Chapter Two
Ethical Considerations and Debating

Argument and debate are activities that humans use to resolve differences. All animals, including human animals, have a variety of other methods of resolving differences, but only human animals use argumentation and debate. Argumentation and debate are not among the methods available to non-human animals for resolving differences. Whether they are competing over limited resources such as food and water or access to mates, non-human animals frequently resort to violence as a way of resolving these differences. Human animals use violent means to resolve differences over access to resources and other issues – religion, for example – as well. For better and for worse, humans throughout much of history have used their abilities to create and use tools to develop weapons of greater and greater destructive power. These weapons of mass destruction threaten the very existence of human life on the planet.

Fortunately, humans also have the ability to use nonviolent alternatives to resolve their differences. Argumentation and debate are among those alternatives to violence. Sometimes humans choose argumentation to resolve differences in order to prevent the outbreak of violence. For instance, in 1961, United States President John F. Kennedy negotiated with Premier Nikita Khrushchev of the Soviet Union to prevent potential war resulting from U.S. missiles in Turkey and Soviet missiles in Cuba. In that case, U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson debated on the floor of the United Nations presenting the U.S. claim that the U.S.S.R. should remove those missiles from Cuba. Valerian Zorin, the Soviet Representative to the United Nations and the Soviet Union’s Deputy Foreign Minister, argued in private with Ambassador Stevenson that the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba was no different than the presence of U.S. missiles in Turkey close to the border of the Soviet Union. These two men and other officials of the USA and USSR successfully negotiated a settlement where the Soviet missiles were removed from Cuba in exchange for a private agreement that the US would soon withdraw its missiles from Turkey.

In a more recent example, in what have been called the six-party talks, the Democratic People’s Republic of [North] Korea, the Republic of [South] Korea, the Russia Federation, the United States, the People’s Republic of China, and Japan have worked to prevent the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula. These six-party talks can be seen as an attempt to use argumentation and debate as alternatives to violence.

Argumentation and debate also can be used to end violence once it has begun. U.S. Senators Mark O. Hatfield and George McGovern made a proposal that the United States should eliminate the funds for the U.S. war in Vietnam. This bill was debated on the floor of the U.S. Senate and although it was ultimately defeated, it was among the things that pressured U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon to eventually end the war. After years of conflict in Vietnam, the United States and North Vietnam finally negotiated an end to the fighting there.

Arguably, choosing the least violent alternative to solve differences presents itself as an ethical way to resolve differences, other things being equal. Therefore, as an alternative to violence, argumentation and debate should be considered as an attempt to use a more ethical method for resolving human differences. Of course argumentation and debate are not inherently ethical practices any more than violence is always unethical. This text begins with the presumption that, all things being equal, non-violence is ethically preferred over violence. The remainder of this
Chapter will discuss some ethical dimensions of argumentation and debate particularly, as those dimensions are related to the debate process and its outcomes as well as to our debate partners and adjudicators. The positions taken in this chapter are most directly related to competitive debate, but to a lesser degree they are applicable to generative debate as well.

**Preliminary Considerations**

Prior to considering these ethical dimensions of the debate process, a few preliminary points need to be established. First, ethical considerations differ from matters of argumentative effectiveness. Second, ethics is a matter of more or less rather than a matter of yes or no. Finally, ethical considerations should apply to individual action as well as social tradition.

**Ethical Considerations Are Separable From Matters Of Effectiveness**

Debaters need to focus on two features that separate good debating and good argumentation from poor debating and poor argumentation. Those features are effectiveness and ethics. Effectiveness refers to how successful debaters are at getting judges or audiences to accept their arguments. Ethics refers to whether or not the arguments, strategies, and tactics that debaters use are right and proper, quite apart from whether those arguments, strategies and tactics are effective.

Much of what will be dealt with in this book concerns effective argumentation and debating. However, before debaters should even consider whether or not certain debating practices are effective, they should consider whether those practices are ethical. The position taken in this book is that ethical considerations should be prior to thoughts about effectiveness. No debater worthy of the name should engage in practices they consider unethical even if those practices have a great likelihood of being effective.

As stated earlier, effectiveness and ethics are separate considerations. Debaters can argue in ethical ways that are ineffective, in effective ways that are unethical, or in ways that are both ethical and effective. The goal of excellent debates is to simultaneously be ethical and effective. However, if demanded by the situation, the most excellent debater will also choose ethics over effectiveness.

**Ethics Is A Matter For Individual Action As Well As Social Traditions**

Although certain groups may develop rules of behavior to guide the members of those groups, individuals have ethical responsibilities that transcend those of the group. All individual debaters have the responsibility to develop for themselves a rigorous set of ethical standards they will follow. The extent to which debaters follow such rigorous standards defines them as moral agents. Debaters who impose only very weak ethical standards on themselves are not living up to their full potential as moral agents. The ways we choose to behave toward one another, including the ways we choose to resolve our differences, defines us as moral agents whether we act as
individuals, groups, or as a species. To the extent we use argumentation and debate rather than violence, we become better, more moral, and more ethical human beings.

At the first level, using argumentation and debate is usually more moral or ethical than using violence. At a second level, using some arguing and debating strategies is more moral and ethical than other methods. One of the goals of this chapter is to describe certain considerations that debaters can use to develop questions and answers about their own ethical debating behavior. One of the most important goals that debaters ought to pursue involves the development of standards that guide them as ethical debaters. Debaters should make those standards explicit and then should use those standards to help them decide which kinds of strategies and tactics to employ. Each debater has a personal responsibility for developing and following a set of ethical standards regardless of what ethical standards might or might not be established by their schools or their debating societies.

**Ethics Operates In The Realm Of More-Or-Less Rather Than On The Basis Of Yes-Or-No**

Like many human activities, ethical behavior is not decided on the basis of a categorical logic of yes-or-no but on the variable logic of more-or-less. Of course we might wish to define certain debating behaviors (for instance, fabrication of evidence) as absolutely and categorically unethical and other behaviors as especially ethical (for instance, providing assistance to a weaker opponent even at the risk of one’s own position), but for the most part, behaviors are more-or-less ethical. For instance, debaters who cite sources of evidence in an honest manner are without question conducting themselves in an ethical manner. But most behaviors are more-or-less ethical.

Consider the following:

Should debaters acknowledge to the adjudicator and opponent, evidence that does not support the debaters’ own case?

Should debaters acknowledge the weaknesses of their own evidence and argument even if opponents do not point out those weaknesses?

To what extent should debaters show respect for other debaters who are not following fundamental ethical strategies?

To what extent should debaters question the wisdom or accuracy of an adjudicator’s decision?

Acknowledging flaws in one’s own evidence and argument may generally be a laudable practice, but might limit one’s ability to use arguments to create substantial good. In other words, if the arguments presented by the debater are used to support decisions that follow important principles or that have the most positive consequences, is the debater obliged to make the argument appear stronger than it actually is in order to support the substantial good that the argument might create? Showing respect for other debaters who do not follow ethical strategies
may be seen as a generally ethical strategy, but may also contribute to a general disregard of ethical standards. Also, questioning the wisdom of an adjudicator’s decision is generally considered a selfish act, but sometimes may be used to gain better information about one’s strengths and weaknesses as a debater and sometimes the very process of facing difficult questions can help the adjudicator improve. These and other scenarios bring to mind ethical questions that cannot be answered with a simple “yes or no” response. Some of these scenarios suggest that behaviors are more easily thought of as more or less ethical rather than absolutely ethical or absolutely unethical. Saying that judgments of ethical behavior is “more or less” rather than “yes or no” is to suggest that general rules prescribing or forbidding certain behaviors are not possible. Judgments of ethical or unethical behavior will always need to be tempered by considerations related to individual circumstances in which the behaviors occur.  

Dimensions of Ethical Considerations Relevant to Debate

Following the three preliminary considerations described above, this text will suggest four categories that involve ethical considerations relevant to debate. These categories are among those that debaters can use to create ethical standards. Then, of course, the task of following ethical standards belongs to each individual debater. The use of methods that meet the standards of ethics and the avoidance of methods that are contrary to the standards are what define the real worth of every debater. As stated earlier, no debater worthy of the name wants to secure an audience or adjudicator’s assent for a claim unless the debater is following ethical standards and avoiding unethical ones.

The four categories that will be discussed include considerations involving respect for the process of debate, respect for those with whom we debate, respect for the audience and adjudicators of debate, and respect for the outcomes of debate. These categories are not arbitrary but neither are they exhaustive of all the categories that might be discussed. These categories emerge from the people and activities that are involved in debate. Respect for the process of debate involves the appropriate use of arguments and strategies. Respect for those with whom we debate has to do with how we treat the people we engage who are arguing against our ideas as we argue against theirs. Respect for the audience and the adjudicator involves how we treat those who will ultimately judge our efforts along a range from poor to excellent. Respecting the outcome of debate involves how debaters deal with winning and losing and with judgments of excellence or lack of excellence. The remainder of this chapter will discuss these four categories with regard to questions they raise about ethical elements of debate.

Ethics and respecting the process of debate

When people decide to participate in debate, or any other activity for that matter, they implicitly agree to abide by a certain set of procedures and principles that define the activity. If people

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choose to participate in any activity, they should at least in general, agree to follow the procedures and principles of that activity. Of course, some situations may arise when those principles and procedures do more harm than good, but in general, participating in an activity involves following its principles and procedures.

The process of debate fundamentally involves using arguments to resolve differences. Using arguments means using evidence and reasoning to persuade others to our way of thinking. Evidence and reasoning are not the only ways to persuade others to adopt a particular point of view. One can also use promises, threats, coercion, power plays, and a host of other methods of persuasion, many of which are antithetical to the methods of argumentation. However when one agrees to the method of debate to resolve differences, they implicitly agree to the method of argument – evidence and reason – as the primary means. Thus, to try to co-opt the debate process by using strategies and tactics which are antithetical to reason and argument raises ethical considerations.

As will be further discussed in Chapter Five, one of the important elements of argument is evidence. Evidence is the foundation on which an argument rests. Not only should good arguments be based on solid evidence, but also good arguments should be able to withstand evidence that is potentially contradictory to the argument. Thus, an ethical debater is not only obliged to present the best evidence available, but an ethical debater should not stoop to hiding or withholding evidence that does not support the debater’s point of view. Certainly an ethical debater can properly cite evidence to make a point even if they know that evidence to the contrary exists. However, the most ethical debater would never engage in tactics to cover up or otherwise obscure that evidence to the contrary. An excellent debater is one who will consider the evidence in favor of and against a particular position and will weigh the evidence honestly and forthrightly. To do otherwise does not respect the nature of argument, which includes evidence. By agreeing to engage in debate, people implicitly agree to an ethic of open and honest use of evidence.

The process of argumentation and debate focuses on the use of logical reasoning as well as solid evidence. Good reasoning involves making sound inference from evidence to our claims. The opposite of good reasoning is sometimes called fallacious reasoning. This text will focus on good and fallacious reasoning in Chapter Ten. Basically, fallacious reasoning involves drawing improper conclusions from the available evidence and is a counterfeit of good reasoning. Thus, knowingly using fallacious reasoning even when it is more effective raises ethical questions regarding the debater’s respect for the process of debate.

By using the highest principles of evidence and reasoning, one respects the processes of argumentation and debate. To do otherwise is unworthy of an excellent, ethical debater.

Ethics and respecting those with whom we debate

Respecting those with whom we debate indicates that we view our opponents as persons to be respected rather than as objects to be overcome. When we use violence to resolve our differences, our opponents – usually called our enemy – are literally objects to be overcome. The
armies of opposing nations present the clearest case of an opponent as an object to be overcome. But when we use argumentation and debate to resolve differences, our opponents are other people whose opinions and evidence may just be as good as our own. In this case, these opponents deserve our respect.

Respecting those with whom we debate may take many forms. Respecting others means refuting their ideas but not attacking them as persons. The act of refuting a person’s ideas shows respect for the person because the very act of refutation means the debater considers the opponent’s ideas worthy of consideration. An act of attacking an opposing debater personally indicates a complete lack of respect for the opposing views of the debater. Attacking an opposing debater can take a variety of forms. Name-calling is one such form: “Only a complete radical like yourself could make such an argument.” Another form of personal attack is deriding a person’s credibility: “Your argument demonstrates your complete ignorance of the subject.” Name-calling and credibility derision are but two examples of strategies that are personal attacks on the opponent rather than criticisms of the opponent’s argument.

By choosing argumentation and debate, debaters implicitly agree that as much as they support their position, they argue against others who support different positions with equal force. To accept the presupposition that one’s opponents are equally committed to their positions demands that debaters respect the very notion that opponents have an equal right to express their opinion and to support them with argument and evidence. When we agree to the use of argumentation and debate as alternatives to violence, we agree to use communication rather than violence to argue against an opponent and we agree to argue against the opponent’s idea rather than against the opponent themselves. Although an excellent debater certainly can use ethical strategies to enhance his or her own credibility, such a debater should not degrade the opponent’s credibility as a part of the argumentative process.

**Ethics And Respecting The Adjudicators Of Debate**

As stated earlier, debate frequently occurs before an outside adjudicator. As such it is the process that is used when arguers are unable to come to an internal agreement – when they are unable to resolve their differences by consensus, compromise, or capitulation. At this point, humans decide that they must trust an outside adjudicator to make a decision. Such a decision demands respect for the adjudicator.

What does respect for an adjudicator involve? First, respect for an adjudicator does not mean that the arguers think the adjudicator’s decision is or will be correct. The very fact that the decision needs to be adjudicated indicates that the decision may not be the precise decision that either of the advocates would have chosen unilaterally. So respect for does not imply agreement with the adjudicator’s decision, just respect for the role of the adjudicator.

The adjudicator has been called upon to reach a decision or to solve a problem that the individual advocates could not do by themselves. The fact that the debaters are forced to turn to an outside adjudicator demands respect for the role of the adjudicator. Does such respect mean that the decision cannot be questioned or even appealed? Although different forums provide different
mechanisms for questioning or appealing the decisions of an adjudicator, ordinarily the decision of the adjudicator is final. Respect for the adjudicator simply means that the advocates agree to follow, rather than ignoring or circumventing those procedures for questioning or appealing the decision.

More than anything else, the adjudicator needs to be respected as a person. The adjudicator is not an enemy. The adjudicator is a person who is cooperating with both parties to come to a decision that the parties could not achieve on their own. As such, the adjudicator deserves respect of all parties involved.

**Ethics And Respecting The Outcomes Of Debate**

As was said earlier, respecting the outcome of the debate is different than agreeing that the outcome is the best one. Having decided to turn the decision to an external audience or adjudicator indicates that such a process is better than the likely impasse that would result from the parties’ inability to make a decision. Thus, turning the decision over to an external adjudicator is better than making no decision at all. So debaters should learn to respect the outcome of the debate even if they are unable to agree with the decision itself.

Since the choice to submit to an external adjudicator means that the decision made by the adjudicator is preferable to the inability of the debaters to decide internally, the ethical response is to respect the outcome as decided by the external adjudicator.

**Summary**

Because humans as a species have access to argumentation and debate as alternative to violence, a reasonable starting point to any discussion of ethics is that argumentation and debate is generally more ethical than resorting to violence to solve problems. Ethics needs to be thought of as different from effectiveness. Even though a certain action might be effective, that same action might be ethically problematic. Ethical action is to some extent dictated by social mores but individuals ought to shoulder the responsibility to reflect on those societal mores and should go beyond social standards to develop individual standards as well.

When people are unable to resolve their differences among themselves, or are unable to come to a solution to a problem that is acceptable to all parties, they then turn to debate as a tool to reach a decision. Ordinarily they entrust some outside party to adjudicate that debate and to decide in favor of one of the parties. When they engage in this kind of debate, several ethical considerations emerge. Among those are considerations involving the process of debate itself, considerations regarding the people engaged in the debate, considerations regarding the adjudicator, as well as considerations related to the outcome of the debate. Debaters need to develop ethical standards that shed light on those and perhaps other questions of ethics as well. Ultimately ethics is a consideration of what is the right thing to do. As such, ethics ought to be a
very important element in a debater’s development and ethics ought to even take precedence over a debater’s effectiveness.