A Coach's Notes[1]

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Connecticut Debate Association

Warde High School, January 7, 2023

THP (This House Prefers) a world in which Artificial Intelligence generally surpasses humans in intellectual activities.

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Introduction

This edition relates to the January 7, 2023, CDA tournament and topic. Previous year's editions can be found through the Training Materials page on the CDA web site. Accompanying this document are my notes from the final round at Warde presented in two formats, transcript and flow chart.

These Notes are intended for your benefit in coaching your teams and for the students to use directly. I hope that you will find them useful. Please feel free to make copies and distribute them to your debaters.

I appreciate any feedback you have, good and bad. The best comments and suggestions will find their way into subsequent issues. I would also consider publishing signed, reasoned comments or replies from coaches or students. If you would like to reply to my comments or sound off on some aspect of the debate topic or the CDA, I look forward to your email.

Debate vs Argument

This month's motion was poorly chosen. Let me explain.

People argue all the time. Some consider it one of the defining characteristics of being human. However consequential, most arguments are fairly sloppy: terms are not well-

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defined, positions are inconsistent, the parties talk past each other, and it often turns out they are in favor of the same thing in so many different words and just don't realize it.

Debate is—or should be—argument with a much greater level of care and precision. Terms should be well-defined. Positions should be laid out clearly, highlighting both the differences between the two (or more) sides as well as areas of agreement. Parties should take as much (or more) time and care on their opponent's case as on their own.

Fundamental to this is that you can't debate something you can't clearly define. People argue about such things all the time. They speculate about possibilities. They have late night bull sessions about the mysteries of the universe. Some go on to write award winning fiction. But none of this is debate as the competitive activity we practice.

This month's motion is not debatable because the most important term is not definable. What does "generally surpasses humans in intellectual ability" mean? I have a degree in computer science, and I have followed the advances in artificial intelligence for years. I can't give a clear meaning to that term and I haven't read anyone who does.

Of course, just because I can't define it doesn't mean you or someone else can't. The closest we get to a definition in the packet comes from Oxford don Nick Bostrom who tells us "Superintelligence is any intellect that outperforms human intellect in every field". Okay, but what does it mean to "outperform human intellect in every field"? In other words, to define super-intelligence, you first have to define human intelligence.

The history of trying to define human intelligence is not pretty. Some measured the shape of people's heads. Other used IQ tests to decide certain groups were inferior until someone noticed the cultural and racial biases. I'm pretty good with math and computers, but my wife's ability to draw, sculpt or weave totally baffles me. What about emotional intelligence? And we all know very smart people who do very dumb things. Lock my cat outside for a week or two and likely she will survive just fine. How do you think you'd do lost in the woods for a week? Does that make my cat super-intelligent in some sense?

Ah, but "super-intelligent" means "outperform in every field". Surely that works!

Read on!

Batman vs Superman

At some point most children given a religious education, when told God is all-powerful, arrive at the question, "Can God make a mountain so big he (or she or they) can't move it?" Philosophers and physicists ponder a more sophisticated version: if God is all-knowing, or if the laws of physics are deterministic as they appear to be, how can free will exist? There is a deep and fascinating literature here. Superpowers present similar problems.

Debates about things like super-intelligence are like superhero movies: the powers wax and wane (usually they wane first and wax towards the end of the story) depending on the needs of the plot. Superman's only weakness is kryptonite, which is supposedly extremely rare, and yet seems to be available to villains at Walmart. The Bat Cave's location is secret unless the plot requires Joker to blow it up. In Star Trek why don't they keep a constant transporter lock on every member of an away team so they can pull them

out at the first sign of trouble? (Hint: not trouble, no plot, no audience, no money, no more Star Trek.)

If you debated this motion at Warde I encourage you to review your case notes and flows. How often, when you or your opponents cited a benefit of AI on Gov or a harm on Opp, was it grounded in a clearly justified explanation of what an "Artificial Intelligence [that] generally surpasses humans in intellectual ability" could do? Or were you just asserting a superpower?

In the Varsity final round at Warde presented these arguments:

- *Gov*
  - *More innovation in all fields (humans innovate for their own benefit, why would the AI do so for us?)*
  - *Avoid human flaws (how do we know certain human characteristics like emotions are flaws and not features of intelligence, or that the AI wouldn't have them to an extent that surpasses humans, or have new flaws we haven't thought of yet?)*
  - *Save time by taking over mundane tasks (given all the time humans spend avoiding work, what if the super-intelligent AI doesn't like working at mundane tasks?)*
- *Opp*
  - *Can't be controlled by humans (we consider self-control an indicator of intelligence and educate our children to demonstrate it, so why wouldn't the AI show self-control?)*
  - *Would lack a moral compass (many argue morality is itself rational; or the AI could decide Buddhist contemplation and disengagement from the world is the highest purpose)*
  - *Inability to self-sustain (poorly worded, but basically AI would destroy the economy by causing mass unemployment, unless of course super-intelligence prefers leisure to work, see above)*

It's easy to mock, and I apologize for mocking these arguments (maybe mocking is a characteristic of super-intelligence?). These are the arguments I expected to hear once I knew the motion. But this is a Batman vs Superman sort of debate. Gov says we get Superman; Opp says we get Lex Luthor. Who knows? How can you decide who is right?

A Better Choice

The worst thing about this month's motion is that there was a much better choice at hand. The packet is largely about recent incremental advances in artificial intelligence. Why not pick a topic grounded in those facts rather than speculate on super whatever? Again, look at your flows from the tournament. Aren't at least half of your arguments based in those advances rather than a superpower?

For example, ChatGPT is getting quite a lot of buzz at the moment, particularly in education. Students I work with are aware of the program and some have already used it (perhaps in a not entirely experimental or teacher-approved way). Educators are concerned over the challenge it presents: the City of New York recently banned

ChatGPT from all its systems.[2] The New York Parliamentary Debate League used motions generated by ChatGPT for one of its elimination rounds in December (not entirely successful or pretty). More than half the packet references ChatGPT. Coming up with straightforward motion on how to deal with ChatGPT isn't hard.

Can we honestly say we (or the debaters) know the capabilities of ChatGPT any better than they know that of a super-intelligent AI? After all, debaters make assertions all the time that are speculative, untrue or not supported by solid analysis. Aren't many debates on even mundane topics "superhero debates" in this sense?

Yes, many debates are simply clashing assertions. The difference is that we know enough about ChatGPT for the better debaters to justify their claims with facts and explanations grounded in the real world. In other words, they can debate the topic properly. Less experienced debaters can see the difference between well-constructed arguments and mere assertions by observing their peers. After the tournament they can review their case, re-read the packet, and research how they might improve.

Leagues and Styles

Debate leagues vary in format and style. I can often place an unfamiliar debater by the cases they present and the jargon they use, much as a linguist can tell an accent. We are an imitative species. Hang around with the same group long enough and you all will probably seem very similar to outsiders, no matter how distinctive you consider each other.

CDA motions have always been policy related, grounded in relatively current issues. There are exceptions, but not many. (You can see past CDA motions going back to 1995 on our website.) This more practical, less abstract approach is consistent with our membership which has a much greater range of schools, ability and resources than other debate leagues.

Motions in other leagues and formats differ. National Speech and Debate Association (NSDA) Policy debate resolutions are written very broadly. Policy debaters research and debate the same topic all year, so that makes sense. NSDA topics for Lincoln-Douglas and Public Forum also tend to follow a pattern.[3]

The New York Parliamentary Debate League (NYPDL) tends to have more philosophical (for want of a better word) motions. They are heavily influenced by current trends in the American Parliamentary Debate Association (APDA) which is a college league.[4] If you debate regularly in NYPDL you know, or quickly learn, to expect this sort of motion.

This month's AI motion is more an NYPDL motion than a CDA motion. I have a great deal of respect for the NYPDL and recommend the training material available on their website.[5] I work with students who debate there and judge regularly at their tournaments. But what the NYPDL does isn't what we usually do or what coaches and debaters expect

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[2] There is a great New York Times article that appeared this week, too late for the tournament, written in response to the ban, arguing for ChatGPT as a teaching tool.

[3] See https://www.speechanddebate.org/topics/ to find all NSDA topics by event type.

[4] For example see NYPDL January 2023 Motions or NYPDL December 2022 Motions recent tournaments.

[5] See https://www.nyparli.org/resources .

in CDA. Some NYPDL motions are, in my opinion and experience, beyond the abilities of even their best Varsity debaters, much less their Novices. Nothing wrong with a good intellectual stretch but these motions are not a good choice for the CDA's competitive balance and educational purpose.

Debating the Undebatable

Okay, enough on what is wrong with the motion. It's 9AM (or a bit later), you get the packet, the motion isn't debatable, what do you do? To paraphrase Jeff Goldblum's character the chaotician from Jurassic Park, "Debaters find a way." There are strategies you can use to have and to win a quality debate.

As Government you have the right to set the framework for the debate: interpret the motion, define terms, identify the central issues, present a weighing mechanism. If a motion is undebatable as written, offer an alternative interpretation that is. Some consider offering a framework that allows a good and fair debate to be one of the burdens on the Government team, balancing the advantage Gov has in its right to set the framework. If a literal reading of the motion doesn't make for a good debate, an interpretation that reasonably falls under the motion and provides both sides with an equal chance of winning is acceptable.

There are two risks here. The judge may not agree Gov has this flexibility. There are no rules of debate and no way to force judges against their own opinions. But most judges will evaluate the debate the two teams agree to have, even if the judge would have interpreted the motion differently. So this risk largely defaults to the second one, that the opposing team will not agree and insist on arguing the literal interpretation. Other teams will have struggled with the same problems you had coming up with a good framework and will be happy to follow your lead. The ones that don't will be making superhero arguments like those above, and you know how to answer those arguments.

How does this work? Start by admitting the problem, then present the alternative with a justification as to why it is reasonable, then present your case. The Prime Minister's constructive might start something like this:

> *Good morning. My partner and I are proud to support the motion, <u>This house prefers a world in which Artificial Intelligence generally surpasses humans in intellectual activities</u>.*
>
> *To be honest, we have no idea what it means for an AI to generally surpass humans in intellectual activities, or what the capabilities of such a thing would be. We could claim it could do all sorts of amazing things, and I am sure our worthy opponents would, in reply, claim it could do all sorts of horrible things. But neither of us would be able to justify those claims and that wouldn't be much of a debate.*
>
> *What we can discuss, and what the packet presents, are the recent developments in the capabilities of artificial intelligence programs. So we offer the following interpretation of the motion, <u>that the recent and continued progress of AI will be on balance beneficial rather than harmful</u>. In other words, rather than speculate on what it means to surpass human intelligence, Government and Opposition*

support their positions by discussing the real capabilities recently achieved or likely to be achieved by artificial intelligence.

Why should our worthy opponents and the honorable judge accept this interpretation? We believe this interpretation falls under the intent of the motion which is to evaluate the impact of AI on our world. We believe this interpretation offers both sides sufficient grounds to present winning arguments in that, like past technological developments, AI is likely to both help and harm. And finally, we believe whatever arguments our opponents have prepared prior to the round are easily adapted to this interpretation, so we do not believe this interpretation unfairly disadvantages them.

Before I present the Government case, I offer my opppponents a chance to raise a point of clarification. (Time stops and PM pauses for a POC before presenting contentions supporting the Gov case.)

I leave the remainder of the Gov case and the Opp reply to you.

At this point I suspect many of you who debated at Warde are saying that this is what you did, or tried to do, or what your arguments effectively said. While I cite the least plausible arguments from the Varsity final round above, much of their supporting detail within those arguments referenced the behavior of known AI programs as discussed in the packet. We naturally drift into the practical when the impractical becomes obvious. The difference is you probably didn't know this was what you were trying to do, and almost certainly didn't say so at the top of the PMC.

If you aren't going to defend the obvious, literal meaning of the motion you need to tell the judge, your opponents and the audience at the top of the PMC so they know where you intend to go. You need to explain why your interpretation is needed so you don't appear to be acting arbitrarily. After you present your new framework, you need to justify it just as you would any other claim. The sample PMC top-of-case does each of these.

In particular the sample PMC includes three justifications that are important. First, the interpretation must generally fall under the motion, the closer the better. You cannot debate anything you want. Suggesting we talk about space travel or immigration would not have been reasonable. Second, the interpretation must leave grounds for both sides. A reinterpretation that attempts to limit the debate so as to exclude any effective reply is clearly unfair. Finally, the interpretation should be such that the arguments the Opposition likely prepped will still be valid without too much modification. Presenting a "surprise" interpretation of the motion intended solely to catch the other team off guard and intentionally steal their prep work is generally considered to be unfair.[6]

There is a difference between a debate about super-intelligent AI where all the arguments turn out to be extensions of known capabilities of AI, and a debate where you specifically say you are not going to debate about super-intelligent AI but only about extensions of known capabilities. It's a small difference, but an important one.

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[6] Generally, but not always. If Gov presents a case that Opp did not expect, but which clearly falls under a valid interpretation of the motion, that is Opp's bad luck or poor prep work, and not unfair.

What if you are on Opp and the PM presents a case under the literal meaning of the motion, with contentions based on AI surpassing human intelligence? Steal Gov's framework! This is one of the most effective ways for Opp to win a round. Accept Gov's framework and you have to defeat each of their arguments, in this case probably with superhero arguments of your own. Convince the judge the Gov framework is wrong and you may be able to dismiss their arguments. You can't always do this, and how you do it is very sensitive to the motion, the Gov framework, and the Gov case.

Here you have to do a little bit of both. Taking the Varsity final round as an example, the PM interprets the motion literally, but their case is a combination of superhero arguments and practical ones. In the LOR you have to separate the two, treating the superhero parts with gentle mockery, but replying seriously to any supporting arguments grounded in current or likely AI capabilities.

Final Round at Warde

I did not judge the final round at Warde, so I won't provide an RFD. I would have voted for Opp with the majority of the panel. You can find a transcription of my flow on the CDA website.

I do want to note two tactical points. Both Member speeches were problematic. The LOC covered the PMC by replying to each contention and then presented two Opp contentions. By the MGC only spoke about one Opp contention and about the LO reply to only one of the three Gov contentions. The MOC covered a lot more ground, but in a laundry list fashion which never mentioned any of the contentions.

Member speeches need to "cover the flow". Both should have something to say in regard to every Gov and Opp contentions, all of which are likely known after the LOC. The simplest way to do this is to cover the contentions by name, starting with the one side and then moving to the other.

If you are going to do something different—for example re-organize the flow on the basis of significant points of clash—you need to tell the judge and your opponents at the beginning of your speech. You then need to provide an outline of those issues, and as you discuss them, explain where and how each contention is included. I'm not sure what the MO intended, as no roadmap was provided.

Similarly, both rebuttal speeches were "laundry lists", one issue after the other. Neither the LO nor the PM gave an outline or explained what they intended to do. Rebuttal speeches should be organized around voting issues, with the clash crisply summarized under each.

I'm not criticizing the arguments made in the Member constructives or the rebuttals, just the organization and coverage. As the speaker, you may know what point you are replying to, but unless you are very clear about it, the judge will not know. The contentions provide one obvious roadmap. If you don't follow it, your replies may get lost when the judge doesn't know where to apply them on the flow.