

HOW TO (STILL) MAKE OUR IDEAS CLEAR

by Jason Baldwin

Our recent bout in LD with the notoriously vague liberty/equality topic provides a prime opportunity to reflect upon the nature of clear thinking. Indeed, as I listened to debater after debater credulously invoke the old LD mantras about the social contract, natural rights, and the marketplace of ideas, I was forced back to the words of the father of philosophical pragmatism, C.S. Peirce:

It is terrible to see how a single unclear idea, a single formula without meaning, lurking in a young man's head, will sometimes act like an obstruction of inert matter in an artery, hindering the nutrition of the brain, and condemning its victim to pine away in the fullness of his intellectual vigor and in the midst of intellectual plenty.

Fortunately for us, in an essay published in the January, 1878 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*, Peirce proposed a treatment for this otherwise fatal disease. The essay, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," was originally conceived as a contribution to the philosophy of science, but careful students of debate can also glean much from it.

One problem we face in LD is this: we are asked to make judgments on a range of normative questions, which judgments are not reducible to a series of self-interpreting empirical observations. I am basically restating here the old saw that 'is' does not imply 'ought.' At the same time, the normative judgments we produce invariably aim to effect or maintain some sensible state of affairs. That is, we would never bother to debate the conflicts of liberty and equality in a just social order if we did not think that there would be some observable difference between a society where liberty was prioritized and one where equality ruled.

But many, if not most, contemporary LD rounds are conducted from start to finish without any indication of just how the two competing moral judgments distinguish themselves in practice. Instead, both sides string together various morally-loaded terms to characterize their positions, without actually explaining what, in practice, those positions mean. As an example, take this (mercifully abridged) chain of thought from a defender of equality: an egalitarian

society is superior because it allows all voices to be heard in the marketplace of ideas, which, in turn, promotes progress. What could such an argument possibly mean? It does not explain the nature of equality except as being whatever promotes the marketplace of ideas. But what is the marketplace of ideas? Where is it, how does it work, and what do they charge for admission? And what on earth counts as progress? None of these notions, without some concrete definitions, have any bearing at all on social life as we experience it. So how can they be the basis for making judgments about the nature of a just social order? The mindnumbing potential of such arguments becomes evident when the defender of liberty stands up and presents the identical chain of thought, substituting only 'libertarian' for 'egalitarian' as that which promotes the mythical marketplace of ideas. How can a judge choose, or even distinguish, between such mushy alternatives?

Peirce believed that good thinking about any subject begins with clear thinking. He rejected the older models of clarity, which were themselves far from clear, and proposed an operationalist test of meaning. A thought or idea is meaningful only to the extent that it describes some empirically perceivable quality of the world. "Our idea of anything," according to Peirce, "is our idea of its sensible effects." As an example, Peirce takes our idea that a diamond is 'hard' to mean nothing apart from the empirically verifiable claim that 'nothing will scratch it.' This would mean that a dispute over whether a diamond is always hard or whether it is soft until the moment someone tries to scratch it is really not a meaningful dispute at all, because we can mean nothing by 'hardness' other than 'unscratchableness.'

Peirce reached this conclusion because of his theory that "the whole function of thought is to produce habits of action." "Thought' is that state mental activity which begins with the irritation of some doubt and issues forth in a settled state of belief. Doubts arise as indecision about action, and belief, therefore, takes the form of a rule for action. We might want to dispute whether this pattern really holds for all instances of thought, but it certainly fits the kind of ethical problems debated in LD; we do ponder these issues because we need to make decisions about actions, and our con-

clusions are precisely our resolutions to act in one morally significant way or another. That means that normative ideas like rights and progress, if they are really meaningful concepts, ought to be identified with certain sensible consequences.

Peirce wants to claim that such ideas could never be understood as anything other than the sum of sensible consequences we associate with them. And that means to define them clearly, we need to know just what sorts of sensible states of affairs they entail. That is what debaters fail to clarify when they treat liberty and equality as both fostering the marketplace of (progressive) ideas. To really distinguish between concepts like liberty and equality, debaters must provide some picture of how societies shaped by the two ideals would differ. And this applies to many other popular LD terms as well, from the social contract to natural rights to human dignity. Debaters have wallowed too long in the emotional appeal of such phrases, weaving sophisticated syllogisms out of them which say nothing meaningful about the moral issue they are intended to resolve. With Peirce, "we come down to what is tangible and practical as the root of every real distinction of thought, no matter how subtle it may be; and there is no distinction of meaning so fine as to consist in anything but a possible difference of practice."

Put into LD terms, this means that to argue clearly, and therefore meaningfully, each debater must provide at least a few examples of how his position would make the world observably different from the world advocated by his opponent. Obviously, time alone precludes fully defining the nature of a libertarian or an egalitarian society, but it should be possible to point to some key differences which will give both judge and opponent a clearer idea of just what's at stake in a given resolution. This does not require the elaborate defense of a policy-style plan, but it does imply a more empirical sensitivity than has been the norm for much LD in recent years. At the same time, it requires debaters to carefully choose only the most illuminating examples. That would mean, at a minimum, that useful examples should highlight some difference between concepts at issue. Therefore, to argue that equality is desirable because it

(Baldwin from page 26)

implies a non-slave society is not really saying much of relevance to the liberty/equality debate, because liberty, too, would seem to oppose the practice of slavery.

It should be evident from the foregoing that Peirce is not here advocating a ruthless ethical pragmatism. His proposal about how to make our ideas clear is not a complete instruction on how to make good decisions; rather, it aims to keep the concepts we are deciding about clear, so that, whatever procedure we use to resolve a given issue, we finish with a clear belief. Nor is the pragmatic method sufficient to produce credible concepts. Debaters cannot simply, by fiat, compile a laundry list of positive empirical examples and pin their preferred conceptual label to it; rather, students must carefully analyze the accepted meanings of the terms they use to find definitions and examples that are plausible to judges. Regular application of such a pragmatic standard of clearness would make for more engaging and believable LD rounds.

(Jason Baldwin won the TOC LD)