

Demystifying the Critique

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Some images that recur in Nietzsche's writings seem to me to fit Heidegger beautifully. I see him as a magician or wizard, "a philosophical Cagliostro and pied piper, in short, a seducer." He was a great performer who took in large numbers of highly intelligent men and women and perhaps even himself. (Walter Kaufmann, Professor of Philosophy, Princeton, *Discovering the Mind, Volume 2, Nietzsche. Heidegger, and Buber*, 1980, p.234.)

"Language is the house of Being," says Heidegger; but in truth his language is the house in which he hides, and his gothic terminology is like a row of towers that frightens us away while it gives him a feeling of security. His philosophy is like a castle that, though certainly not beautiful, stands out from a generally dull landscape and catches the eye. We should not dream of settling down beneath it to spend our lives, like Kafka's K., in futile efforts to penetrate the mysteries that, more often than not, are expressions of confusion rather than profundity. (Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, 1959, p302.)

From the date of its first appearance at the University of Northern Iowa debate tournament in September of 1991, the critique (or "Kritik" in its Germanized form) has created consternation and confusion. It has attacked some of the most fundamental presuppositions of policy debate; indeed, it has even raised the question of whether it is policy debate that we are primarily engaged in. The critique has undergone a process of rapid popularization in both college and high school debate; and it has unquestionably been the most striking and controversial theoretical innovation of the past five years. Critique debates have improved over time. Critique proponents have become clearer in articulating their positions, and teams arguing against critiques have begun to develop more coherent and effective strategies of defense. Still critique debates remain bemusing. Critiques tend to function outside most of the normal conceptual categories through which debate arguments are generated and evaluated. And the critique has its intellectual origins in a German philosophical tradition which is alien to most American debaters and coaches. It is a philosophical tradition originating in Hegel and climaxing perhaps in Heidegger which is infamous for its complexity and obscurity. As applied to debate, one is still left wondering whether the critique offers authentic new insights or whether it is simply an obfuscation device designed to pay competitive premiums to critiquers.

The language of the critique remains, sometimes literally, foreign. Debating against critiques can prove to be a mystifying experience, as argumentative ground shifts rapidly under one's feet. My purpose in this article is neither to praise the critique nor to bury it, but rather, in part at least, to demystify it. What teams debating against critiques need most is a framework through which critiques can be grasped and attacked. This is not an easy task. Critiques vary widely. Some critiques are epistemological; others are moral, political, or even metaphysical. They can attack opponents' premises, opponents' method of reasoning, even opponents' language choices. There is no single block of "critiques are bad" arguments which will apply equally well (or even apply at all) in all situations. I think, however, that there are a number of general approaches to debating critiques which will prove widely applicable. In what follows, I suggest a few.

Critiques almost invariably operate outside the normal policy framework of debate. It is clear why this is the case: if critiques were powerful as policy arguments (or at least *as* powerful), then they would probably have been formulated as such. What the critique seems to challenge most fundamentally is that what we are essentially engaged in is a policy debate. That is what, even more than the specific content of the critique, makes critiques seem like such alien beings—they attack what may be our most fundamental assumption, an assumption pertaining to what we are debating about.

Given that this is the case, the first approach to debating critiques seems clear: one should attempt to reestablish the policy framework for the debate. Two arguments can be made from the outset. First, the subject matter for the debate, the debate topic, is a question of public policy. Second, this specific topics operating within a larger framework of policy debate. Both NDT and high school two-person debate have chosen to debate policy propositions for as long as I, at least, can remember. A major distinguishing feature of NDT debate vs. CEDA debate has been that NDT debates policy questions. And "policy debate" is the standard synonym for two-person debate in high school. What this implies is that not only is the specific subject at hand a question of policy, the entire framework within which our forms of debating occur has been established by agreement to be a public policy forum.

A policy framework sets some limits on what arguments are relevant and what impacts arguments possess. For example, a negative might argue a linguistic critique, suggesting that the phrase "Islamic fundamentalism" is tainted by ethnic bias, or that the concept of "development" is ethnocentrically pro-Western. One might, within a policy framework, conclude that such arguments are true and still decide that the affirmative plan is a good idea in comparison to the status quo or any counterplan the negative may have advanced. Furthermore, certain arguments which might logically be absolute may still be inappropriate in a policy forum. The critique of causality derives from the writings of David Hume, an eighteenth century British philosopher. In the section of *A Treatise on Human Nature* which deals with epistemology (the theory of what we can know), Hume argued that we can never rationally prove the existence of causation. We can only observe the sequence of events; we can never know with logical certainty that event X causes event Y. As a matter of pure logic, Hume seems to be correct. But he certainly never intended his "critique" of causality to become a precept of practical or political reasoning. Indeed, when Hume discusses ethics, later on in his *Treatise*, he offers a thoroughly deterministic psychology, that is, he assumes principles of causation. The point of this example is to suggest that an epistemological quandary doesn't necessarily constitute a political argument.

The major argument made by defenders of the critique against the notion that we are mainly engaged in a policy debate takes the form of a critique of fiat. "Fiat," it is said, is a utopian concept. Nothing is really done at the end of the round; no new policy is really put into place. The language used in the round, and the attitude formation associated with that language use, is far more "real" and of far more consequence in the actual lives of the participants. Further, since nothing is really done, there's no real reason why various abstract epistemological or metaphysical theories shouldn't be considered in the debate. In addition, we do sometimes evaluate and vote on non-policy issues even within our current debate conventions, topicality arguments and ethics challenges to evidence being the two most prominent examples.

Is fiat utopian? The word "fiat" has probably caused more problems for debate theory than any other two syllables, and the way in which the concept of fiat has been formulated is often problematic. Traditionally, fiat was said to be the "power" to put a plan (or counterplan) into effect. Based on this "magic wand" notion of fiat, it is relatively easy to see why some might call it utopian. But there are other ways of thinking about fiat. Rather than being a power, one might say that fiat is an act of imagination; we simply imagine that the plan is in place in order to decide if it would be a good idea. Or, one could say that fiat is just shorthand for the idea of normative endorsement. "Fiat" is then equivalent to saying that we have made the value judgment that the plan should be done. Conceived as such, this process is hardly utopian; we make such ethical and political judgments all the time. Is the process of making such judgments unreal or unimportant? Hardly. It is through the process of making these judgments that our moral and political world views are developed. The judgments we come to at the end of debate rounds may only be provisional, based on the evidence and arguments in that round, but overtime the sum of our provisional judgments is what ultimately constitutes our moral and political belief system.

Policy debates are important. As citizens in a democracy, we have individually small but collectively large inputs into the policies our government chooses. As future decision makers or opinion leaders, the judgments about policy which debaters come to may be especially important. And even if our own input into the policy process is small, we live (as Bob Dylan says) "in a political world," and to keep our bearings in that world, we need to make some informed judgments about what we believe.

Topicality functions as a necessary adjunct to policy debate, not as an alternative to it. A topicality argument

essentially claims that the affirmative is not arguing for a relevant policy. It is a side constraint on what can be discussed in order to maintain a clear policy focus. Evidence challenges are also meant to sustain the integrity of the policy discussion process. Given our reliance (whether good or bad) on authority, it is necessary that external authorities be cited accurately. Otherwise, the whole policy discussion process breaks down.

There may well be other ethical violations which would so undercut the debate process that judges should vote against such behaviors. Debate can only proceed effectively if we respect the integrity of those who we are debating. So, for example, bigoted behavior directed towards an opponent seems to me like a good reason to vote against a team. But serious ethical violations such as this are very rare in debate, and accusations of bigotry should not be casually made. Ethical issues in debate shouldn't be argumentative pawns. It seems absurd to suspend a substantive discussion simply because of a lapse in the use of gender neutral language, for example.

Language is a form of behavior, and if language is so abused that the integrity of the debate process has been undermined, then it probably should be a voting issue. But few uses of language seem to call for such a severe response. If the phrase "Islamic fundamentalism" distorts policy discussion by evoking an erroneous racial stereotype, then the credibility of evidence and arguments employing that language may be reduced, but that is not likely in itself to be a reason for concluding that an affirmative plan is a bad idea. Similarly, if "development" is a totally bankrupt concept, then there should be disadvantages to increased development efforts. If such disadvantages don't outweigh the affirmative advantage, then the critique of development seems like semantic nitpicking.

If we are engaged in a policy debate, then aspects of how one argues, such as one's rhetoric, are relatively incidental. The point is to evaluate the policies proposed on their merits. Poor rhetoric by a plan's proponents is not a reason to reject an otherwise sound idea.

Once one rejects the policy focus, then everything seems open to debate. We could be setting ourselves up for the "critique of attire." If clothes make the man (or the woman), and if immediate relevance to the participants in the round is the criterion of argument importance, then arguments about who is better dressed would seem to become relevant. Or what about the "critique of personal hygiene"? Personal hygiene is certainly more important to our social existence than are particular judgments about an affirmative plan. (And if critiques of verbal communication are legitimate, why not critiques of non-verbal?) So, by the logic of the critique, we could end up debating who is better groomed, the relative value of different ways of parting one's hair, or the esthetics of deodorant. To certain proponents of the critique, who have been known to vote on the "tie paradigm," such an outcome might be acceptable. Personally, I would rather judge debates about whether teams' arguments stink than whether their bodies do.

Having argued that the context of public policy discourses is the appropriate framework for our type of debate, the second major step to take in attacking a critique is to argue why the critique isn't a reason to reject the plan. In doing so, two key ideas are the notions of comparative analysis and absoluteness.

All policy debate, it has been cogently argued, requires comparison. Every human institution has its flaws; its worth can therefore only be determined in relation to some alternative institutional arrangement. As Churchill said, democracy is the worst form of government, except for every other form. If policies are to be evaluated in comparative terms, then the plan must be evaluated either versus a counterplan or the status quo (or both). If the negative fails to advance a counterplan, then the only available comparison is with the present system. The main implication of this is that if a critique is to function as a disadvantage, it has to be unique. Consider the example of a deep ecological critique. This critique might argue that long term environmental survival requires a new environmental ethic. But the fact that a new ethic would be good, or even vital, is not a reason to reject a specific affirmative plan which operates outside that ethic unless we have at least some reason to believe that the new ethic is coming and that the plan impedes its arrival.

But, it might be argued, this critique is not intended to function as a disadvantage; rather it is a moral and metaphysical argument directed at the core assumptions underlying the affirmative advantage. This claim is

not to be lightly dismissed, but I believe that the critique is likely to fail even at this level. It is here that the notion of absoluteness comes into play. To win this critique the negative would have to win that there is no value associated with the affirmative plan. Thus, the negative might win that it would be best to try to preserve the biosphere as a whole and that humans don't have a privileged place in the ecosystem. But it would be hard, even from a deep ecological perspective, to win that humans have no value. They are, after all, biological beings and part of nature. Even if they are not more important than other species, they are, by the same logic, not less important. Thus, unless preserving human lives harms other life forms (which would be a defensible disadvantage), then even from a deep ecologist's standpoint, human lives should be preserved.

The critique of rationality provides another good example of why critiques are likely not to be absolute. "Reason" may be a flawed instrument; there may be occasions when we should give greater weight to our emotions or intuitions. But rationality clearly has a vital place in human life. If you had been falsely accused of murder, you would want the jury to listen to the reasons you could give for your innocence, not just vote on whether they like you or not. The fact that you were in Lexington at the time that this murder was being committed in Austin is a sound logical reason for why you couldn't have committed it. My point is that no critique of rationality can discredit all forms of rational thought. Furthermore, it cannot do so with complete certainty. It should be next to impossible for the negative to win that rational reasons have no probative value. It's better to decide on the basis of a flawed rationality than it is to flip a coin.

The third main approach to attacking the critique is to argue it in its own terms. While I would not recommend this as a sole strategy, I believe that it has considerable merit in combination with other arguments. Most critiques simply are not that strong. There may well be a good reason why the assumption that the critique attacks is rarely questioned. At minimum, it is likely to be an assumption which most people (including most judges) happen to share. Thus, the degree of persuasion required to sustain that assumption may be minimal.

Consider the rationality example. The necessity of reason in a public policy debate seems obvious. We try to give reasons for our conclusions because reasons can be evaluated and compared. If one side claims that its intuition is that a policy is wrong and the other says that its intuition is that the policy is right, we have no grounds for debate. We can emote or intuit at each other all day without getting anywhere. Reasoned argument offers our only real hope of peacefully settling intuitive disagreements. It can never be established logically that logic is correct; to do so would be circular. But the elementary rules of logic are simply self-evident. If I was in Lexington, Kentucky at the time which someone was stabbed to death in Austin, Texas, I couldn't have been the one to do the stabbing. Similarly, given the way in which our minds are constructed, empiricism seems to be by nature compelling. Logically, we can't know that the sun will rise tomorrow; the future may not repeat the past. But our past experience is the best thing that we have to go on; life requires that we act and judge with some degree of uncertainty.

Or consider the critique of "Islamic fundamentalism." Words have both denotative and connotative meanings. The phrase "Islamic fundamentalism" is not, in itself, value laden. It simply refers to someone who believes in a very literal and conservative version of the Muslim religion. "Islamic fundamentalism" could be true or false, good or bad; the phrase itself doesn't prejudge any of these alternatives. The fact that the phrase may have acquired negative connotations in some quarters doesn't deny that it also has a non-evaluative denotative meaning, and there is no reason why one should not use the phrase to express this denotative meaning. Some critiques are of course more substantive and may require more research or longer reflection to answer. But it should not be that difficult to defeat critiques, like other counter-intuitive arguments, on their own merits. Theory arguments tend to be unsatisfying, usually degenerating into fairness whines. It may be easier to win that anarchy is a bad idea than that the critique of government is illegitimate.

Fourth, one may wish to critique the critique, that is, to attack some of its underlying assumptions. Should all premises really be questioned? Won't doing so result in an infinite regression? Does doubting everything result in a nihilistic inability to believe in anything?

Is the critique appropriate to debate? Don't political debates almost always take an a priori ethical and political

framework for granted? Can philosophical arguments be effectively discussed given our time limits and delivery conventions? Is the critique appropriate to high school debate, or does it assume an inappropriate level of sophistication in students who have never had even an introductory philosophy course? Does the critique lead to an excessive emphasis on theory, encouraging the proliferation of voting issue blips? Does the critique make debate, already a difficult skill to master, too esoteric and therefore discourage student participation and institutional support?

Should critical thinking be given so strong a priority over constructive thinking? Is it intellectually irresponsible to simply critique without proposing an alternative? Marx's "devastating critique" after all, led indirectly to the Soviet Gulag, and one of Heidegger's "woodpaths" led him at least temporarily to Nazism. Do we necessarily want to destroy the conceptual categories which currently make debate coherent to its participants? Do critique debates produce intellectually satisfying experiences? Or do they simply produce a sense of confusion and intellectual chaos, where judges and debaters are operating from radically different assumptions, failing to communicate, and therefore at the end of the round generally feeling cheated?

To make a persuasive argument, each of these questions would require considerable elaboration. (Although Heidegger, for one, thought that questions were more important than answers.) But it should be clear from this list that there are plenty of grounds for attack.

In summary, I believe that there is a four-step process which can be applied effectively against most critiques. First, try to establish a framework within which *you* think the debate should be evaluated, as opposed to the framework of the critique. Usually this will be the framework of public policy analysis. Second, argue that within the policy framework, the specific critique is not compelling. You might argue that the critique does not function as a disadvantage to the plan because it is non-unique, that it is not an alternative solution because there is no counterplan, or that it doesn't negate the affirmative advantage because it is not absolute. By reestablishing your framework for analysis (step one), you have made the standard types of debate analysis with which you are familiar relevant once again. Third, try to refute the critique on its own terms. You can either defend the premise the critique attacks or argue that even within the worldview proposed by the critique, your plan is still justified. Fourth, you can attempt to "critique the critique" by attacking some of its underlying assumptions.

Of course, you need not resort to all of these approaches every time you encounter a critique. I believe that steps one and two are almost always advisable. Approach three, to simply debate the critique on its own merits has risks (you are at least temporarily shifting to the negative team's ground), but it can be effective. (After all, most of us do ultimately believe that causality exists, that rationality is good, that separate individuals exist, that at least from human standpoint humans are more important than other animals, that government is necessary, and that ideas are more important than the rhetoric with which they are expressed.) The fourth approach, critiquing the critique, may tend to degenerate into a series of one-liners, but there are certainly plenty of grounds for cogent argument.

With research and reflection, the critique need not be so threatening. The basic requirement is that you demystify the critique, avoid being intimidated by its German philosophic pedigree, and argue it intelligently.