The decline of the unifying and legitimating power of the grand narratives of speculation and emancipation can be seen as an effect of the blossoming of techniques and technologies since the Second World War, which has shifted emphasis from the ends of action to its means." The result of this revelation is a deep "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1979, xxiv). It is a refusal to believe in the power of religion, science, education, humanism, capitalism, and other ideologies to fully explain life or deliver humankind to some perfect future. In the place of such belief is substituted a healthy skepticism which examines efforts to instantiate these worldviews to understand how they necessarily conceptualize the world, render some parts visible and others invisible (and thus not eligible to be spoken about), and distribute power throughout society. Though this discussion could continue at length in examining all the various implications of this shift, it should suffice to say that a postmodern perspective demands a serious interrogation of the way weighing mechanisms operate in our debates.

How Weighing Mechanisms Work

Imagine the average American couple shopping the Saturday newspaper for a new automobile. The wife notes that she has many errands to run that day and instructs her husband to "just pick the best car." What sort of car might the husband purchase? He may find himself scratching his head as he wonders what his wife meant by "the best." One can imagine that the best car might be the sporty convertible if his wife believes that the best cars are the ones that are the most exciting to drive. But if the best cars are the ones that cost the least, the convertible begins to look like a poor choice. What our hypothetical husband lacks is a weighing mechanism; a method of valuing the cars based on specific attributes to find the best one.

Weighing mechanisms make decisions possible by installing a worldview or ideology which instructs interlocutors as to: which qualities are important and which are not; which topics are suitable for discussion and which are taboo; and which solutions are acceptable and which are not. Altheide and Johnson (1994) point out that the traditional application of weighing mechanisms acts to promote the "nineteenth-century model of science-as-the-physical-sciences" (p. 487). In other words, any given weighing mechanism sets parameters for decision makers; it tells them what parts of the universe to look at and how to measure those parts. Data which do not conform to such a model are discarded. For example, when a cost-benefit-analysis is used, all potential considerations must be stated in terms of quantifiable costs and benefits. Those things which do not translate into costs easily are either significantly undervalued or nonexistent within that worldview. One might imagine how the issue of abortion might sound if all arguments for and against were rendered solely in terms of profits and costs. Furthermore, solutions which we may prefer for a variety of unrelated reasons may appear less attractive when seen only for their value as profits or losses. Bochner (2000), reminds us, "criteria always have a restrictive, limiting, regressive, thwarting, halting quality to them, and they can never be completely separated from the structures of power in which they are situated" (p. 269). Thus, I conclude that weighing mechanisms are not simply devices for weighing arguments, but are rhetorical filters which legitimate and restrict arguments based on their adherence to specific and limited metanarratives.

If the reader takes seriously these charges against weighing mechanisms, a change is called for. If weighing mechanisms are rhetorical filters which invoke imperfect ideological metanarratives, our traditional approach to the weighing mechanism seems problematic. In the section below, I offer a potential approach to public debate which aims to better incorporate this postmodern perspective while retaining the sort of practicality that surely constitutes some of the IPDA's allure for debaters, coaches, and audiences.

Pragmatic Pluralism

At this point, I hope readers find themselves in a bit of a conundrum. On the one hand, I have argued that weighing mechanisms are useful and perhaps essential to good decision-making. On the other hand, I have

asked readers to humor me as I advocate a postmodern perspective which damns weighing mechanisms as inexorably imperfect, restrictive, ideologically grounded rhetorical filters. It is my contention that we can alleviate, if not solve, the discomfort this paradox creates by embracing what I will term pragmatic pluralism. Pragmatic pluralism might be described as an attempt to avoid the most extreme sort of restriction caused by the traditional application of weighing mechanisms by means of pluralism. First, it would take the weighing mechanism as a necessary element of decision making. Perhaps because of the need to sell more and more, we find ourselves increasingly surrounded with choice wherever we go. Clearly, we must use some means to choose one or some among the multitudes. Second, given their imperfect and ideologically-based nature, weighing mechanisms should be viewed with great skepticism. Third, a better decision is one which is informed by as many perspectives as is feasible. Readers might remember the old axiom that “two heads are better than one.” When imperfect means of perception are to be used, more confirmation and triangulation are preferable. How might this play out in a public debate round? Hypothetically, a debater tasked with opposing a resolution might, instead of simply accepting or refuting a given weighing mechanism, accept and counterbalance the weighing mechanism with several others. In such a case, the debater would essentially be saying to the judge, “My opponent has presented one of many possible ways to see this case. While I can and will attempt to refute the case on this basis, I also feel it would be a disservice to our aims of education if I also did not mention the other equally important perspectives that the affirmative’s advocacy ignores.” I should note that this approach should not be confused with the beginner’s mistake of ignoring weighing mechanisms. The skilled interlocutor employing this approach would surely be conscious of the ways that weighing mechanisms inform and shape discourse and, thus, would work to include all those arguments (and weighing mechanisms) which could inform the case.

If such a perspective were applied, debaters would be free to present important arguments from a variety of perspectives rather than just the one originally offered by the affirmative. One can imagine that this would aid in the articulation of arguments which might otherwise be rendered unimportant by particularly narrow weighing mechanisms. Such an approach would surely attract criticism. In the next section, I will attempt to anticipate some of the more significant claims that might be made against this advocacy.

Underview

Though the ranks of the IPDA are generally gregarious, some might take issue with this pragmatic pluralism. Devout postmodernists may complain that my proposal does little more than augment one restrictive filter with a few others. I will first admit that my proposal asymptotically approaches but never meets the standards that a radical postmodernism requires. A fervently postmodern answer to the weighing mechanism would resemble total chaos. It would require an infinite set of perspectives as varied as the limits of symbolic expression allow. In other words, a radically postmodern approach would require an infinite array of weighing mechanisms. This sort of advocacy, assuming it were possible, would require far more preparation and ability than the typical college-level IPDA round affords us.

Furthermore, such an approach might be inimical to our association’s larger goals. Perhaps the feature of the IPDA of which we are most proud is its applicability. Coaches like to tell administrators that their debaters are learning skills which will better equip them to deal with life after college. Life after college frequently requires decision-making based upon imperfect research, tight deadlines, and distracted audiences. With these considerations in mind, I have offered pragmatic pluralism as an improvement. In pragmatic pluralism, audiences are provided with a number (as many as the debaters can research and present effectively) of perspectives which inform their arguments. So, while pragmatic pluralism is no magic bullet for the ills of modernism, it provides a significant improvement for ameliorating the most important problems created by traditional implementations of weighing mechanisms.

Another significant criticism may come from those who would agree theoretically with my argument but find themselves at a loss in considering how to explain such an approach to the average judge. I agree that this represents the most significant impediment to applying pragmatic pluralism to an IDPA round. It seems likely that the first few times a debater attempts to use pragmatic pluralism in a rebuttal, the affirmative will complain mightily. They may say, for example, that if the negative cannot prove a problem with the prima facie weighing mechanism, then it must be accepted and used as the gold standard for valuing arguments in the round. I would suggest that this complaint and others like it would be handled by our hypothetical pragmatic pluralist who

would explain the need for multiple weighing mechanisms, possibly through a simple analogy like the ones included in this paper.

Still others may say that pragmatic pluralism unnecessarily muddies the decision-making process. They might claim that arguing from multiple perspectives makes judging near impossible. “How,” they would ask, “are judges to sort out financial arguments, ethical arguments, moral arguments, and legal arguments?” I would simply remind them that such decisions are a necessary part of our everyday lives. And still we muddle through. Finally, some may say that such an approach requires far too much work for the payoff. One could imagine the difficulty of erecting the intellectual apparatuses of postmodernism and pragmatic pluralism before a lay judge. One might also remember debate rounds in which the resolution reads, “Candy bars are better than ice cream,” or some such variant. A person possessed of such an imagination and memory might rightly complain that what I ask is far too much work for what is likely to be a small payoff. They will say, “How much more education can we gain in a round about candy bars and ice cream?” This criticism, I believe, points up a larger question: what is the ultimate goal of IPDA debate? I suspect that some will echo my old friend, Steve Goode, and say that the IPDA should, above all else, be fun and educational. Others may say that all debate is an activity that aims to sharpen the mind and teach interlocutors, through experience, the art of eloquence.

If the reader happens to fall into that first camp who say that the IPDA should be fun and educational, I would say that that this approach can be no more or less helpful than the resolution to which it is applied. Regardless of how one approaches the topic, “Candy bars are better than ice cream,” does not promise much in the way of education. On the other hand, if you believe that debate is about sharpening mental acuity and fostering eloquence, I see no problems in encouraging students to take up the task of adapting this approach in any round.

Conclusion

As we shop for our homes, cars, laundry detergents, and political candidates, we use weighing mechanisms for separating better and worse options. In this essay, I have expressed a postmodern perspective which renders these weighing mechanisms as imperfect, restrictive, and ideologically-based rhetorical filters. In an attempt to alleviate the problems created by our reliance on any given weighing mechanism, this paper advocates pragmatic pluralism. It is no perfect answer; perhaps it complicates the calculus of evaluation or requires more mental lifting than some would prefer to undertake on their weekends. However, I suspect that the added education and consideration provided to the round may be well worth the effort.

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