

## Teaching Philosophy through Lincoln-Douglas Debate

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*Abstract:* This paper is about teaching philosophy to high school students through Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate. LD, also known as “values debate,” includes topics from ethics and political philosophy. Thousands of high school students across the U.S. debate these topics in class, after school, and at weekend tournaments. We argue that LD is a particularly effective tool for teaching philosophy, but also that LD today falls short of its potential. We argue that the problems with LD are not inevitable, and we offer strategic recommendations for improving LD as a tool for teaching philosophy. Ultimately, our aim is to create a dialogue between LD and academic philosophy, with the hope that such dialogue will improve LD’s capacity to teach students how to do philosophy.

This paper is about teaching philosophy to high school students through Lincoln-Douglas (LD) debate. LD, also known as “values debate,” orients around topics from ethics and political philosophy that thousands of high school students across the U.S. debate in class, after school, and at weekend tournaments. Past topics include the morality of nuclear weapons, justified responses to domestic violence, killing one to save many, capital punishment, justice in health care, and eminent domain for private enterprise. As a result of fiercely debating such topics, philosophical arguments take on a surprising second life with LD debaters. At the most prestigious high school debate tournaments in the country, a considerable majority of the students will be able to explain—with

surprising accuracy—the differences between David Cummiskey’s Kantian consequentialism and Christine Korsgaard’s Kantian deontology. They will be able to define reflective equilibrium, will have read at least a section or two of Parfit’s *On What Matters*, and they might even be able to describe a few objections to metaethical realism. For better or worse, more people are at least trying to read philosophy than philosophers might suppose, and their readers are sometimes as young as 15 or 16.

In this paper, we discuss the problems and opportunities for LD as a tool for teaching philosophy. Our aim is to create a dialogue between debate instructors and philosophy teachers, with the hope that such dialogue will improve LD’s capacity to teach students how to do philosophy. The paper consists of three sections. In the first, we explain how some features of LD provide a foundation and springboard for acquiring philosophical skills and knowledge. In particular, we focus on three aspects of LD debate that uniquely position LD to be an effective tool for teaching philosophy. In the second section, we discuss some ways in which LD today falls short of its potential to teach philosophy. These problems, however, are not inevitable, and we suggest that LD can be a much better tool for teaching philosophy than it is now. So, in the third section, we present three recommendations for how educators can improve LD’s potential to teach philosophy at the high school level. We conclude with a brief discussion on the assumption of disagreement in LD.

### *1. How Debaters Learn Philosophy*

In this section we will briefly describe what happens in a LD debate, highlighting features of the activity that contribute to its value in providing philosophical education. LD debate is an extracurricular debate event that is governed by the National Forensics League.<sup>1</sup> A round of LD debate begins with an affirmative speech, which asserts and defends the truth of a given resolution, and a negative speech. Both speeches are followed by three-minute periods of cross examination by the opposing debater and are followed by an affirmative rebuttal, a negative rebuttal, and a final affirmative rebuttal.

Generally, the first affirmative speech will attempt to achieve three primary objectives. First, the affirmative will seek to specify an interpretation of the resolution that will inform what constitutes a sufficient reason to vote for the affirmative and what constitutes a sufficient reason to vote against the affirmative. Many resolutions allow for a variety of plausible interpretations. For example, a recent resolution held that “Resolved: Individuals have a moral obligation to assist people in need.” Debaters, like philosophers, are apt to hear

this assertion as requiring specification before its truth or falsity can be decided. Is a Kantian imperfect duty to provide aid enough to say that one is morally obligated? In how great a need must a person be in order to trigger the obligation? If individuals are morally obligated to save a stranger drowning in a pond, but not morally obligated to help someone carrying groceries into their house, then is the resolution true or false?<sup>2</sup> Affirmatives face a tricky set of considerations in deciding which interpretation to propose. If they propose an interpretation that makes the resolution easy to rebut, they risk spending time only to give their opponent a strategic advantage. If they propose an interpretation that makes the resolution's truth too easy to establish, their opponent may abandon the effort to rebut the resolution at all. Instead, the negative may merely attempt to show that the judge should reject the affirmative's interpretation of the resolution, and thereby render the affirmative case irrelevant.

At the most competitive levels, debaters invest a great deal of energy in fixing the interpretation of the resolution that is used throughout the round. To do this, debaters will commonly appeal to philosophical resources. Why prefer one way of interpreting a moral statement to others? Questions of this form are familiar philosophical terrain. Debaters will borrow from work in the philosophy of language and metaethics to support their preferred interpretation. Alternatively, debaters might deploy ideas from the philosophy of law to establish principles for carrying out an interpretation in the first place.<sup>3</sup> Even if the debater's reasons for choosing one interpretation are strategic, the expectation that an interpretation will be contested forces the debater to confront substantive philosophical issues and to choose an interpretation that seem defensible.

After completing the presentation of an interpretation, the affirmative's next task is to present a "framework" for the debate. A framework is basically a debate term for a moral theory, paradigmatically including Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, contractualism, and so forth. In this section of their case, the debater seeks to describe how the framework can be used to answer questions in applied ethics or political philosophy, and also to defend this framework against alternatives—centrally alternatives that the debater anticipates might be appealing to her or his opponent.

In the final stage of the affirmative case, the task is to show how the framework just articulated answers the first-order moral question posed by the resolution in a way that makes the debater's favored interpretation true. With this accomplished, the debaters have a cross examination period in which the negative debater can ask the affirmative what positions the case is and is not committed to endorsing. The negative thereby seeks to prevent the affirmative advocacy from

shifting during the round. A second objective of cross examination is to look for weaknesses that expose which of the three areas discuss present the best opportunity for negative pressure. The negative then may or may not engage the affirmative about all three types of issues: interpretive, normative ethical, and applied ethical.

Now that the mechanics of an LD debate have been explained, we would like to call attention to three unique aspects of this activity that make it an effective tool for teaching philosophy. First, competitive LD debate as it is currently practiced brings students into contact with a considerable diversity of philosophical questions. While one might suppose that debaters would primarily engage with literature in moral and political philosophy, recent developments in debate have expanded attention to metaethics, philosophy of language, and epistemology. For instance, advanced rounds between more experienced debaters have included discussions of moral non-cognitivism, ontological arguments for the existence of God, Humean critiques of induction, and even the moral implications of David Lewis's modal realism. And as we will describe later, debaters now appeal to moral epistemology—perhaps arguing that their theory fits better with our considered judgments in wide reflective equilibrium, or is more powerful or parsimonious.<sup>4</sup> Such diversity of topics is significant in that it provides a natural motivation for exploring areas of philosophy for which there is usually less general interest. Teachers of philosophy sometimes complain that while students are engaged by first-order questions in moral or political philosophy, they may have difficulty grasping the importance of questions in metaethics, metaphysics, or epistemology. Debate motivates students to understand a broader range of philosophical inquiry than they might otherwise attempt to learn.

Second, LD debate provides a unique way of appreciating the connections between different areas of philosophical investigation. It is an open question how resolving various metaethical disputes affects the plausibility of various normative ethical theories. At least some philosophers believe that certain metaethical results tend to either support or undermine the case for certain normative ethical views.<sup>5</sup> Yet students at the college level typically learn about metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics in separate, distinct components of an introductory course. LD debate, however, presses students to look for connections between these fields. Although this aspect of debate carries some costs that will be discussed in the next section, it is worth pointing out that this also confers a pedagogical benefit. It can teach students to think about the discipline in the same way that philosophers do themselves, rather than as a set of unrelated questions divided into weeks of brief study in a survey course. In this way, LD debate teaches students not only how to study philosophy, but also—borrowing from Rudisill

(2011)—how to *do* philosophy. Debaters engage in self-directed research projects, begin to identify what is at stake in philosophical debates, and evaluate and communicate arguments.

Third, LD debate provides a venue for students at different levels to collaborate and learn from each other.<sup>6</sup> We have so far ignored a crucial participant in each debate round: the judge. After every round's conclusion, the judge writes a brief reason for decision on the ballot and then discloses whether the ballot has been awarded to the affirmative or the negative. The judge may describe the reasons for preferring one side's arguments to the other's. After this there is a brief period in which the debaters may converse with the judge about the judge's decision. At competitive tournaments, judges and coaches may talk with each other and with students about how best to adjudicate difficult or close rounds. Most often, those judges that participate most actively in debate are themselves former debaters who are now college undergraduates. For many, judging debate is their first opportunity to be entrusted with responsibility for teaching others. Because they cared so much about winning debate rounds, new debate judges characteristically evaluate round with great care and attention to detail. An economy of esteem develops around those judges who give persuasive "reasons for decisions," or RFDs.

The judging system has several advantages. First, it shocks former debaters into realizing that while they had formerly believed they won rounds clearly, many rounds remain unclear after the final rebuttals. At its best, this can cultivate even-handedness and recognition of the merits of opposing points of view. Teachers of philosophy may bemoan that undergraduates do not appreciate the difficulty of philosophical problems. Judging debate can push students to understand that philosophy is hard, especially when who wins or loses turns on how a complex philosophical disagreement is resolved by the judge. Second, conferring responsibility to younger judges who are college undergrads provides an opportunity for contributing meaningful service to others, and for sharpening their ability to communicate philosophical ideas simply and directly. Philosophers want students to write in plain, clear prose. Forcing them to explain themselves to those who know even less than they do is one means to this end. The final benefit from the system of judging is that it creates a community in which participants at differing types of involvement have an ongoing stake.<sup>7</sup>

In general, then, we are quite hopeful that debate offers much for high school students to gain. We recognize that many philosophers have probably been frustrated at one time or another by loud former-debaters in their classes. Debate is a community primarily of adolescents and it would be naïve to suppose it could be free of the difficulties which

often attend such communities.<sup>8</sup> But for its foibles, debate can be a valuable experience for students and teachers alike.

## 2. Issues at Stake

Let's turn now to the features of LD debate that could affect students for the worse. In this section we will draw attention to three concerns we have about LD debate. Although we believe that these features are not inevitable and that there is ample room for improving LD debate, these issues are worth discussing if LD debate is to become a positive tool for teaching philosophy.

### 2.1. Moral Relativism and Skepticism

Students argue for both sides of the topic. A typical tournament consists of six preliminary debates and each debater argues for each side in half of her debates. To determine the champion, the debaters with the best records compete in a single-elimination bracket, in which sides are determined by coin flip. There are a lot of benefits that stem from the requirement to switch sides that are documented by Muir (1993). But there are drawbacks to regularly switching sides too.

As a result of constant side switching, LD debaters occasionally begin to believe that there is no single right answer to moral questions. If there were just one right answer, then the outcome of each debate would be the same every time. But that would be unfair, so there must be no right answer. Or so a lot of students think. In principle, the National Forensic League could choose any moral proposition to be the topic, and it would still be unfair. So debaters often graduate with the view that there are no right answers to moral questions—either because rightness or goodness is determined by a person's belief or cultural norms, or because moral progress is impossible. Our view is not that this belief is bad *per se*, but rather that debaters come to believe it for *bad reasons*.

This particular reason is bad because the existence of a right answer would not determine the outcome of each debate. LD debaters and judges could and probably do get the answer wrong. The outcome of a debate only indicates which side was best supported by the debaters' performance and the judge's beliefs, not which side was supported by truth. Unfortunately, it is not easy to correct for widespread attitudes in debate because many coaches also accept such fallacious reasoning. That is usually because those coaches believed it as debaters and are reluctant to change their minds.

Another cause of poorly justified relativism and skepticism in LD debate comes from judge expectations. Judges are advised not to *intervene*—that is, not to use their prior opinions about the resolution

when deciding who won any given debate. That would be unfair, say some debaters and coaches, since it would advantage one debater over her opponent.<sup>9</sup> Yet judges of LD debate today often take an even stronger view than this one. Instead of abstaining from intervention about the resolution, judges try to abandon all of their prior opinions about *everything*. While this ideal is impossible to achieve, its proponents believe that judges should try to reduce the influence of their own views as much as possible. They argue that judges should let debaters defend whatever they wish, which is often defended on the grounds that there are no right answers to moral questions, or that the answers depend on the students' own beliefs.

LD debaters tend to welcome this opposition to intervention because it gives them greater freedom to choose strategies that increase their odds of winning. They also tend to accept every view supporting this idea without much thought or criticism, including views like moral relativism and skepticism. Debaters sometimes like arguments because of their conclusions—after all, they work hard to find the ones they need—not because of their quality and evidential support. The problem, then, is that debaters are inclined to accept a controversial philosophical view about morality for the wrong reasons.

Third, debaters have a difficult time answering arguments for moral relativism and skepticism. Quoting and understanding arguments from contemporary philosophers helps, but debaters have to read the philosophy first, and metaethics is heavy reading for a high school student. Arguing against a skeptic or relativist is an uphill battle in LD debate, largely because judges have unusually high burdens of proof for ordinary moral beliefs. For example, counterexamples are ineffective because the skeptic in LD debate can almost always bite the bullet. Absurd implications are not enough because most debaters and judges are reluctant to “rely on intuition”—mostly for debate-specific reasons, like opposition to judge intervention, but also for philosophical reasons that are accepted without question.<sup>10</sup> LD debate exchanges feature these sorts of exchanges frequently:

DEBATER A: “Your ethical framework implies that it is permissible for the U.S. government to preemptively destroy an entire civilization out of fear that its members may one day threaten U.S. hegemony. Is this an acceptable result?”

DEBATER B: “Yes. So what? To assume a result is unacceptable prior to formulating a moral theory that yields that result is to beg the question against my moral theory.”

JUDGE: [*Nods sagely*]

Given current paradigmatic practices, moral relativism and skepticism is an effective strategy in LD debate. It is difficult to answer, and it poses little strategic risk to the debater who defends it. The problem

with debaters' acceptance of moral relativism and skepticism is not that there might, in fact, be moral truths. Rather, the problem is that debaters internalize an unjustified methodology that biases them towards anti-realism for bad reasons.

## 2.2. Misunderstandings and False Beliefs

Some features of LD debate, as it is practiced today, encourage students to misrepresent philosophical arguments, ignore subtle distinctions, and oversimplify ideas.

Here is one reason why. Debaters have limited speech time, so one reliable way to win is by overwhelming one's opponent with objections. Instead of developing the best version of the best objection to each argument, debaters often make as many objections as they can think of, regardless of their quality. Why? Because a false argument is strategic so long as the explanation of its falsity is more time intensive than the argument itself. Students know that this strategy is successful, so they try to replicate it by learning how to generate large numbers of objections. Unfortunately, learning how to make more objections usually trades off with learning how to make better objections. (Perhaps it need not be this way, but that is the status quo.) So, many debaters, including the most successful ones, learn not to care about the quality of an argument. They internalize the view that any argument is worth making as long as it maximizes the debater's time tradeoff—that is, the ratio of how long her opponent spends answering her objection compared to how long the objection took to develop. Sometimes, explaining an argument in the kind of depth and precision that philosophers use has little marginal value in terms of the debater's time tradeoff. As long as she can get the basic argument out there, she can force her opponent to waste her time answering it. If the answers are poor, then all the better. If the answers are good, the debater will just dig in on a different argument, and it will not matter. Of course, some debates involve well developed arguments with thoughtful objections and an interesting dialectic that often mirrors current academic debates on the issue. But these are extremely rare because it is often easier and more efficient to oversimplify.

Furthermore, the misunderstanding and oversimplification of some of the philosophical literature used in LD debate is a persistent problem. In our experience, the vast majority of students and instructors in LD debate use the word "utilitarianism" to describe any moral principle according to which the consequences of an act are relevant. This is a mistake because there are many non-utilitarian version of consequentialism, and because many non-consequentialists agree that consequences matter (they just aren't *all* that matters). Is this too much nuance to expect from high school students? Maybe, but we think it would be



better if debaters used no technical terms rather than incorrect ones. Misusing terms leads students to misinterpret what they read and, therefore, misunderstand the philosophy. Moreover, misusing terms may lead students to develop false beliefs about the philosophical terrain. Students who use “utilitarianism” incorrectly may end up believing that the only plausible view on which consequences matter is the theory that requires us to maximize total well-being. These students will believe in false dilemmas.

A more pernicious worry is that sometimes LD debaters will go as far as to intentionally misrepresent or distort arguments found in the philosophical literature. Debaters may read excerpts from various philosophers discussing the relationship between reason and moral responsibility while glossing over the subtleties of each thinker’s views, if not outright equivocating between fundamentally distinct uses of the relevant terminology. Members of the community are often complacent in regards to these practices.

To see how widely our impressions held, we conducted a survey of 245 debaters, coaches, and judges. The respondents were readers of a debate blog—mostly current debaters, but nearly 80 coaches and 20 former debaters. 74 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement: “Many arguments that succeed in LD are too poorly explained or read too fast to be adequately understood and answered” (see Figure 1). Similarly, 62 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “debaters often misrepresent their evidence” (see Figure 2).

It is worth elaborating why it is bad if LD debate fosters misunderstandings and false beliefs about philosophy. First, misunderstanding is an ineffective educational outcome for an activity that is supposed to teach students about philosophy and how to apply it in their lives. LD debate is, in some respects, failing to achieve its learning objectives. This problem might be remedied when students take philosophy courses in college; the hope is that bright students realize that they got things wrong as debaters and still perform very well in courses.

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following opinion about debate:  
Many arguments that succeed in LD are too poorly explained or are read too fast to be adequately understood and answered.

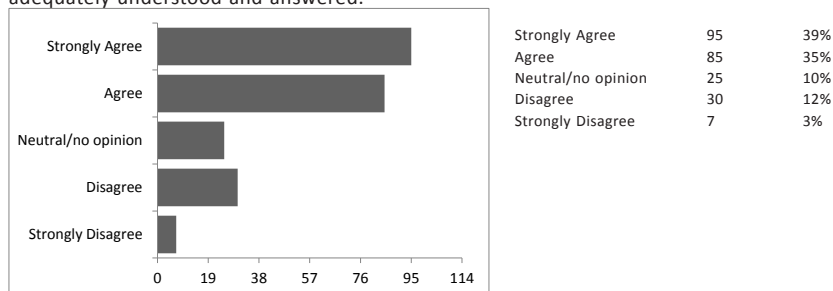


Figure 1

Please rate the extent to which you agree with the following opinion about debate:  
Debaters often misrepresent their evidence.

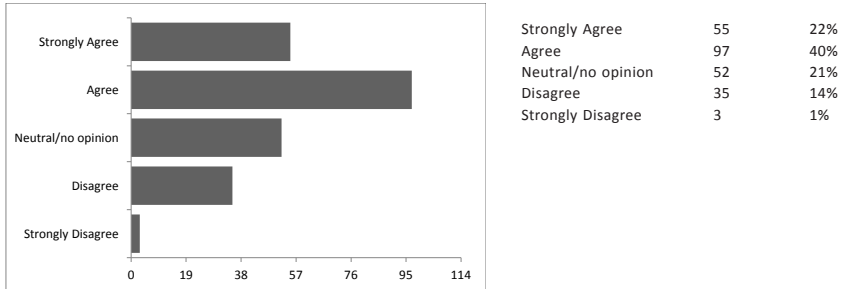


Figure 2

Second, this outcome has negative impacts on students' critical thinking skills. College courses in philosophy teach more than just the content of philosophical views. They teach students how to think and how to communicate their thoughts. If LD debate encourages students not to care for precision and to ignore subtle distinctions, it is preparing them to underperform in college philosophy courses and courses in general.

### 2.3. Philosophical Methodology

The dominant view in LD debate about philosophical methodology is very different from the methodology of academic philosophy. As discussed in Section 1, a typical LD debate case first argues for a moral framework through which the debater evaluates the resolution. The moral principle that she applies to the topic is called the *value criterion*. Common criteria include maximizing total well-being, respecting persons as ends in themselves, preventing undeserved suffering, and minimizing inequality.<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the LD debate community has uncritically taken sides on the philosophical problem of the criterion. As Chisholm (1973) presents it, we face two questions. The first question asks for the general criteria for a concept: in epistemology, how we know; in ethics, the features that make acts right. The second questions asks for particular applications of a concept: in epistemology, what we know; in ethics, which acts are right. The problem of the criterion is that an answer to the first question seems to require an answer to the second, and an answer to the second question seems to require an answer to the first. How philosophers should proceed is an important question of philosophical methodology. Chisholm's *methodists* begin with general principles and criteria, whereas his *particularists* begin with particular judgments and cases. Thomas Kelly (2005) views this division as a continuum, with reflective equilibrium in the middle.

The LD debate community is on the hyper-methodist end of the spectrum. Even reflective equilibrium would seem suspicious to many

debaters and judges. As discussed in Section 2.2, debaters and judges are highly skeptical of intuition. But they have a narrow understanding of what an intuition is. In particular, the LD debate community uses the word “intuition” broadly to pick out moral judgments about particular cases, but not any other philosophical principles. According to the conventional wisdom in LD debate, abstract principles are to be trusted over intuitive judgments. For example, one prized strategy in LD debate is the use of metaethics to derive first-order moral judgments. Many debaters not only assume that normative ethics is impossible without first doing metaethics; they also assume that any metaethical argument trumps any normative argument to the contrary. A common practice in rebuttals is to defend some metaethical justification for one’s ethical theory and then concede all the non-metaethical arguments for the opponent’s ethical theory. This saves time and exploits LD debate’s bizarre norms regarding argument priority because for any given ethical theory, no matter the number of counterexamples, procedural objections, or generic arguments against it, that theory wins so long as it is derived from a metaethical view while its competitors are not.

We believe LD debaters and coaches tend to hold this view because first, they think it would be unfair for the judge’s intuitions to play a significant role in the debate; and second, because they think that abstract principles are on firmer philosophical footing than particular judgments. One consequence of this view is that debaters tend to argue for extreme moral views, no matter how absurd they seem. A philosopher would respond to these views with counterexamples, but counterexamples are not dialectically effective in LD debate, primarily for a reason mentioned earlier in the paper: biting the bullet is almost always the most strategic option. Most judges will not penalize a debater who says, for example, that it would be wrong to violate someone’s property rights to prevent human extinction, or that the surgeon should kill an innocent person and distribute his organs to five other patients, or even that the Holocaust wasn’t morally wrong if the debater in question is defending moral nihilism.

In a recent interview, Scanlon (2012) offers some insight on this trend:

A lot of people, at least a lot of students, tell you that if you can’t come up with an argument that some imagined opponent would have to accept on pain of some kind of contradiction, then who’s to say what’s right? And I think that’s the sort of thing that debate encourages. It belies the fact that the question, at the end of the day, isn’t: is this person actually going to accept it? The question is: do they actually have good reason to accept it, or not? . . . [P]eople lose sight of the fact that philosophy is mostly about deciding what to think, rather than about trying to convince other people what to think.

In our experience, Scanlon is unfortunately right that debate encourages this view of philosophy and of argumentation, and that may be the most pressing problem for educators in LD debate. As others have noted in this journal, arguing with others may not be an effective way to develop the skill of improving one's own beliefs.<sup>12</sup> This problem may seem inevitable, because debate is about convincing other people (namely, the judge), and because, in many debaters' views of the activity, the judge's own beliefs matter very little. In the next section, we discuss how we might be able to change this aspect of LD debate.

### *3. Recommendations*

All is not lost. LD debate's potential to teach students philosophy in an interesting and engaging way makes it worth improving. Debate can make philosophy seem appealing to students who would not find it important in a classroom setting. In particular, debaters not only learn about philosophical concepts and arguments, but also about their applications to public decision-making. Therefore, we offer a few recommendations for different agents to strengthen LD debate as a pedagogical tool for teaching philosophy to high school students.

Although the problems discussed in the previous section are regrettable, they are not inevitable. Some features of LD debate are highly unlikely to change. As long as there are rewards for winning, debaters will do what they can to increase their chances of winning. This means they will view arguments as pieces in a game instead of as claims about the world. As Ralston (2011) has noted, this feature of debate may decrease the substantial benefits that come from deliberative learning.

Fortunately, however, debate strategy is not fixed; it largely depends on judge norms, which change. The main cause of the problems discussed in Section 2 can be traced to LD's competitive incentives in the status quo. Debaters want to win, so they adapt to the preferences of their judges.<sup>13</sup> Tournament directors typically require judges to have a judging paradigm, or set of preferences, publicly available on a website.<sup>14</sup> And debaters often ask additional questions about the judges' preferences before each debate.

A strategic argument for one judge may not be strategic for another judge. For example, biting the bullet on a devastating counterexample may not be a good strategy for a judge who accepts reflective equilibrium, although it is a good strategy for a hyper-methodist judge. Similarly, oversimplifying a philosophical argument may not be a good strategy for a judge who expects clear, precise communication, although it is a good strategy for a judge who votes for the debater with the greatest number of arguments. That is why one of the highest priorities for improving philosophical education in LD debate is improving judge norms.

There is ample evidence that changing judge norms can change debaters' habits and assumptions on a large scale. Until 2007, for example, most debaters regularly used ellipses to remove words, phrases, or entire sentences in quoted evidence. A few judges expressed a strong preference against the use of ellipses, on the grounds that both debaters should have an opportunity to see the evidence in its original context during the debate. Debaters adapted to this preference, and it became the norm within a year. Until 2009, the philosophical arguments of advanced debaters on the national circuit were largely drawn from Continental philosophy. Many judges perceived analytic philosophy as boring and stale, and some were undergraduate majors in fields that borrowed heavily from Continental philosophers. Very few debates today include a discussion of Continental philosophers. What changed? Some judges left the activity, and new judges replaced them. Many prominent judges expressed a preference for clear argumentation, and a few admitted a bias against Continental philosophy. Debaters who relied heavily on Continental philosophy lost in high-profile debates because of these preferences.<sup>15</sup>

Judging will never be perfect, but good instruction from experts can make a great difference. In the context of LD debate this means that judges should receive instruction from professional teachers of philosophy.<sup>16</sup> The National Forensic League could pay philosophers to give talks at national tournaments on topics like the importance of philosophy, philosophical methodology, the elements of a good argument, and ethics. Directors of debate tournaments could also pay philosophers themselves and integrate fund raising for the honorarium into small fees paid by the schools attending the tournament. In addition to improving students' and coaches' understanding of philosophy, such talks would improve the community's vision of the general importance of LD debate and what philosophy in LD debate should look like. It would also provide a regular and yet not time-consuming way for philosophers to interface with high schools. The National Forensic League and tournament directors could start this process with graduate students, who may welcome the opportunity to explain their arguments to an eager audience of students who are deeply interested in their work. Videos of such talks could be posted online to increase access nationwide. There would be significant interest in these efforts, given the presence of judges and coaches who study philosophy in college and the popularity of online articles about philosophy in LD.

Our second recommendation is that high school teachers consider LD debate as a supplement to philosophy programs. We believe that using LD debate to reinforce philosophical lessons in the classroom would be an overwhelmingly positive experience, although it requires training to execute. Teachers of philosophy at the high school level

could read about LD debate and watch debates at local tournaments or online. With strong coaching and dedicated students, LD debate has the potential to influence students to apply philosophy to their moral and political decisions. Even as a small component of a philosophy class, LD debate may help students understand the importance of philosophy in a new light.<sup>17</sup> One advantage of using debate in class is that teachers can help to shape their students' understanding of debate, focusing on the long-term, positive relationship between pedagogically sound practices and competitive success rather than catchy slogans or tricks engineered to produce immediate but smaller payoffs. Philosophy, like debate, relies on dialogue and persuasion, and teachers can model good philosophical practice by visibly trusting students to emphasize arguments over slogans. A second advantage of using LD in the classroom will be in expanding the number of high school students who have access to philosophy. In many places, competitive speech and debate is already a co-curricular institution. While relatively few students (especially outside of wealthy, private schools) have access to philosophy classes, many high schools—including public and rural high schools—have debate classes. Always in need of resources for competitions, high school debate teachers offer a built-in market for general instructional tools in philosophy. The details of incorporating LD into the classroom cannot be satisfactorily addressed here, but we are hopeful that there are more opportunities than philosophers or debate instructors have realized so far. Teachers who worry especially about students becoming passive or skeptical as a result of debate may wish to supplement an LD debate program with a service learning project, along the lines that Ilea and Hawthorne (2011) have recommended.

The use of LD as a teaching tool in high school philosophy classrooms raises practical questions, e.g., about the range of students targeted by such programs. It is our view that such questions deserve more attention than we can offer in this paper. We therefore urge that our remarks on this point be read as general suggestions and not as specific policy proposals. We also wish to stress that the success of such integrative efforts does not determine the success of our overall project; LD can still be excellent tool for teaching philosophy to high school students even if it proves less workable in a classroom environment.

Our third recommendation is that summer debate institutes use *focus weeks* to gather qualitative and quantitative data about learning philosophy at the high school level. Focus weeks, as pioneered by one national debate institute, are programs where debaters work primarily on philosophy, rather than other debate-related research.<sup>18</sup> The aim of these programs is twofold: first, to help students who often lose debates to philosophical arguments with which they are unfamiliar; and second, to expose students to new philosophical arguments that

they can use to win debates. Focus weeks are also an efficient means for changing judge norms. When students who attend a focus week graduate from high school, they transition into judges with a better eye for philosophical argumentation. And judges who are less familiar with philosophy can visit the focus week to improve their depth and breadth of understanding. As of yet, there has been no systematic pedagogical thinking about philosophy focus weeks and the only data we have from these programs is student feedback on their instructors.

It is worth noting, however, that the feedback on focus weeks has so far has been overwhelmingly positive. For example, one student wrote, "After the philosophy focus week, I feel like I can answer any position that comes my way." Another student wrote, "I don't think I ever learned this much in one week." And a third student wrote, "Every single session made me think and change my mind." Many other students focused on how the focus week helped them connect philosophical arguments they read to real problems they encounter in debate.

Of course, this kind of feedback is nowhere near sufficient. Self-reported positive outcomes may not correlate well with good outcomes for learning philosophy because debaters' incentives may be at cross-purposes with pedagogical goals. Input from philosophy teachers would help debate instructors gather relevant data on learning outcomes, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of how high school students learn philosophy. Similar programs include the Summer Philosophy Institute of Colorado and Indiana University's Summer Philosophy Institute, but neither is currently active.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, philosophy focus weeks have had high enrollment each year, and debaters' interest in the program is increasing.

#### *4. Conclusion*

LD debate has benefited tens of thousands of students in the thirty-two years since its inception. For many students, debate may be a better way to teach philosophy than a typical classroom experience because it emphasizes application and because it is very fun as a competitive event. Although we have discussed some negative aspects of LD debate, it has been argued that they are not inevitable, which makes efforts to improve LD debate very important because of the unique role it can play in teaching philosophy.

This paper has outlined some of those efforts, which center on judge norms as a tool for change. We have suggested that the National Forensic League or tournament directors reach out to philosophers, that teachers of philosophy at the high school level consider LD debate as a supplement to their program, and that debate institutes use philosophy focus weeks to help teachers understand how students learn philosophy.

With more and better input from philosophers, LD debate can maximize its potential to teach philosophy at the high school level.

One might object that LD is antithetical to the goals of high school philosophy, because its competitive incentives are structured around disagreement.<sup>20</sup> While we agree that LD debate will never resemble a perfectly open community of inquiry, we think that the assumption of disagreement has significant benefits. First, the only proposition on which debaters are forced to disagree is the resolution itself. When combined with the time constraints, this structure actually *encourages* agreement on most issues. The time constraints force debaters to prioritize certain issues, and they can remain ahead on the resolution by making concessions on other issues. The most successful debaters will often concede all but one argument in the final rebuttal, and will try to persuade the judge that this one argument outweighs the other issues—while giving full weight to the force of their opponents' arguments. Partial agreement is an important benefit because disagreement is a core feature of moral discussion, so teaching students to find common ground on difficult ethical issues is valuable. Second, the assumption of disagreement forces debaters to debate both sides of a topic. Even when a debater's convictions are on one side of a controversial proposition, the practice of devil's advocacy has significant virtues (Correia 2012). It fosters the virtue of argumentative charity, for example, by encouraging debaters to appreciate the strongest objections to their own views. In a perfect philosophical community, participants might not need forced disagreement in order to engage in virtuous devil's advocacy. In a high school classroom, however, switch-sides debate fulfills a function akin to training wheels on the pathway to ideal philosophical discussion.

LD is imperfect, and it always will be. Some of the problems we cite may be insurmountable, or may only be slightly mitigated by our proposals. But that is not a reason to abandon these efforts, or to downplay the benefits of the activity, which are still quite substantive. To state it plainly: without LD, far fewer high school students would make serious attempts to think about philosophy. That is a significant benefit even if all the problems we cite are insoluble. Ultimately, the most important priority for improving LD debate as a tool for teaching philosophy is creating a dialogue between teachers of debate and teachers of philosophy. Our hope is that this paper is the start of that dialogue.

### Notes

1. The National Forensic League's official description of the activity is as follows: "Lincoln Douglas Debate centers on a proposition of value, which concerns itself with what ought to be instead of what is. A value is an ideal held by individuals, societies, governments, etc. One debater upholds each side of the resolution from a value perspec-



tive. To that end, no plan (or counterplan) should be offered. A plan is defined by the NFL as a formalized, comprehensive proposal for implementation. The debate should focus on logical reasoning to support a general principle instead of particular plans and counterplans. Debaters may offer generalized, practical examples or solutions to illustrate how the general principle could guide decisions. Topics change every two months.”

2. Notice that these different interpretive possibilities all have antecedents in the philosophical literature. Of course, the locus classicus of this literature is Singer 1972. Equally obviously, there has been a proliferation of approaches to this problem in the literature. For a few examples, see Sin 2010 and James 2007. For recent discussion, see Dorsey 2009. For a view on the obligation to provide aid in the case of carrying someone’s groceries, see Ebels-Duggan 2009.

3. For example, Dworkin 1986.

4. On these desiderata, see, for example, Kagan 1989.

5. For one example, does metaethical naturalism fit with some form of consequentialism better than other moral theories (cf. Railton 1986)? Does a “second-personal” conception of moral reasons tend to support a contractualist normative ethics (cf. Darwall 2006: chap. 12)?

6. The collaborative benefit of debate is also noted by Carroll (2001, 2007). Carroll draws significant attention to the unique mentorship relationship between coaches and student, which is another means by which LD is able to teach philosophy. This especially the case when the coach is a philosopher or student of philosophy.

7. This community thrives largely on the Internet, where online exchanges among judges and debaters look much like the “agonistic” approach recommended by Mosser (2006).

8. For a thorough discussion, see Fine 2001.

9. This kind of non-interventionist judging may mitigate Esquith’s (1988) worries about the adversarial format as “coercive” and too heavily influenced by the teacher as judge. On the other hand, non-interventionist judging treats debate too much like a “game,” which has its own problems. These problems are discussed by Mitchell (1998) and Muir (1993).

10. For a discussion of these debate-specific reasons, see McGee and Simerly 1994. Although their discussion is limited to the role played by intuition in intercollegiate policy debate, their concerns about intuition apply *mutatis mutandis* to high school LD debate.

11. The criterion is typically a gerund. On some local circuits, the criterion is a theory or a concept—e.g., the first formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative. In some debates, the criterion is a fully spelled out rule that is necessary or sufficient to affirm. It is often debated within a round what exactly the criterion’s role should be in that debate round.

12. See, for example, Stokes 2012 and Crooks 2009.

13. One reviewer suspects that competitive incentives make it inevitable that debaters will misrepresent philosophical arguments. Not so, we think, if judges explicitly discourage misrepresentation. Debaters are free to turn arguments into slogans if they so choose, but they will avoid doing so if that causes them to lose debates. In LD, judges aim to evaluate debates on the basis of the arguments, not mere rhetoric. Rhetoric may influence judges’ decisions in subliminal ways, but it is not a reliable path to victory.

14. Typically <http://judgephilosophies.wikispaces.com/>.

15. We are not claiming, or assuming, that this change is a good thing. Our point is merely that debaters’ practices depend on incentives created by judge norms.

16. Professional philosophers would be paid, as we mention below, by the National Forensic League or by directors of debate tournaments. Graduate students may be more willing to volunteer.

17. This might also be true for philosophy courses in college. For example, a debate is one of the key steps in Cahill and Bloch-Schulman's (2012) approach to teaching argumentation. And Croy (2010) recommends teaching propositional logic in the context of argument reconstruction, which is a common teaching strategy used by debate coaches.

18. The Victory Briefs Institute has offered a philosophy focus week for the past three years.

19. The Indiana University's Summer Philosophy Institute is discussed in Hicks and Holland 1989.

20. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pressing this objection.

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