

PROPOSITIONS OF FACT

by Professor Ronald Matlon

I ought to begin this discussion by identifying what a proposition of fact is. Propositions of fact help us discover what "is not," whereas propositions of value discover "good" and "bad." The proposition of fact that the cost of higher education is the major reason most people do not attend or drop out of college" measures "is/existence" or "is not/nonexistence;" the proposition of value that "it is wrong to charge students so much money for higher education" measures "good/right" or "bad/right" or "bad/wrong." The first of the two propositions above is a proposition of fact because it "describes a view of reality.... The purpose of the [proposition]...is to establish whether the stated description [of reality] is correct" (Patterson & Zarefsky, 1983, p.16). The "correctness" of this view of reality can be measured and tested empirically. Meanwhile, while we may in part rely on empirical information to judge the "right" or "wrong" of something, empirical data alone will not suffice when examining values. The opinions of philosophers and an understanding of individual and societal wants and needs also matters.

Propositions of fact may examine the past, present, or future. Juries look at claims of past fact (what happened) when they consider propositions such as, "John Doe is guilty of first degree murder." Economists argue claims of present fact (what is happening) when they consider propositions such as, "The rate of inflation is increasing." People with political interests frequently debate claims of future fact (what will happen) when they consider propositions such as, "Jesse Jackson will be elected President in 1996."

Many propositions of fact are also identified as historical or scientific in nature. "The historian attempts in interpret events within the framework of some explanation; the scientist, to interpret phenomena by reference to some theoretical structure" (Zarefsky, 1980, pp. 11-12). In these cases, historians and scientists are trying to discover meaning (what something means) with propositions like, "Resolved, that Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty' exacerbated the problems of

poverty in the United States," or "Resolved, that computers will alter the course of civilization." Notice, again, that the focus of these propositions is on "is, was, or will be," not "good, bad."

If ... participants debate non-policy propositions of fact, many of the problems faced by debating propositions of value or quasi-policy might be overcome. In-depth fact analysis may be more within the reach of our students than in-depth value analysis. As one observer notes: "Propositions of fact...are often easy to understand since the advocate of the proposition needs only to demonstrate the existence of certain facts to 'prove' her case to the audience" (Tuman, 1986, p.86). Fact analysis requires empirical and authoritative validation; value analysis requires a comprehensive understanding of philosophy, sociology, and psychology.

In depth fact analysis may be more within the reach of our students than in depth value analysis.

The former is more concrete; the latter is more abstract. Presumption may also be somewhat easier to locate with propositions of fact than propositions of value, especially if the framers of the propositions remain cognizant of what is generally presumed to be ("true").

In addition, debating propositions of fact may give us a fuller understanding of how the definitive and designative stock issues work. These two general and fundamental issues are certainly as endemic to fact resolutions as they are to value resolutions. With the definitive stock issue, we would ask: "What criteria are available to justify the fact (assess the degree of truth) claimed in the proposition?" With the designative stock issue, we would ask: "Does the fact claimed in the proposition conform to the criteria?"

Here are some examples:

Proposition: Sam is guilty of loitering.

Definitive Issue: What constitutes loitering? (What criteria do we use to determine when loitering has taken place?)

Designative Issue: Did Sam loiter? (Does Sam's action conform to the definition of loitering?)

Proposition: Capital punishment will deter crime.

Definitive Issue: What constitutes a deterrence in crime?

Designative Issue: Will capital punishment cause such a deterrence?

Proposition: The two-party system is dead in America.

Definitive Issue: What would make death an appropriate characterization of the two-party system?

Designative Issue: Are these conditions satisfied.

Zarefsky (1980) shows how potential issues flow from these two stock issues with the following proposition, although I do not think this is a particularly well-balanced resolution:

Proposition: Jimmy Carter received stronger political support than Gerald Ford.

Definitive Issue: What constitutes support?

Potential Issues:

1. Number of voters
2. Intensity of partisan feeling
3. Independence of voters
4. Positive effect

Designative Issue: Did Carter have stronger political support than Ford?

Potential Issues:

1. Carter vs. Ford regarding number of votes
2. Carter vs. Ford regarding intensity of partisan feeling
3. Carter vs. Ford regarding independence of voters
4. Carter vs. Ford regarding positive effect

Some of these potential issues may never be raised by either side in the debate; they become waived issues. Some of these potential issues may be introduced by one side and agreed to by the opposition; they become admitted issues. Some of these potential issues remain points of disagreement by the affirmative and the negative throughout the debate; they (Matlon to page 20)

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become actual issues or points of clash. For example, an affirmative team might say "intensity of partisan feeling constitutes political support, and the negative may admit to this issue. However, when the affirmative goes on to say the "Carter generated more intensity of partisan feeling among Democrats than Ford did with the Republicans," the negative might disagree and we have clash. Additional steps in the analysis of fact propositions are discussed in a variety of sources, one of which is found in Chapter 8 of Rybacki and Rybacki (1986).

Several propositions of fact have been suggested in this essay, other possibilities are listed below

Resolved, that granting tuition tax credits to the parents of children who attend private schools will perpetuate segregation.

Resolved, that violence on television causes violent behavior in children.

Resolved, that Lee Harvey Oswald killed President John Kennedy.

Numerous other possibilities exist. If [NFL] wants to be in the forefront of generating theories of argument, its mission might be to turn to propositions of fact. Such a mission offers an exciting, yet realistic, challenge for coaches and debaters alike.

References

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