# Truth Objections and Parliamentary Debate:
# A Closer Look at the Truism and Tautology

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Those familiar with current parliamentary debate practice know that many student competitors make references to government cases as being truisms or exemplifying tautological reasoning. Where these references are concerned, judges in parliamentary debate are frequently exposed to some variation on the following: In the first few minutes of his or her speech, the leader of the opposition will observe that the government's case is a "truism" or "tautological" because no reasonable person could or would disagree with the resolutional interpretation advanced by the government. Curiously, the leader of the opposition quickly moves on to offer a series of objections to the government case, thus presumably demonstrating that she or he is *not* a reasonable person. The government and opposition continue by offering superficial arguments and counter-arguments concerning the objection, and the speaker is left at the end of the round to assess a poorly developed theoretical position that is of indeterminate relevance to the win-loss decision.

We find the current state of parliamentary debate practice to be unsatisfactory, given that the character of the truism and tautology objections is poorly articulated in even the best debates. Moreover, rhetorical theory, argumentation theory, and philosophy are of little direct assistance, though a great deal of theoretical work deals in one way or another with issues relevant to the assessment of these claims. Below, our aim is to interrogate the usual descriptions of the tautology and truism claims in debate practice and extant scholarship. In doing so we hope to improve debate practice and to use intercollegiate debate as a laboratory for the development of argumentation theory.

Our position is outlined in five parts. First, the truism and tautology objections will be distinguished from weaker claims of abusiveness. Second, the tautology will be examined independently. Third, the focus of the essay will shift to the more difficult truism objection. Fourth, the difficulties involved in accepting or rejecting the truism as a concept will be examined. Fifth, a solution will be offered that minimizes this difficulty. This essay will examine non-controversiality as a voting issue and conclude that the truism objection logically entails reciprocal risk. This essay is not

intended to suggest that the truism and tautology objection are epidemic problems in debate rounds, but they are embarrassingly ill-defined concepts in current debate practice that need to be addressed.

## Distinguishing The Truism/Tautology From Claims Of Abusive

From the start, it is important to distinguish the truism and tautology objections in parliamentary debate from weaker claims of abusiveness. The truism and tautology objections both entail that a government team's resolutional analysis leaves an opposing team in a position from which it cannot win. This is distinct from a claim of abusiveness indicating that presumption has been unfairly tilted towards the government. The latter describes an unfair division of ground, while the former claims that *no* opposition ground exists from which to debate. In the truism or tautology objection, the opposition is claiming that they *cannot* overcome the burden created by the violation. In an abusiveness objection, the opposition claims that they *ought not* have to overcome the burden created by the violation. The difference here is a subtle one. Although it might appear to be a purely rhetorical choice as to whether one chooses the words "ought not" or "cannot" this choice results in very different claims.

The abusiveness objection entails some continuum of fairness. For example, one might hear a debater claim that a case is "really" abusive, which indicates that some cases are more abusive than others. In contrast, the truism and tautology are binary concepts, true or false, yes or no, debatable or not debatable. Linguistically, the truism and tautology objection do not slide on a continuum. Instead, they function as a switch that is thrown when an opposing team sees no reasonable way to clash. The truism or tautology objection suggest a more severe accusation, because such an objection entails a claim that a case is not just unfair, but not debatable at all.

We find it puzzling that claims of "truistic-ness" abound in parliamentary debate rounds. Saying that a case is "truistic" is the equivalent of saying, "It is somewhat the case that the government's advocacy represents an irrefutable truth." A statement such as this is on a par with others like "two plus two is somewhat four" or "A cat is partially a feline." While the employment of a term like "truistic" may appear to be an abandonment of the law of the excluded middle on the part of opposing debaters, it really functions as an abusiveness claim. For example, if in making a truism objection, an opposing team claims that their chances of winning are so small that they ought not have to accept their assigned burden and then attempt to negotiate more ground from the government or more presumption from the critic, it is an abusiveness claim in disguise.

Regardless of the terminology that is used (or perhaps abused), it is a rather simple task to functionally distinguish an abusiveness claim from that of a truism or tautology objection. If an opposing team claims that they ought not have to debate against a case because it is unfair, they are making an abusiveness claim. However, if the debaters claim that they cannot debate against a case because it is non-controversial, they are making either a truism or tautology claim.

This is not to say that these objections are not related. The truism and tautology objections are just extreme abusiveness claims. In such cases, abusiveness is so malignant that opposition is no longer possible. Somewhere along the continuum of fairness, the increasingly difficult terrain of abusiveness gives way to the impossible situations posed by the truism and tautology. Establishing where this dividing line between unfair and un-winnable is demands the elucidation of some coherent criteria that would allow adjudicators to effectively evaluate such objections.

## Tautology

When distinguishing between the truism and the tautology, the tautology is the easier of the two objections to identify and understand. In his debate text *Debate and Critical Analysis: The Harmony of Conflict,* Branham reports that, "A tautology is a proposition that is necessarily true by definition or logical structure. . ." (39). For example, any formally valid syllogism is a tautology. In debate rounds, tautologies are constructed when definitions generate a completely circular identity statement. As a simple example, consider the resolution, "Coke is it." If one defines "it" as "that which is Coke" and Coke as "That which is it," there is nothing left to discuss. Any possible semantic analysis of the proposition has been elimi-nated, because the subject is entirely contained by the predicate. A tautol-ogy exists if there is no linguistic path to a false rendering of the resolution.

Resolutions that contain some form of the verb "to be" most often invite such a blunder, as this functions as an equality sign between the subject and predicate. For instance, a resolution like the "The United States is the most reprehensible violator of human rights" can easily become a tautology if so defined. Phraseologically define "the most reprehensible violator of human rights" as "The United States," and the job is done. This would not necessitate that the claim is *materially* valid, but material validity is discussed.

Analyzing whether or not a government team's analysis creates a tautology can be examined using Karl Popper's criterion of falsifiability, which he introduced to fight creeping circularity in science.    Popper's

philosophy that scientific theories must always be contestable led him to declare that "there is room in science for debate" (126). An example of Popper's standard is the theory of the faith-healer. If one visits a faith-healer and is cured, it was because of the power of God working through the faith of that person. If, on the other hand, one was not healed, it is simply because he or she did not have enough faith. Therefore, no negative example can disprove the faith-healer's method within the faith-healer's own explanation of the world. If a debate were forced to take place within the faith-healer's definitions of reality, there would be no way of proving that individual wrong. If a debate case only allows for analysis within the confines of a similar, non-falsifiable explanation, it is a tautology.

The definitive test is to determine whether or not the resolutional analysis offered by the proposing team only considers the formal validity of the resolution as an analytic statement. Consider this altered, but familiar syllogism:

> All people who drink hemlock say it's tasty
> Socrates is a person who drank hemlock
> Therefore, Socrates said that hemlock is tasty

This syllogism is formally valid; it does not contradict itself, so it is deductively true. However, its material validity is dubious at best. While it would seem easy to contest the material validity of the preceding syllogism, a tautology discludes such analysis. The conclusion of the preceding syllogism could be stated as a resolution: "RESOLVED: Socrates said that hemlock is tasty." From this, terms can be defined to create perfect circularity. Define Socrates as "A man who drank Hemlock and said it was tasty". Define Hemlock as, "A substance imbibed by Socrates who reported it was tasty". Through these definitions there is no route to deny the material validity of the resolution.

But why is this so? Does it not seem rather dubious that a circular definition renders an uncontestable proposition? What is it about a circular definition, as in the Socrates/Hemlock example, that prevents contestants from questioning its material validity? The answer is "nothing" so long as opposing debaters reject the definitions that create the tautology. The legitimacy of the tautology objection, therefore, rests upon some assumption about how terms are defined, namely, that the opposing team cannot counter-define terms, or that the opposing team ought not have to counter-define terms.

One assumption would be that the opposing team could not counter-define terms. This would be based on some form of parametric

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analysis. Within such an interpretation, the original resolution is no longer at issue. The debate centers around a narrowed form of the resolution that is specified through definitions. In parliamentary debate, there has historically been an abundance of vague and metaphorical resolutions that require a linkage to some specific topic via definitions. As such, some parametric-type rights have been negotiated for government teams in order to practically debate ridiculous resolutions like "It is time to water the lawn." Since no one really wants to focus on the whole resolution in these instances, parametric approaches have been accepted.

Yet, there has never been a revocation of the opposition's ability to counter-define terms. There does not seem to be any reason why an opposing team could not counter-define terms in such an instance of a tautology. Indeed, of all the standards that have been offered as a justification of alternative definitions, none seem as indubitable as a tautology's warrant for counter-definition.

The second assumption would be that an opposing debater should not have to counter-define terms in such an instance. An opposing debater might rightly claim that it is the responsibility of the government team to define terms in a topical (or "resolutional" since the parliamentary community wants to re-invent the wheel) and controversial manner. Having failed to do so, it might be further claimed that the government team should lose for having failed this *prima facie* burden. This assumption is less problematic as it looks to the responsibilities rather than the abilities of debaters. If either assumption is granted, the tautology objection foregoes the burden of alternatively interpreting the resolution in a non-circular manner. When the objection is granted, it is a moot point as to whether "Socrates" could or should be alternately defined. The government team loses the round for failing to meet its prima facie burden of appropriately stating the controversy.

## Truism

The truism is distinguishable from the tautology in that it is not necessarily true by its own definition; rather, it is self-evidently true or true by some unassailable standard. Unfortunately, the debate texts that actually mention the truism are exceedingly vague in this regard. Knapp and Galizio, in the sole textbook on parliamentary debate, report that, "A truism occurs when the claim is obviously true or non-controversial" (54). Branham states in his book that "A truistic claim is one that no reasonable person could oppose" (40). In both debate texts these rather sparse definitions and a few examples are all that are offered concerning truisms. In both cases the reader is left with the immodest task of determining how a "reasonable

person" or an "obvious truth" are to be defined.

To elaborate upon the rather sketchy definitions of Knapp and Galizio and Brahnam, we offer two dichotomies that describe the truism objection. One dichotomy involves a distinction between *strong* and *weak* truism objections. The other is defined by the difference between a *guaranteeing* versus an *authorizing* criterion of truth. When the truism objection is made by opposition debaters, such distinctions are not made. These distinctions are used in this essay to facilitate a deeper understanding of the truism. Debaters consistently provide the underlying analysis that forms the basis of these dichotomies, but, at this time, these dichotomies are not articulated as distinct forms of the truism objection.

### The Strong-Weak Dichotomy

The strong form of the truism objection grants the truth of the proposition. The weak form of the objection claims that some overarching standard of truth renders the proposition non-controversial. The former objection claims that the proposition is not debatable, because it is impossible to debate against a true claim. The latter does not directly concede the truth of the proposition but claims that opposition is impossible for all practical purposes.

The strong form of the truism objection assents to the truth of the interpretation of the proposition presented in the government case. The opposition claims that there are no grounds for debate. There is no controversy to be discussed within the government case, as it is most certainly true. No one could be expected to defeat this case because it contains no controversial or potentially untrue elements. An opposing team might make a strong truism objection to a case asserting, for example, "that pure objectivity is impossible for humans to attain," by simply agreeing that this statement is indeed true.

The weak form of the truism objection does not concede the truth of the proposition, but claims that it cannot be opposed. It might be self-evidently un-debatable, but not, however, self-evidently true in and of itself. It may be the case that some common standard may render opposition moot. It may be that any and all arguments to the contrary are too weak to defeat the proposition. In all cases, the resolution is true according to some standard that presumably lies outside the reach of the opposing team. Suppose, for the sake of illustration, that a government team proposed a case stating that "a clear and sunny day is preferable to a dark and stormy night." An opposition team might respond by making a weak truism objection. The opposing team might state:

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In the words of Eddy Money, "we love a rainy night," and we, therefore, do not personally assent to the truth of the resolution. Yet, we must concede that according to the aesthetic standards set forth by our culture that this proposition is non-controversially true, and therefore object to this case as a truism.

A similar situation can come about by defining "this house" in a manner that renders the resolution non-controversial. For example, if a government team were to define "this house" as NASA and then describe a case asserting that more money ought to be spent on space exploration, a weak truism-objection might be made on the grounds that NASA would obviously want to spend more money on space exploration, even though the opposition may not agree with the resolution. At the same time, a slightly different interpretation would make this a strong objection. The opposition might say, "Well, since this house is NASA, and we are this house, it is rather obvious that we support the resolution; this is a blatant truism."

There are similarities between both objections that clearly identify both claims as truism objections. There are also important differences between these two claims that isolate them as distinct sub-types having different assumptions and burdens. Both forms of the objection claim that it is functionally impossible to debate the government proposition in the round. Whether the analysis is that the resolution is true in the strong sense of actually being true, or the weak sense of truth according to some standard, both objections claim that no substantive argumentation can be expected against the government case. As it is not functionally possible to oppose the case, the government team should lose the round for failing to present any debatable controversy.

There is an unspoken implication that is carried with either form of the objection that the critic would be somehow unable or unwilling to vote for the opposition side if the government's division of ground is accepted. The truism objection is made in the hopes that the critic will recognize the government case as being true in a strong or weak sense. If the critic assents to the strong truism objection, the critic then agrees that it is unreasonable to expect someone to debate against a true claim. If the critic adheres to the weak form of the objection, the critic then agrees that it is unreasonable to expect someone to debate a claim that is true in light of some hegemonic standard. In the latter case, a critic need not personally assent to the truth of the proposition itself, but rather to the truth that it would be unreasonable to expect the opposition to argue against that proposition.

In either case, the critic agrees that it is functionally impossible for the opposition to offer any direct argumentation against the government

case. This means that the critic agrees that the opposition is in an un-winnable position. In other words, the critic actually concedes that she or he would be unable or unwilling to vote for the opposition based on any argumentation offered within the parameters of the government's resolu-tional analysis. This is either due to the fact that the resolution is obviously true or because the critic would defer to some truth standard(s) that would preclude any viable line of reasoning by the opposition.

## The Guaranteeing-Authorizing Dichotomy

This dichotomy, where the truism objection is concerned, centers on the justification of the objection itself. The aforementioned strong-weak dichotomy focuses on the objection itself, where the authorizing-guaranteeing criterion considers the justification of that objection whether it be strong or weak. As those who assert must prove, opposing debaters are inevitably compelled to offer some justification in support of the objection. Rescher observes that the justification of a claim may provide either a guaranteeing or an authorizing criterion of truth (30-31). The difference between the two is further illustrated by Johnson who states:

> For instance, if being acid is defined as having a pH of less than exactly 7, then whether it has a pH of less than that is obviously a guaranteeing criterion. Yet whether it turns the litmus paper red is an authorizing criterion which is almost (though not quite) invari-ably correct, and very much easier to apply in practice. (26)

In terms of the truism objection, an opposing team might provide a criterion that guarantees the certainty of the objection or offer an authorizing criterion of certainty. A guaranteeing criterion demonstrates without any possibility of doubt that a case is non-controversially true in a strong or weak sense. The authorizing criterion demonstrates that for all practical or meaningful purposes a case is non-controversially true.

The guaranteeing criterion is easy to conceive and does not require much explanation. It does, however, leave the opposing team with a rather daunting task of establishing how it is that the criterion selected to justify the objection can issue such a guarantee. The strong form of the truism objection when justified with a guaranteeing criterion is conceptually the simplest form of a truism objection. The opponents state that the resolu-tional interpretation is indeed true and then support this claim with some criterion of truth that indubitably establishes this state of affairs.

The authorizing justification of the truism objection is more diffi-cult. Considering that a truism involves the modality of certainty (i.e., this

proposition cannot be debated), it may seem to be a sheer act of prestidigitation to justify such a claim with an uncertain (i.e., probable) criteria. As it is a seeming *non sequitur* to warrant the certainty of a claim by utilizing an uncertain criterion, some explanation is in order. The answer lies in recognizing what kind of certainty is needed to reject a government case as non-controversially true. If it is only necessary for the objection that for all practical and/or meaningful purposes the case be established as certain or un-debatable, a guaranteeing criterion is not needed. It should be noted that "certainty" in this instance is distinctly different from how a philosopher or logician might use the term.

Perhaps the limitations of a given round (i.e., time, evidence, structure, etc.) make it impossible to use a guaranteeing criterion. Perhaps there is no guaranteeing criterion available. Criminal law, for example, considers "reasonable doubt" to be the bright line of certainty in criminal proceedings. Whenever a person is convicted within the American criminal justice system, the jury is making a *strong-authorized* claim of the defendant's guilt. While people desire that jurors be certain a man or woman is guilty before convicting him or her, no one would want to let an axe-murderer off the hook because a jury deemed it possible, however unlikely, that ninjas or wood sprites may have committed the crime. The downside is that innocent people sometimes wind up going to prison because a jury was certain beyond a reasonable doubt that they were guilty.

If a strong-guaranteed truism objection is the easiest to conceive of, the weak-authorized truism objection is probably the most difficult to think about. This is partially because the weak-authorized objection is as "soft" one can be in making a truism claim, without slipping into a claim of mere abusiveness. Suppose, for instance, that a government team advocated a case stating that, "The legalization of heroin and phencyclidine hydrochloride (PCP) in the United States is undesirable." An opposing team could object to this case with a weak-authorized truism objection. The weak part of the truism objection could be made by stating, for example, "We, the opposition team are extreme libertarians and think that legalizing all drugs would be fantastic. However, by the overarching standards that prevail in today's round, this case un-debatable." An authorizing justification supporting this weak truism objection could be offered by stating:

> Now we cannot guarantee that that by the criterion offered in today's round of "the collective sum of American cultural values," that this resolution would necessarily follow, because freedom is a defining value for Americans. Yet, it seems to us incredibly unlikely that American culture would endorse unrestricted freedom to access these powerful drugs. Even though it is possible, we find

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it so unlikely as to render debate on this topic practically useless. We object that this case is a truism.

The only reason why this "hedging objection" still presents itself as a truism is that it still maintains that opposition is impossible. The opposing team in this example does personally assent to the resolution, but still assert that it cannot beat it. Furthermore, it is not guaranteed that opposition is impossible; it is instead asserted that the objection is authorized. It is important to remember that if an opposing team were to hedge any further and say that they *should not* have to oppose the resolution then they would be making an abusiveness objection, and not a truism objection. Philosophically speaking, "ought implies can," and if one can oppose a case it is not a truism.

The authorizing criterion does not necessarily claim that no argument could be made against the government case, nor does it necessarily entail that is entirely inconceivable that the opposition could win the round within the government team's analysis. *The authorizing criterion is only the litmus test of truth.* It indicates that one is justified in a belief, but not that this belief is guaranteed to be true. In the case of a truism objection, it is an authorizing indication that one is justified in the belief that a government case is un-debatable.

The daunting question is how practically, pragmatically, meaningfully or reasonably sure one need be in order to be "certain" in the sense of any of these terms to justify rejecting a government case. There is also the question of why any of these criteria are valid in the first place. The utilization of authorizing criteria merely delays the same epistemological questions faced by a guaranteeing criterion. In either case, the opposing team must establish the validity of their justifying criterion.

These dichotomies might present themselves in any of four combinations; strong-guaranteed, strong-authorized, weak-guaranteed, or weak-authorized. The strong-weak dichotomy concerns whether the opposition assents to the truth of the government's interpretation of the proposition. The guaranteeing-authorizing dichotomy addresses the modality of the criterion evaluating the objection, but not the objection itself.

### Standards for Truism Objections

Whether the criterion selected offers a guaranteeing or authorizing justification or whether the objection is framed as a strong or weak, specific truth standards must be introduced to support the claim. What is offered below is considered representative of the reasoning offered in support of

truism objections in contemporary debate practice. There are five general standards that might be called upon to support a truism objection: Self-Evidence, Demonstration, Empirical Reasoning, Authority and the Community Standard. The first two of these standards are internal; that is, they are truths that are purely accessible by the mind. The remaining three are external; they seek justification outside of the mind as well as in it. These standards are a distillation of the writings of the modern philosophers (1450-1800) including, most notably, Locke (*Of Human Understanding),* Hume *(An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding),* Spinoza *(Ethics)* and Kant *(Critique of Pure Reason).* This is not to suggest that this is the single correct categorization, nor do we suggest that this is the most comprehensive schema. Rather, this is merely a way to conceptualize how truism objections are commonly constructed.

### Internal Standards

Internal standards represent a philosophical position known as epistemological foundationalism, which is a traditional response to a nagging difficulty involved in the justification of truth claims. The problem of offering any criterion of truth appears when the validity of the criterion itself is called into question. The obvious response is to offer a meta-criterion, but this does not prevent someone else from questioning the validity of a meta-criterion.   This is known as the problem of epistemic regress. The foundationalist's solution to the problem of epistemic regress is to assert that the regress is not infinite but finite. Justifications give way to more fundamental justifications, but eventually one will arrive at indubitable and indivisible truths. Because a fundamental truth is elemental, it cannot be justified and therefore need not be justified.

### Self-evidence

The first strategy for making a truism objection is to claim that the case is true on face. This strategy is rather convenient for opposition debaters, since it allows the person making the objection off the hook for demonstrating *how* it is a certain truth. If it is self-evident, then there is no need to supply any proof. A self-evident truth is like understanding "redness"; it is something people seem to naturally apprehend. Audi et al. report that, "Self-evident propositions are those that can be seen (non-inferentially) to be true once one fully understands them" (382). There is no need to think about it; it is just apparent to the observer. What constitutes a self-evident truth is not easy to describe as the nature of such a claim purports to need no external support. Self-evident truths are also sometimes described as intuitions or common sense. Since these are unjustified true beliefs, there is no question of an adequate criterion of truth. An individual can simply recognize such truths without assistance from others or reasoning.

A self-evident truth must stand alone as self-sufficient. A self-evident truth must not be contestable, but be able to justify itself "in and of itself". One cannot state that "X is a self-evident truth, as it is a necessary consequence of Y" because doing so shows that it needs exterior support. As McGee and Simerly observe, "when an interlocutor requests an explanation of the other's premise for an argument, the other's attempt to reply with further substantive argumentation signals that the other's reasons can be contested" (88). This is difficult for the purposes of debate, as there can therefore be no standard of self-evident truth that can serve to examine such claims. A truth is either self-evidently true or it isn't.

There have long been questions about how intuition or common sense can be claimed to deliver certain truth. Some intuitions appear to be flat out wrong, for example, it was once an intuitive truth that any valid mathematical or logical system ought to be capable of demonstrating its own consistency until Godel published his incompleteness theorems in 1931. Locke would provide a practical response to questions about self-evidence by stating, "He [she] that demands a greater certainty that this demands he knows not what, and only shows that he has a mind to be a skeptic without being able to be so" (195). Campbell would make a similar response in the late eighteenth-century, stating "And it is equally impossible, without full conviction of them [self-evident truths], to advance a single step in the acquisition of knowledge, especially in all that regards [hu]mankind, life, and conduct" (40). This response is not entirely satisfying, because, for all one knows this could be an irresistible illusion and not an indubitable truth. Just because this is how so-called knowledge is acquired does not necessitate that such knowledge is valid. Campbell anticipates this response and relates the sentiments of Buffier in writing:

> It is, perhaps physically possible that the course of nature will be inverted in the very next moment; that my life is no other than a delirium, and my life a dream; that all is mere illusion; that I am the only being in the universe, and that there is no such thing as a body. Nothing can be juster than the reply given by Buffier, "It must be owned," says he, "that to maintain propositions, the reverse of the primary truths of common sense, doth not imply a contradiction; it only implies insanity" (41-42).

While this is witty, it also begs the question how one justifies calling another insane without begging the question all over again.

There is no compelling justification that explains the certainty of self-evident truths. To this extent, it would seem rather dubious as to how one could make a truism objection in this manner. Philosophers have

managed to engage in great debates over the most intuitive of truths. The bottom line here is that, a critic will either see the objection as valid and see the government's case as a self-evident truth or the critic will not see things that way.

*Demonstration*

Demonstration is the other route to interior support for a claim. Instead of flatly stating that a claim is self-evident, multiple self-evident claims are combined in the demonstration of the claim's truth. This is nothing more than logical demonstration via self-evident truths. This strategy must, therefore, also manage to justify the validity of self-evident truths. This approach may be functionally more effective, because at least it provides a chain of reasoning that can be defended. It also requires that the premises along this chain be valid in order to make an adequate objection. Merely demonstrating how a proposition is indubitable if one accepts certain premises is a far cry from establishing the adequacy of such premises, so the problems here are essentially the same as with the standard of self-evidence.

## Exterior Standards

If a claim is not self-evidently or demonstrably true, then some exterior standard must be summoned by which it can be verified. One might, to borrow from Kant, appeal to *a posteriori* reasoning through the senses (inductions made by observing the world). Appeals might be made to the authority of an individual expert or some community. Exterior justifications are not as firmly grounded as are self-buttressing interior justifications.

*Empirical Reasoning*

This type of reasoning is dependent upon sensory experience and observations of regularities in the world that form identifiable patterns. This is the process of induction. Deductive reasoning about sensory experience may only occur after inducting premises that one may reason with. The most notable critique of this kind of reasoning was offered by Hume in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and argumentation scholars also have made this point (e.g., McGee, "Assessing"). Given the lasting sting of Hume's critique, one might be ill advised to offer a guaranteeing justification of a truism objection using induction.

*Individual Authority*

Once could state that a particular expert does not believe X, therefore X is not correct. This is dependent on one's expert actually being right, of course, and the whole matter is back at square one when the question is asked as to why it is that statements of a given expert should be

trusted. This is where slippage into common standards often occurs. Once it is stated that "Every reasonable person knows that Galileo was right" the standard regresses to an *ad populum* appeal.

*Community Standards*

Common Standards of some sort are of the most popular exterior justification employed by opposition teams making a truism objection. The simplest of these is the common person standard: What would the average person say? One might also appeal to a specific community of experts or one might appeal to a hypothetical audience. The assumption is that the beliefs of the many are more trustworthy than the beliefs of the few or the individual.

Appealing to a community standard often serves as a meta-justification of a truism objection. When an inductive, expert, or self-evident truth is objected to, many an opposition team resorts to stating that people just see it that way. If it is granted that most people would concur, there is no doubt some psychological pressure one would feel to conform with the herd, but at the same time this does nothing to indicate why clustering around a belief renders it true.

There is some confusion that results from community standards often being mingled with self-evidence and reason. In explicating how it is that the government case is a truism, many opposition contestants offer that "No room filled with reasonable people would disagree with the government's analysis." Thus, common standards in parliamentary debate are often confused claims that the case is obviously true by the faculty of reason or rationality. This is why such hypothetical audiences are so often populated with "reasonable" people. Sometimes such audiences are imagined as a demonstration of self-evidence. In an instance when it is claimed that a generic audience would just see that the resolution is true, the hidden assertion is that all such people would recognize the self-evident truth of the resolution.

Even so, it would be wrong to dismiss appeals to such an audience as mere appeals to reason or self-evidence. If it were solely trusted that the good reason or self-evidence of the resolution would carry the day, such proofs would be offered by themselves. The fact that an audience is conjured shows that there is indeed something conferred by such an audience to legitimize a given claim. As such, an appeal to an audience, reasonable or not, is a form of reasoning *ad populum.*

An *ad populum argument,* of course, would appear warranted if that audience were competent. At the same time, the popular opinions and

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beliefs of communities have resulted in the most ridiculous claims imaginable and the most horrible excesses recorded in history. There is no good reason why a community belief should in and of itself signal the certain truth of any proposition.

While we believe that these five standards are representative of the justifications given in support of truism objections, we find none of them unproblematic or completely compelling. A debater engaged in a truism objection is making a statement about the nature of truth itself, which is a (predictably) difficult task. This task is so difficult, in fact, that it leads us to ponder the following.

## Is There Any Such Thing As A Truism?

There is enough disagreement over the nature of truth in philosophy that it makes one wonder if such any such thing actually exists. In most rounds truism objections are justified in terms of a correspondence theory of truth. Schmitt offers the following definition of correspondence: "A proposition is true just in case it corresponds to the facts or the world" (145). Correspondence theory assumes that the truth is not just manufactured, nor is it a mere linguistic property. Yet, Coherentism, Pragmatism, and Deflationary theory are all rival theories of truth that debaters might avail themselves of, even though each has its weaknesses.

Many philosophers would contend that truth is an "all or nothing" proposition and can be accordingly grouped into rival camps of realism and anti-realism. Realism and anti-realism can be considered in terms of absolutism and relativism, respectively the idea that there is one truth and the notion that there are no transcendent truths. Some philosophers (most notably, Lynch and Toulmin) argue that a middle path is possible, but there is (if one will excuse the *ad populum* fallacy), however, no consensus on the matter.

Adhering to an absolute conception of truth denies that there is more than one valid way of viewing a situation. If this were the case, however, one side would always be fated to lose a debate round, because they would be on the wrong side of the proposition. Pluralism, therefore, is an assumption that grounds the practice of debate. But nihilism and relativism are also associated with pluralism. If there is no correct or preferable conception of the truth then there is no truth at all. But, if this is the case, then who is to say that there is anything wrong with a truism objection in the first place? Pluralism has its limits. Indeed, if it were agreed that one discourse cannot valued over another, there would be no way to determine winners in debate rounds.

Regardless of a critic's beliefs, adjudicators often suspend their notions of reality to evaluate the reality that is debated in the round. There is a reason why ballots state "In my opinion the better job of debating was done by" as opposed to "In my opinion the better job of representing the truth was done by." If we, as critics, had a nickel for every time we voted against our personal beliefs in a debate round we would, no doubt, never have to worry about funding a debate program again!

The problem with truism objections is that they encourage critics to vote based on their own personal beliefs and to intervene in worrisome ways. For example, to state that a case is self-evidently a truism requires the critic to intervene with her notion of self-evident truth to decide the matter. All argumentation afterwards is moot. Similarly, if a critic decides a case is a truism based on a community standard, then how are minority viewpoints to be expressed and dominant viewpoints challenged? It would be quite disingenuous to claim that critics do not vote based on their beliefs anyway, but the question is one of how far a critic should impose herself on the round (McGee, "Judgment").

How then, can anyone claim that a case is a truism? A more appropriate question might be, "How can someone not recognize some cases as truisms?" We personally would not want to debate against the proposition that the laws of gravity will most likely be functioning tomorrow, even though we cannot be absolutely certain that everything that isn't nailed down won't float off the face of the planet with the new day. It is apparent to us that some cases may indeed be justifiably objected to as truisms. It is equally apparent that such objections need to be minimized to avoid encouraging judge intervention instead of student argumentation. This leads us to offer the following.

### Solution

The tautology does not present the same difficulties that the truism objection does. It is a rather simple matter to determine whether a case has been rendered as a tautology and only the most junior teams make this mistake. Whether a tautology warrants an automatic government loss or merely legitimizes alternative definitions is an open question. At the very least, we would like to hear analysis from the opposition as to why a tautology warrants a loss for the government team.

The truism objection is not quite so easy. There are unpalatable consequences involved in entertaining and rejecting such arguments. One is faced with intervention on the one hand and a nagging boundary problem for pluralism on the other. In order to preserve the pluralism that allows for

debate to occur, without denying that there are legitimately problematic cases, we believe that it is best to create a disincentive (based on reciprocal risk) to making frivolous truism objections.

If the opposing team were to accept the objection as a reverse voting issue (RVI), it is more likely that such an objection will be made with caution. This way the objection does not amount to a "whine," and it becomes clear how to adjudicate the win/loss decision. If this were the expectation for the truism objection, it would certainly be more likely that the opposition would think hard about the objection before making it, and there would most likely be fewer abusiveness claims disguised as truism objections.

Further, reciprocal risk is a logical and necessary consequence of making the objection. Most members of the CEDA/NDT debate community have concluded that topicality and similar objections do not engender an RVI, but a truism objection is much more serious than a topicality argument. A case can be off topic but still be debatable. By definition, a truism is not even debatable. When an opposition team claims that a government case is a truism, they are granting the non-controversial truth of the proposition even if they do not personally assent to it.

There are two reasons for this. First, the truism objection claims that no argument can be made against the proposing team's case. This logically forecloses the possibility of offering any other arguments against the case. If the truism argument is lost, there are no other objections to the case that can be made by the opposition's own analysis. An opposition team cannot offer arguments against a case and still claim that it is a truism. A case is either debatable or it is not. There is no such thing as a case being "truistic." As previously stated, the truism objection does not linguistically function on a continuum; rather, it is a switch that is thrown.

Second, and more important, offering the truism objection grants the government case and does so in the strongest manner. Not only is the case true, but it is so obviously true that no one in their right mind would debate against it. It is not just granting the other team's case; it is granting their case with the stamp of certainty. Granting case in this manner and then trying to reverse oneself is the ultimate performative contradiction. After all, even the weak form of the objection grants that the resolution is true. It is not that the opposition personally agrees that the resolution is true, but it is deemed true by some unassailable standard that places the opposition in an un-winnable position. Again, it would be a performative contradiction to claim to be in an un-winnable position and offer arguments from that position.

For these two reasons it is apparent to us that the truism objection is logically a reverse voting issue. If an opposing team calls truism, then both sides should effectively switch. The opposition team should advocate the certain truth of the resolution, thereby justifying the objection, and the government team should offer potential arguments against the indubitability of the case, thereby delegitimizing the objection. Treating the truism objection as such would not only be logical, but it would also minimize the problem by decreasing the number of objections. It would also clarify the win/loss decision. The reverse voting issue would necessarily focus the round on epistemological issues; however, as Berube has observed, educational debate can still occur at the level of criteria. Furthermore, such rounds would allow for the debate community to focus more closely on these issues and ideally would lead to an enhanced appreciation for argumentation theory.

As for complaints of "truistic-ness" as mentioned previously, these claims function as abusiveness objections and should be treated as such. This would further distinguish the truism objection from the abusiveness claim. If an opposing team wants to call truism, they should do so, rather than whine in a manner that sounds like an objection but lacks any sort of rationale that can be evaluated.

Tautologies are obviously subject to the same logic. If an opposition team offers opposing arguments to a case that they claim is true by definition, then they are contradicting themselves. While it is true that an opposing team could counter-define terms in a non-circular manner, it is not their responsibility to do so. As a result, we see a tautology as a voting issue against the government team that offers a tautology as a case. At the same time, an opposing team ought to face the logical consequences of making an objection and also view it as a reverse voting issue.

The tension between absolutism and pluralism is troubling, and the extreme form of either is unpalatable. Yet, short of mandating an overarching epistemology for the debate community we will have to live with the tension and the confusion it produces. Regardless of one's own philosophical beliefs, we believe that isolating truism and tautology objections from abusiveness claims and from each other at least sorts out some of the confusion. Even though we concede that there are justifiable truism objections and that the evaluation of such objections sometimes demands intervention, we also believe if one has to intervene, one should intervene cleanly. If, for example, a critic can recognize an appeal to self-evidence in support of a strong-guaranteeing truism objection, the extent of intervention can be limited to evaluation of that particular claim. If intervention cannot be eliminated it can, at least, be minimized. Most importantly, treating a

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truism objection for what it really is, a necessary RVI, can also help minimize such problems.

It may seem strange that evaluating the truism objection should be any more difficult than evaluating any other truth claim made in debate rounds. Truism objections, however, involve arguments about the nature of truth itself and, as such, result in difficult self-referential exercises that explore the "truth of truth." While we cannot offer definitive answers about the nature of truth, we do believe that we can minimize the difficulties involved in adjudicating truth itself by clarifying what the truism and tautology objections are and by offering a logical norm to regulate the use of such objections.

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