Competitive debates and argumentative virtues

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Introduction

Competitive debates are generally considered as one of the best methods to improve argumentative skills. They have been widely practiced in the United States at least since the 1960s under the sponsorship of the American Forensic Association, in the form of intercollegiate debates. In many other countries, they are also becoming increasingly popular in academic contexts. In this kind of debates, each team of debaters is assigned a position on a topic (which may or may not correspond to the debaters' own views), and then the team must debate the opposing team, which has been assigned the contrary position (although there may also be two teams in each side). A jury decides on the respective merits of the speeches of each team. The winning team is decided according to the quality of the argumentation and the respect for the proper procedure of the debate.

Moreover, debates are also often used as pedagogical tools in many domains—from theology and philosophy, where the practice originated, to other disciplines such as history and literature. Instructors regard debates as promoting critical thinking, argumentative skills and even democracy. Even though most of the old pedagogical methods have been severely criticised, debates are still valued and encouraged. As Tumposky (2004, p. 52) puts it: "Debate, like apple pie and motherhood, seems almost sacrosanct."

But is the practice of competitive debate really so beneficial to argumentation, critical thinking and democracy? I believe there are at least some reasons to be concerned. The USA is one of the countries in which debate has most profusely been used for decades, and yet in recent years we have witnessed the electoral victory of Donald Trump, the increasing belief that the Earth is flat and a pervasive rise of political polarisation. Certain far-right pundits who contribute to political hostilities and spread extreme and questionable beliefs, such as Ben Shapiro and Stefan Molyneux, are well trained in debates. Of course, these are not conclusive reasons against the benefits of debates, but they show the need to look into the effects of debates on thought and argumentative behaviour.

In order to properly assess those effects, it is not enough to consider logical and dialectical skills such as the quality of arguments and respect for procedural rules. We also need to take into account argumentative *virtues*, which influence the behaviour, attitudes and motivations of the arguer. I have proposed that virtue argumentation theory could accommodate both skills and virtues if we distinguish between two kinds of virtues: reliabilist and responsibilist virtues (Gascón, 2018). Reliabilist virtues are akin to skills and, when applied to the production and evaluation of arguments, they "make the arguer *reliable* in grasping cogency" (p. 164). The focus of reliabilist virtues is on the arguer's products. They have to do with whether arguers produce cogent arguments, whether they make correct assessment of arguments, whether they ask the appropriate critical questions or make accurate objections, and whether they follow the required steps in a critical discussion. Reliabilist virtues, then, can be characterised on the basis of what the arguer produces or does.

Responsibilist virtues, on the other hand, do not refer to the arguer's products as much as to her attitude and motivations. Virtues of this kind are more characteristic of virtue theories and more germane to the spirit of Aristotelian virtue ethics: intellectual humility, intellectual courage, open-mindedness, honesty, and so on. Zagzebski (1996, p. 104), who

proposed a virtue responsibilist approach to epistemology, characterised a virtue as "a deep quality of a person, closely identified with her selfhood." In order to properly characterise responsibilist virtues, we need to mention the arguer's habits, attitude and motivations. In fact, for Zagzebski, motivations (in her epistemological account, the motivation for knowledge) are what *defines* the intellectual virtues (p. 166). Hence, as opposed to reliabilist virtues, responsibilist virtues cannot be properly characterised simply on the basis of the quality of the products. They involve a whole way of approaching intellectual problems and other people.

Both kinds of virtues are important in argumentation. On the one hand, of course, arguing well involves producing cogent arguments and respecting rules. But arguing well also involves respecting other arguers, trusting reason, being open-minded about claims different from one's own, listening to objections, and many other behaviours that concern responsibilist virtues. Let us see then how competitive debates fare in both aspects.

Reliabilist virtues: likely benefits

Competitive debates are designed so that the quality of arguments and replies determines the winner. The debaters' purpose is, of course, to be declared winner by the jury, and therefore their efforts will be directed towards producing good arguments and counterarguments. Debates must also follow procedural rules, both those that are mandatory and those that are recommended, if they want to get a good score. It is to be expected, then, that the practice of debate will likely help debaters master logical and dialectical skills. In other words: debates are likely to foster reliabilist virtues.

It is true that the manner of speaking, the emotions aroused and the speaker's gestures are aspects that the jury must take into account when assessing the debaters' performance. This might seem suspicious to some, who might regard those aspects as irrelevant to argument quality. However, two considerations should alleviate such a concern. On the one hand, those aspects can arguably be regarded as part of the repertory of skills that a good arguer should have—rhetorical skills. As long as they do not clash with argument cogency or with dialectical propriety, rhetorical skills can be seen as a subset of the reliabilist virtues. On the other hand, it seems that in practice jurors in competitive debates tend not to pay much attention to the manner of speaking (Harvey-Smith, 2011, p. 59). What matters for most jurors is the merits of the case mounted and the responses to the opposite team.

When judging the debaters' performance, the jury relies on what the "average reasonable person" would find persuasive. If we believe Aristotle's optimistic words in the *Rhetoric* (I,1 1355a), people are convinced when they believe that something has been proven, and they "have a natural disposition for the true and to a large extent hit on the truth." If that is so, the jury will need to assess the quality of the arguments in order to judge whether an average reasonable person would be persuaded by a debater's discourse. Let us see whether that is the case. The World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC), one of the most famous competitive debates in the world, includes in Schedule 1 of its Adjudicators Guide[1] the following guidelines:

- The main claim ("motion") that will be defended by the proponent team must be properly defined, avoiding "truisms and tautologies."
- Weak arguments must be regarded as such independently of whether the other team exposes its flaws or not.
- Judges must not be influenced by their personal beliefs when deciding the strength or weakness of an argument.
- The speeches should address the critical issues of the debate.

[1] Available in: https://www.wsdcdebating.org/services-4

Admittedly, this is not very specific, and th*e Guide leaves a lot of room for the jury to decide what is and what is not persuasive*. However, the points mentioned—specificity and clarity of the claim, argument strength and relevance—undoubtedly refer to important skills that a good arguer must have. Furthermore, as the Guide makes manifest, competitive debates are an environment in which participants put forward publicly arguments that are assessed by an impartial judge. According to current research on critical thinking and bias, that is precisely the kind of environment that best promotes good-quality arguments and diminishes bias (Correia, 2017).

How are the debaters' arguments evaluated in practice? Harvey-Smith (2011) gives advice on how to win debates on the basis of his own experience. Some of the recommendations that he makes are: interpret opposing arguments in the strongest possible way and avoid attacking straw men (p. 5); when arguing for a course of action, consider both positive and negative consequences (p. 42); and state clearly the claim of your argument and explain it (pp. 44-45). He does not mention the criteria that an argument must fulfil to be strong (or persuasive), or the appropriate critical questions for each argument scheme, but he does discuss the strength of practical arguments ("practicalities"), arguments from consequences and argument from principles.

Again, even if we do not find here anything as specific as the ARS criteria for argument cogency (Johnson & Blair, 1994) or the pragma-dialectical rules (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004), the Adjudicators Guide of the WSDC and Harvey-Smith's handbook surely point to important argumentative skills. That gives us reason to believe that competitive debates contribute to the development of those skills. And, in fact, the empirical research seems to confirm that hypothesis. A meta-analysis of both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies indicated that participation in debates produces an improvement in critical thinking, as measured by the Watson-Glaser test and other instruments (Allen et al., 1999). Recent research has produced similar results. For example, in a study with secondary school students from The Netherlands who practiced debate in their class of English as second language, debate instruction led to the improvement of their argumentative competence (el Majidi et al., 2021).

I do not think, however, that the concept of reliabilist virtue is the most interesting feature that virtue argumentation theory can offer. Since reliabilist virtues are characterised in terms of rules and criteria (that is, qualities of the act), that is a concept that logical and dialogical approaches to argumentation can also accommodate easily. Those approaches could simply define a virtuous (reliabilist) arguer as an arguer that consistently produces cogent arguments and follows dialectical rules—thus defining "virtue" on the basis of qualities of the act. But, as Aberdein (2010, p. 170) points out, "the virtue talk in this approach would be wholly ornamental." Even if we use the word "virtue", we would still be talking about logical cogency and dialectical propriety. Let us explore, then, the effects of competitive debates on a different kind of virtues that depend more directly on the qualities of the arguer: responsibilist virtues.

Responsibilist virtues: concerns and opportunities

In contrast to reliabilist virtues, the possession of responsibilist virtues does not depend solely on the quality of the acts that the arguer performs. Responsibilist virtues can only be understood by referring to the arguer's habits, motivations and state of mind. They are, therefore, the kind of virtues that are distinctive of a virtue (agent-based) theory, and that an act-based theory has difficulties accommodating. Responsibilist virtues cannot be identified by merely looking at the arguer's arguments, objections, questions and so on, but it is also (and mainly) necessary to consider the arguer's habits, attitude and motivations.

Moreover, responsibilist virtues are not just a matter of following rules—unless they are what Hursthouse (2001) calls v-rules, such as "do what is honest." I believe there are two reasons for this. First, in general rules cannot capture all the considerations that go along with a virtuous arguer's reasoning and action (McDowell, 1979). For example, when is a hypothesis worth considering? In order to decide this, the virtuous arguer has to exercise prudence in weighing considerations such as the plausibility of the hypothesis, its explanatory power, the chances of finding evidence that supports it, and even practical considerations such as the risks of being wrong or the possibility of harming someone simply by considering that hypothesis—imagine someone posing the question of whether it was a good thing that her interlocutor's father passed away. Second, a vicious arguer can learn to follow rules and still be vicious. I once used an example from a character of the movie *Thank you smoking* to show that informal logic criteria can be correctly applied in the service of vicious motives (Gascón, 2016). Hence, it is characteristic of responsibilist virtues that they must be defined on the basis of characteristics of the arguer and that they cannot be accurately captured by rules.

It is for that reason that I do not think that the kind of rules and recommendations that we have seen in the previous section can have much bearing on responsibilist virtues. This is not to deny that rules can be justified on the basis of principles and values. For instance, pragma-dialectics' first rule of conduct establishes that (Eemeren & Grootendorst, 2004, p. 190): "Discussants may not prevent each other from advancing standpoints or from calling standpoints into question." This is undoubtedly a rule intended to secure inclusiveness and to prevent the silencing of participants in a critical discussion. Thus, that rule instantiates an important value. But that does not tell us anything about the virtues of the arguers who respect the rule. They might abide by it in a debate because otherwise they will be penalised by the judge, for example, even though they would happily silence opponents if they could.

Keeping in mind this difference between (impersonal) values and (agential) virtues is crucial in order to determine what norms are agent-based and which are act-based. Values do not belong to any particular individual and can justify norms regardless of whether those who follow the norms embrace or even recognise the values—think of the difference between the justification of taxes and the reason why most people pay them. Virtues, on the other hand, are necessarily a person's traits, who cannot possess them unless she has the appropriate motivations.[2]

In the *munāẓara* tradition of debate that was developed in the Muslim world since the 13th century onwards, different sequences of critical moves were proposed (Oruç et al, 2023). When the proponent put forward an argument, the opponent had three possible critical moves at his disposal: casting doubt on a premise of the argument (objection), pointing to an inferential deficiency in the argument (refutation), and arguing for the opposite claim (counter-argument). Then there was a discussion among scholars about how those moves should be arranged in a debate. Three possibilities were proposed (p. 9):

1) Objection → refutation → counter-argument.
2) Refutation → objection → counter-argument.
3) Objection → counter-argument → refutation.

The rationale behind each of those arrangements was based on values, taking into account that the overarching value in the *munāẓara* tradition was the attainment of truth or justice. The first sequencing was justified by the value of *coalescence* (p. 12), with the critical moves

[2] Of course, we can also talk about the virtues of political institutions, of theories, of methods, or whatever. In these cases, I do not think the term "virtue" is being used in the same sense as in virtue ethics, virtue responsibilist epistemology and virtue responsibilist argumentation theory—but rather as a synonym for "benefit" or "merit".

ordered from the weakest to the strongest. The value behind the second sequencing is *reliability* (p. 13), with the strongest move at the end but also a first move designed to check the reliability of the argument. And, finally, the third sequencing is said to promote the value of *efficacy* (p. 15) by using the strongest move in the second place, before probing the reliability of the argument with refutation.

All that discussion seems reasonable as it stands. It helps us (argumentation theorists) understand why a particular sequencing should be adopted. However, I do not believe that it shows a link between responsibilist virtues and dialectical procedure. As I argued, an agent does not need to be virtuous or to embrace those values in order to follow the required sequencing. If, for instance, following a specific sequence is what is expected of an arguer in a certain context, then the arguer may follow it simply to avoid (legal or social) sanctions, to gain appreciation or to enhance the chances of winning the debate. Rules do not care why they are followed—the only thing that matters is whether they are followed.

Hence, as I have argued above, sets of rules and criteria cannot capture what being a virtuous arguer is. For this, one needs to take into account the arguer's motivations. That is why I believe that sets of rules, such as those that are outlined in debates, are unlikely to promote the development of responsibilist virtues.

But, apart from rules, competitive debates offer other things: they establish a certain setting in which arguers must aim at particular goals. Now, *this* might have an effect of responsibilist virtues, creating a worldview and particular motivations in the minds of the arguers. What can we say about that?

The first thing to note about competitive debates is that they are *competitive*. That is, the goal of the activity is *winning*. Much has been said about the importance of debates to reach truth and make wise decisions (two relevant examples are Ehninger & Brockriede, 1978; Mill, 1864), but that can only work if participants argue to *learn* instead of arguing to *win*—that is, if they are willing to change their mind. This leads us into the second remarkable feature of debates, which is that participants cannot change their views. Together, these two features may create some concern about debates. If, instead of having learning and resolving of disagreements as the goal, arguers focus on competitive goals and remain steadfast their views, that is unlikely to produce good results (Tanesini, 2021a).

Tanesini has argued that competitive goals are likely to promote vices rather than virtues (2021, p. 169): "When the point of the debate is not to find the truth, but to find a winner, then steadfastness, arrogance and cockiness might be treated as admirable features." Her work has focused on how competitive motivations lead to bias, arrogance and polarisation. As she points out, current research has shown that the motivations of the arguers influence the outcomes of deliberation, and when the motivation to win is higher than the epistemic motivation, the outcomes tend to be poor (Tanesini, 2021b, p. 330). Thus, competitive motivations, such as those that characterise debates, do not seem to be the kind of motivations that should be fostered.

A third problematic aspect of debates is that they may encourage the assumption that, for any issue, there must always be two (and exactly two) positions. Debates are structured so that the complex issues that are addressed can be divided between a team in favour of a view and another team against it. This, however, is an oversimplification of reality. As Tannen (1998) points out in her criticism of what she calls the "argument culture", very often there is a great variety of nuanced positions—and sometimes there is just one that is reasonable, such as in debates about whether the Holocaust happened. She writes (p. 256):

> …the students who are arguing are not addressing the subtleties, nuances, or complexities of the points they are making or disputing. They do not have that luxury because they want to win the argument—so they must go for the most gross and dramatic statements they can muster. They will not concede an opponent's point, even if they can see its validity, because that would weaken their position

Tumposky (2004), who is also sceptical about competitive debates as pedagogical tools, agrees with Tannen (p. 54):

> A dualistic format often trivializes complex ideas or focuses selectively on aspects that strengthen one's argument. Ideas are sometimes reduced to sound bites, as our televised presidential debates so often lamentably illustrate.

Framing all debates as if there were always two opposite positions might lead to the view that, in order to make a case *for* one of them, it is enough to argue *against* the other one. Furthermore, it might even lead to seeing the argumentative landscape as divided in two teams—us and them. It would not be surprising, then, to find out that competitive debates contribute to *political polarisation*.

However, the empirical evidence about whether competitive debates foster arrogance and polarisation is inconclusive. De Conti (2013) reviews several studies that show that debaters tend to polarise—at least when they argue for their own views. Those studies support the view that debates lead to polarisation, which in turn leads to confirmation bias, close-mindedness, dichotomisation and conflict escalation attitudes. De Conti criticises those studies and challenges their conclusions. I do not find all his criticisms convincing, but he makes several valid points: for example, participants in competitive debates tend to de-polarise when they have to argue for a position that is contrary to their own. On the other hand, Colbert (1993) found that participation in debates fosters argumentativeness (understood as a trait which predisposes the person to advocate positions on controversial issues and criticise those of other people (Infante & Rancer, 1982)) and diminishes verbal aggression—both allegedly good things.

Given the empirical evidence and the discussion about the setting of competitive debates, it seems that the question of whether debates foster responsibilist virtues (or vices) is still open. Yet, there are certainly reasons to be concerned. However, if the format of the most widespread styles of debate proves to be problematic, perhaps changes can be made to solve the problem. Tannen (1998, p. 262) suggests organising discussions of three positions instead of two, and such a format of three-teams debates has already been outlined by Snider and Schnurer (2006). The task of each team could be expanded so that it includes not only argumentation of its own position and refutation of the other two, but also detection of points of agreement with the other teams. I cannot see how the distinction between winners and loser could be avoided, but perhaps it could be possible to score points by finding points of agreement and moving towards coalescence. In the end, the winning team would be the most reasonable one, not the most rhetorically skilled one. These are just some ideas, and more could be proposed, but they are only possible if we recognise that the practice of competitive debates involves certain risks regarding responsibilist virtues.

Conclusion

To sum up, we have seen that, in order to assess the impact of competitive debates on argumentative virtues, we must differentiate between reliabilist and responsibilist virtues. There seems to be enough evidence for the view that debates foster reliabilist virtues—related to logical and dialectical skills. However, the case of responsibilist virtues is tricky.

Consideration of the format and the goals of competitive debates gives us reason to be concerned, and there is also empirical research suggesting that the practice of debates leads to argumentative (responsibilist) vices. If those fears are empirically confirmed, perhaps that is not a reason to abandon debates but rather to consider changes in their format and their goals that diminish the risk of preventing the development of responsibilist virtues.

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