

Resolutions of Fact: A Critique of Traditional Typology in Parliamentary Debate

Geoffrey W. Brodak
California State University, Long Beach

Matthew Taylor
California State University, Long Beach

In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.

--Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: the Birth of the Prison*

In a quarterfinal round at the 2002 National Championship Tournament of the Parliamentary Debate Association we witnessed a critic and a debater have the following exchange. I voted for the government, the critic argued, because I felt like they met their resolutorial burden. They established that capitalism had indeed been a cause of 9/11. One of the debaters on the Opposition team then asked how the critic evaluated their argument that while we *could* say that capitalism had a role in 9/11, we *should not* say that capitalism caused 9/11. The disadvantage to naming capitalism as a casual factor in 9/11, the Opposition had argued, was that it ignored the orientalism of US foreign policy. Symbolically limiting our understanding of the causes of terrorism, the Opposition argued, only doomed the US (and the world) to more problems in the future. The critic responded by saying that the consequences were irrelevant to his decision. Since the debaters had agreed that we were debating a factual resolution, the only issue was whether capitalism had or had not played a role in 9/11. Factual resolutions, he argued, did not include a calculation of value or "goodness." Instead the only issue was the truthfulness or accuracy of the claim. It was the assumption that factual resolutions do not include an assessment of value or consequence and that there lies a "truthful resolution" to factual propositions that motivated us to write this paper.

As most contemporary textbooks will define "facts," they frame our understanding of the world because they function as evidence (Inch and Warnick, 2002). According to Littlejohn (2001), asking questions of fact establishes the "properties and relations of what is observed" (p. 9). As a result, facts become the naming of our experiences. Like Kenneth Burke, we believe that it is the rooting of facts in experience and observation that gives them their rhetorical power as truth. In other words, we believe with more certainty that which has been experienced.

While we would agree that facts name our experiences, we are less certain that those names establish real and/or truthful observations of it. Our concern is motivated by several questions: If what counts as a fact is reliant on what we observe, and our observations are constrained by our experiences, values, beliefs, attitudes, and cultural norms, are "willing" our experience of the truth? Further, what systems and relations of power do the values and norms that guide our judgment imply? Most importantly, are the facts we observe just as much social constructions as the power relations that reify interpretation of those facts? While the fields of philosophy, rhetoric, and argumentation have grappled with these questions, our position is that the parliamentary debate community has not. The assumption in the parliamentary debate community that resolutions of fact should not include a discussion of values and or policies needs to be discussed.

The only way to prevent community norms and expectations from reifying a truth about the way we engage in debate, we argue, is to abandon the notion that resolutions have a predetermined identity. Our position is that the participants in the debate should negotiate the identity of the resolution (and the corresponding argumentative constraints). Under such a view, resolitional interpretation preserves a position of agency for the arguer by allowing the style of propositional justification to be a matter of choice, not an *a priori* constraint on agency.

To support this argument we will first, explore how enforcing propositional categories privileges a truth based paradigm that runs counter-intuitive to fair debate. Second, we will suggest that the assumption of meaning as intrinsic to propositions serves to reify the subject/object distinction, thus perpetuating objectivity's privilege. Third, we will argue the tradition of discrete propositional categories, and their corresponding modes of justification, position people as docile bodies within a regime of truth. Finally, we will take agency for our understanding of propositions of fact and argue that an evaluation of consequences should be included when deciding whether or not a fact does or does not exist.

The Truth Paradigm

Envisioning resolutions as starting points for debate works to define the roles and methods of proof deployed by the participants in debate rounds (Herrick, 1998; Hill and Leeman, 1997). It is these end goals that Rybacki and Rybacki (2000) and Rottenberg (2003) suggest frame the division between propositions of fact, value and policy. While Hill and Leeman (1997) argue advocacy requirements are the critical determination of between policy or non-policy resolution; these categories are still viewed as discrete because non-policy can be further divided into propositions of fact and propositions of value. McCulloch (2000) argues

the trichotomy of fact/value/policy rests on the implicit assumption "that each proposition possesses an inherent identity as a factual statement, a value judgment, or a policy imperative and "that the traditional system of classification merely attempts to recognize those real qualities" (p. 30). Under such a system of thought, the wording of a resolution is of utmost importance. Typically, resolutions of policy are recognized by an agency term such as "should," resolutions of value are identified by an evaluative term such as "justified," and resolutions of fact are indicated by existential term such as "is."

Unfortunately, these words have taken on a "bloated" meaning in the parliamentary debate community. Debaters and judges use the appearance of these words as warrants for resolution type in rounds and on ballots. As a community, we have stopped asking ourselves whether the proposition is best understood as an issue of fact, value, or policy. Instead, we allow ourselves to be argumentatively constrained by the mere appearance of symbolic identifiers in the resolution. Since the word justified is an indicator of value judgment, we limit the possibility of resolitional identification to one of value whenever the word appears in the proposition.

Of course of system that encourages distinctions between types of resolutions also encourages the essentialist position that each type of argument is intrinsically different from the other. The operating assumption in the parliamentary community for factual resolutions, for example, is that propositional justification for facts asks about the existence of some truth without reference to a value judgment or a call to action. While theoretically resolutions of fact have several subcategories—Rieke and Sillars (2000) identify three different types of facts: the past facts (*New Mexico became a state in 1912*), present facts (*Twenty-four species of animals run faster than humans*), and future facts (*The percentage of the U.S. population over 65 will significantly increase by the year 2020*)—the unifying element is ability to "verify" the fact with "observation" or "objective data from reliable sources" (p. 49). We believe that this interpretation of factual resolutions is bad for parliamentary debate.

Specifically, adopting a paradigm of factual verification is antithetical to setting up fair debates. Fairness suggests resolution interpretations ought to, at the very least, attempt give both teams a chance to win the debate. A factual debate, however, makes no such attempt because it operates under truth-based paradigm not a fairness paradigm. Freeley and Steinberg (1999) demonstrate the deference to a truth-based paradigm when they write, "In a debate on a proposition of fact, the affirmative maintains that a certain thing is true while the negative maintains that it is false" (p. 45). By fixing of the ontological status of a resolution as one of fact a problematic epistemic step has been made because it positions the resolution as having a "correct" answer. Since there "is" a world out there

that "exists" in some objective way, then the answer to the resolution exists is some verifiable examination of our reality. In other words, one side is already right and one side is already wrong before the debate begins.

This does not strike us as fair ground for one side or the other. The only way those on the "false" side of the resolution win is if their opponents are either very uninformed or make some strategic mistake. Either way, the team defending the "false" side of the resolution is left at a serious deficit for an offensive strategy. Additionally to the issue of fairness, the assumption that resolutions have a particular and that we can communicate that identity to one another is suspect. With a little help from those not active in the debate community we argue that the debaters need to be empowered to negotiate resolutional meaning because there is no meaning outside their communicative exchange. In other words, at a philosophical level, we will argue that meaning is never translated in "perfect" form. Instead we negotiate interpretation with those involved in our communicative praxis.

Subject Not Object (?)

The paradigm of truth makes the assumption that the words of the resolution can communicate a stable meaning from which propositional typologies can be assigned. According to Derrida (1972), the very word communication "implies the *transmission charged with passing, from one subject to the other, the identity of a signified object of a meaning or a concept in principle separable from the process of passage and of the signifying operation*" (p. 34). The idea that meaning can be equated to some portable property of a unified subject represents the grammatical tool from which notions of objective description stem. Any *reality* that may exist is not known through objective observation of any particular resolution but rather through simulating that *reality* and meaning by constructing grammatological tools that define contexts and functions that only appear to be natural or real: "For us, the rapture of that 'natural attachment' puts in question the idea of naturalness rather than that of attachment" (Derrida, 1974, p. 46). Thus situated, meaning has no natural attachment to the signified — it does not exit outside of the text. Or, as Littlejohn (2002) explains, "Since there is an unending set of possible meaning in any text, there can be no central or true meaning at all" (p. 223).

The result of the search for stable propositional categories then is not the discovery of the reality of a resolution's meaning but rather a simulacrum. It simulates something previously invisible — the meaning of the resolution. The separation of meaning from the process of transmission between the participants empowers "discourses by imposing a social order upon the world that relegates words, writers, and speakers to zones of centrality and marginality" (Harriman, 1999, p. 36).

Traditional notions of the resolution communicating meaning further assumes that meaning can be transmitted to other subjects; but as the previous analysis suggests, the distinction between subject and object is problematic in that the constraints of language can never be transcended to establish meaning. At the point where the symbolic nature of language constrains communication by constructing a discourse that constantly recreates the illusion of objective meaning, the temptation may develop to suggest that the structure of language determines our communication. However, such a move is ill conceived in that it reproduces the very objectivity that deconstruction attempts to problematize. A more effective strategy, according to Derrida, is "to give to everything at stake in the operation of deconstruction the chance and the force, the power of communication" (Derrida, 1999, p. 1480).

Poulakos (1999) offers some potential insights into such a strategy; "if it is agreed that what is said must be said somehow, and that the how is a matter of the speaker's choice, then style betrays the speaker's unique grasp of language and becomes the peculiar expression of his [*sic*] personality" (p. 27). Choice of resolutional (re)presentation then can be seen as guiding actions that have implications for social, ethical, legal interactions. And "even though [Derrida] rejects what he takes to be an absolute belief in the availability of context or intention as specifiable conditions for these acts" there is still room for individuals to operate in relation to the constraints of communication. This is because the knowledge that is created through language is not based on logical or objective truths but it is "negotiated through by persuasion and interpretation" (Lucaites, Condit, and Caudill, 1999, p. 1473; p. 1472).

A structural ontology of communication is at best a problematic conception in that it attempts to pass objectivity off as something more real than a simulation. This occurs when both the *subject investigating* and the *object of investigation* are re-presented as embodying the context that determines the form of the subject and object respectively. These simulacrum of communication are embedded at all levels of discourse. The structures of signs, language, group roles, and social institutions are therefore significant in that they are symbolic representations that do not exist outside of the text. The text however, is not deterministic because through its deconstruction a negotiation of interpretations can occur which simultaneously situates the identity of object and subject in a context that is not real.

Beginning from a standpoint that propositional categories can be derived from the terminology of propositions takes the very force away from words that the original categorical division attempted to preserve. Furthermore, since the resolution itself already has a correct answer, the resulting debate following the introduction of a "factual resolution" has

been predetermined as well. However if the meaning and the outcome of the debate are already predetermined, the question remains, "predetermined by whom?" Thus, it is necessary to move beyond a critique of resolution typology to consider the very methods of factual proof.

Active Resolution, Passive Participants

In the 1969 postscript to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn contends that the text uses the term paradigm in two different senses. In one sense, a paradigm stands for "the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community" (Kuhn, 1996, 175). In the other sense, a paradigm "denotes one sort of element in that constellation, the concrete puzzle-solutions which, employed as models or examples, can replace explicit rules as a basis for the solution of the remaining puzzles of normal science" (Kuhn, 1996, p. 175). For Kuhn, paradigms are closely tied to observation and the interpretative process in that they situate and focus methodological procedures. While Kuhn's explicit focus is the operation of normal science the similarity between scientific paradigms of observation and a truth based paradigm of factual analysis justify consideration of Kuhn theories.

Kuhn (1996) describes the investigation of a normal scientist as being similar to the investigation of a chess player "who, with a problem stated on the board physically or mentally before him [*sic*], tries out various alternative moves in the search of a solution" (144). The chess player only finds a valid solution when the rules are not violated. The rules for a chess player inform what counts as a valid piece, how a piece can navigate the playing space, and ultimately what constitutes that playing space. If the rules are violated then the chess player is not really playing chess. Chess then can only occur when these rules are accepted *and* followed.

Debate over factual propositions operates in a similar fashion to the chess player because a particular paradigm informs debaters as to what the rules are so that debate can commence. The paradigm of the debater thus allows for definition of what constitutes relevant questions, just as the rules in chess confine what counts as a playing space. Furthermore, paradigms tell people how their pieces can navigate that space be it an electron, a cell, an atom, in the case of scientific inquiry-a claim, warrant, data, or an argument in debate. Therefore, propositional justifications are only valid if they were derived by following the rules of the dominant paradigm. If a solution is found that that does not conform to the paradigm then the individual is either operating in a way that must be considered invalid or the paradigm must change to account for that solution. Paradigms then are prior to the operation of normal science and debate in that they not only tell us what to look for but also where to look.

It is this notion of "looking" that is particularly interesting to Foucault (1977) because it the "exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation . . ." (1977, 170). According to Foucault (1997), discipline through observation developed slowly over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth century hand-in-hand with the scientific developments in the field of optics. The physics and cosmology of light assisted in the development of an epistemology of objective observation through technologies such as the telescope and the lens. These apparatuses were thought to allow a viewer to observe and measure an event from a neutral vantage point.

It is this notion of neutral observation then that forms the basis of the truth based paradigm of factual debate. Foucault contends that the development of a paradigm of neutral observation also necessitates a normalization of judgment that imposes homogeneity because individualization makes "it possible to measure gaps, to determine levels ... and to render the differences useful by fitting them one to another" (1977, 184).

Statistical tools are a paradigm example (pun intended) of drawing conclusions from the normalization of individual points of data. This "scientific" examination of individual differences, that developed contemporaneously with an epistemology of objectivity, "clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the 'marks' that characterize him and make him a 'case'" (Foucault 1977, p. 192). The truth-based paradigm then has constructed an epistemology of objective/neutral observation that is supported by a methodology of normalization.

Factual resolutional analysis further supports the scientification of knowledge production by the role it assigns to experts in various factual fields. While many individuals involved in academic debate are skeptical of objective/neutral observation there is still a desire to create intersubjectivity through standardization. Preservation of the standardized resolutional interpretation is a critical component to the preservation of discrete propositional categories because facts trigger the notion that observation and sensory data are accurate pictures of reality.

Facts and values, however, cannot be separated easily from one another because they reinforce each other. Babbie (1998) contends that agreement is the only basis of accurate description of our reality because there is no way to build from our flawed perceptions, a verifiably objective description of the world. Rather, we live in subjective realities that are constantly up for grabs. Agreement, however, is framed by an individual's values and paradigms because they inform what they will count as a fact as well prompt how they will go about looking for facts. Likewise, facts

that are out there in the world help to reshape and redefine our values.

Facts work to produce the notion that there is a static world out "there" where something is "true." For critics operating from such a paradigm, belief in the "fact" is what distinguishes a debater, who is right from a debater who is wrong because the rounds factual accuracy is judged based on the critic's beliefs about how "the real world" is organized. Beliefs farther intrude into the realm of facts because a debater's presentation and selection of the facts is influenced by their own values as well. Thus, there are few substantive distinctions between value debate and factual debates because the two concepts are inexorably connected.

Finally, a discrete notion of fact resolutions is problematic because it attempts to draw a distinction between normative and descriptive analysis. Rottenberg (2003) contends that to support a claim of fact, factual information that "responsible observers assume can be verified" must be offered (p. 57). If the resolution question cannot be answered in such a manner, then it is moving beyond the realm of a proposition of fact and, at very least, entering into value judgments. Therefore, a *true* proposition of fact calls for empirical not normative evaluations. Empirical evaluations are concerned with what exists, why it exists, and potentially, if it is likely to exist in the future. Empirical evaluations are not interested in if what exists is good or bad, or if it ought to exist—these are normative not empirical questions. Thus, factual interpretation preserve for objectivity the ability to make normative claims about worthwhile at the same time escaping the need to consider normative objection to the facts existence.

When this occurs, we believe, we allow debaters to avoid the most difficult questions of all. If we are truly training critical thinkers and future citizen orators then we need to empower them with the knowledge that naming reality is as much a question of ideology as it is observation. There is a reason that we created a battered women defense in the courts. While the facts of women killing their husbands demanded that they be tried for murder, we decided as a society that we did not think women who were being battered should be labeled and punished the same way we discipline other forms of murder. Even though the observable facts may have warranted a charge of murder, the consequences of calling it murder demanded that we call it something else. Values and policies and facts are all intertwined. Instead of imposing an assumption that certain resolutions demand certain questions we need to leave it to the participants in the debate to argue for what is and is not important. Lets restore agency and argumentative responsibility to the people were are here to educate.

Conclusion

Resolutions of fact assume there are a predetermined meaning on three levels. First, factual identity positions the resolution as a verifiable unit before the prime minister's constructive ever begins. Second, assumptions about resolutorial meaning replicate objectivity's power in the form of subjectivity. And third, methods of factual verification/justification position individuals as objective observers that surrender their agency to control propositional meaning to prevailing scientific convention of knowledge production. At best, envisioning resolutions as having intrinsic meaning undercuts the ability to have fair debates. At worse, it hegemonically imposes dominate conventions of scientific inquiry on the participants in the round. It is because the move to classify facts as a discrete propositional category is problematic that a more inclusive notion of proposition justification must be considered. While it may never be possible for individuals to transcend the gramatological trap created by meaning, uncritical adoption of a truth based paradigm-either objective or subjective truth-serves only to constrain and predetermine debates.

Resolutions ought to be envisioned as opportunities for individual agency because it is only the individual that brings any meaning to the debate. By critics enforcing discrete systems of propositional justification they are enforcing dominate forms of knowledge production; and ensuring that the facts never change because the power system that defines factual existence is never questioned. When a debater asks a critic to either affirm or negate a fact (i.e. This House believes that...) it has real implications for the world. It is at best a questionable pedagogy to teach people how to ignore the implications of beliefs and values because such a move denigrates critical thought.

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