between the internally consistent paradigms of policy making and hypothesis testing must be made on the basis of (in Hume's terms) preferences, not reason. Certainly, debaters can attempt to persuade the judge that particular interpretations are superior because 1) they more accurately match preferences the judge already has or 2) the judge ought to change his or her current preferences and adopt those of the debaters. The process of decision-making need not be conservative. Indeed, I believe that it is dynamic and dialectical, a process of constant re-examination and comparison of principles (debate theory) and considered convictions (intuitive ideas about the debate process as influenced by experience and prevailing views of the community). Zac Grant has noted the similarity of such a process to the notion of "reflective equilibrium" as developed by John Rawls.6

I believe that much of what passes for debate theorizing in discussion about external preferences rather than logical reasoning. Robin Rowland's judging philosophy is a good example of this. Some may feel that debate theory is weakened by an admission that many choices within it are made on the basis of preference rather than rigorous, "objective" logic. I think that, if anything, the opposite is true (turnaround!). Pretending that it is possible to resolve questions of theory without introducing questions of values and subjective assumptions will only create further disagreements. Eventually, everyone will see that the emperor has no clothes. Furthermore, as Friedrich Nietzsche recognized, a view based on preference and values is not inferior to one premised on "reason." As debaters more than anyone else ought to recognize, the realm of preferences is the realm of rhetoric and persuasion.

NOTES
2 Ibid, p. 7.
3 Ibid, p. 10.

CATASTROPHE WITHOUT CAUSE: ESCAPING THE PARADIGMATIC DISADVANTAGE

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Debate is catastrophe. It begins and ends as calamity on a global scale. Indeed, competitive high school and college debate is haunted by a twisted form of Euclidean reasoning--somehow the shortest distance between losing and winning debate rounds has become a thermonuclear holocaust or an abrupt slide into planetary ecodisaster. And in practice, the more counter-intuitive the chain of events leading to the catastrophe, the shorter that distance becomes. As Michael Mankins has so eloquently noted:

It has been argued, and no doubt will continue to be countless times in the future, that our planet sits at the juncture of two cross-roads, on the brink, at a precipice. One fork, it is maintained, will lead mankind to "the end of poverty, unemployment and human misery," and the other will dislodge him from this precarious perch and hurl him into the abyss of thermo-nuclear flames. It is when these two dichotomous paths are forged into one--when economic growth becomes disastrous, liberty becomes tyranny, and black becomes white--that one begins at last to realize that he has...entered the realm of high school competitive debate.1

And why not? Certainly most debaters would agree that real-world policy makers are too short-sighted, wandering blind in the night of political reality. They ignore the subtle, long-term consequences of their actions and pay little heed to the myriad of cataclysms that await the human species. They turn their backs on the complexity of the Earth's most pressing problems and force simple "quick-fix" solutions upon situations that demand a complete overhaul of the system.
Out of all of this debate emerges as a potentially powerful forum for discussing the major issues that must be resolved if our planet is to survive. Even students who have participated in the activity for only a couple of years develop a fine appreciation for the complex interaction among the multitudes of the planet's problems: food aid and overpopulation, resource depletion and environmental degradation, the arms race and nuclear deterrence, to list but a few. These are the issues on which the survival of our planet depends--either we meet them, or they meet us. Yet many critics of contemporary debate complain that the focus of the activity has been overwhelmed by these continual discussions of disaster and has lost touch with the "reality" of the real world. They argue that the issues at hand, for example the actual quality of water, are all but ignored. In this view debates evolve from a somewhat relevant first affirmative to three or four incredible scenarios under which the plan might trigger a world-ending catastrophe. In other words, the critics argue that rare is the judge who ever have to decide what is the best way to obtain a sound water policy, but rather the judge is voting for the team that carries it with the least risk of triggering apocalypse.

Thus, at least two competing camps have drawn lines across academic debate to define their ground. On one hand there are those who argue that debate is educationally a sound activity because it forces us to consider the major crises of our day on a more holistic level—that is, debaters must acknowledge that the increased prosperity of our own nation may not be such a good thing after all. Before long, debaters recognize that no decision (political, moral or otherwise) is made in a vacuum. Feeding ten people today may cause the death of one hundred tomorrow. The point is quite simple; if we are to deliver our planet from its current state of turmoil we must not fall blindly into the perilous path laid out by the politics of the past. Each action must be weighed by its net effect on the well-being of the Earth as a whole. And debate judges, those "machines of argument evaluation," turn the giant crank and determine which team engenders the highest risk of disaster.

However, there are those who view this process a bit differently. To them, high school debates have fallen short of intelligent discussion of our planet's troubles, and instead have become nothing more than irrelevant chatter about incredibly ludicrous chains of highly improbable events. Like Lucifer, debate has fallen into madness and evil. Instead of taking academia by storm in an intellectual coup d'état, debate has remained an elite, isolated activity, making sense only to the debaters themselves, and not even to the authors whose evidence they value so highly. These critics maintain that instead of deciding what actually should be done to solve one of these crises debaters claim to be so concerned about (i.e., water quality), debates decide what not to do.

Even when alternative policies are presented in the form of a counterplan they generally are not a solution to the problem area, but rather a way at making certain their disadvantages do not apply to them.

Instead of shedding meaningful light into a problem area, critics see this focus on disaster as a waste of a potentially valuable forum.

At this juncture some throw up their hands in despair, write off this classic dispute as an unresolvable clash of philosophies, and continue reading evidence about the end of the world as fast as possible. Others, myself included, would opt for a different strategy: reappraisal. To begin I should confess my biases on the subject. I think discussing huge impact disadvantages is an extremely important function of debate—but only when they are directly linked to the affirmative plan. I also feel (as many others do, I am certain) that chatting about inherency is very boring. In short, debate needs to be interesting, and gigantic disasters certainly are. However, I see a big difference between the approaches taken by affirmatives and negatives to these issues. I see a great need for a critical reappraisal of how we should (and do) assign "relevancy" to arguments. In other words, at what point is a disadvantage really "linked" to an affirmative case? Do all disadvantages presented have some level of risk associated with them or can it legitimately be claimed that at a certain point a judge should assign zero risk to a disadvantage? Is it enough for a negative to prove that some generic condition of the affirmative plan is also a generic link to a disadvantage? The question as I see it is not whether discussing catastrophe is good or bad, but rather at what point do arguments about disaster become nothing more than intellectual sophistry? For those who view debate as nothing more than a game—another sport like basketball or football—this discussion may not be very meaningful. But for those who see debate as both a sport and as an intellectually credible forum, I hope to be able to answer some of these questions in a fashion that is both reasonable (i.e., educational) and profitable (i.e., competitive).

**LINEARITY, UNIQUENESS AND DECISION RULES: LINKS AS PARADIGMS**

A long time ago if a negative team was going to "win" a disadvantage they had to prove that if the judge voted for them the disaster would not occur anyhow. It was the plan alone that caused the disadvantage to occur and absent that plan the world would be spared the disastrous consequences. Another way of looking at this was to say that there was "solvency" for the disadvantage. Even if the judge did not act in the future s/he could rest assured that the disadvantage would not appear. This, essentially, was the concept of "uniqueness." A strict interpretation of this concept would force the negative to prove that it was only the affirmative's action that triggered the harm, not other variables. In this sense, disadvantages could be looked upon as "mirrors" of the opposite. Instead of only they presented the ugly side of the picture. For the most part, this is gone as a negative strategy. Instead, most disadvantages are descriptions of ongoing crises (i.e., resource depletion, strained superpower relations, the international debt bomb, etc.) that are funneled into the soup
of Armageddon. Challenges by the affirmatives that these arguments are "Not Unique" (in other words, that they would occur anyhow), are countered by the argument that the disadvantage is "linear" or that the "decision-rule" means that uniqueness is irrelevant, or both. It is on these issues that the affirmative pivots; before, we might spend a moment describing what exactly a negative means when it claims that a disadvantage is "linear" or that their "decision-rule" somehow eliminates their burden of uniqueness.

The claim that a disadvantage is linear should mean one of two things. First, it might mean that there is a linear (i.e., direct, constant) increase in risk that each affirmative-type plan will push us over that proverbial brink into chaos. A good example of this occurred frequently under last year's high school debate resolution. Round after round negatives argued that employing poor people would increase their expectations of wealth and status and would therefore lead to riots since those expectations would not be fulfilled. In addition, the negative often read evidence to suggest that we are "on the brink" of riots that will make the 1960s look like a family squabble. A common response by the affirmative was that many poverty programs were being implemented to some degree already and no riots were happening. In rebuttal, the negatives would argue that each new increment of increased expectations would push us closer and closer to the brink—the risk of triggering disaster through riots was, in effect, linear.

The second argument that a debater might have in mind when dubbing a disadvantage as "linear" is that each increment of link can be directly associated with an increment of impact. One of the classic examples of this is the infamous "Growth" disadvantage. Here the negative could claim that the plan increases economic growth and that economic growth depletes the Earth's primary resource base and eventually this will lead to a nuclear war as the nations of the world struggle to gain control over what precious little remains. Wise affirmatives often suggest that hopeful programs day are created that increase growth, not to mention everything that already exists is designed for that very purpose—growth. Not to be caught off guard, the negative has already prepared a "block" of arguments to answer this assertion by the affirmative. In short, these arguments generally "prove" that the impact of growth is linear—each increase in growth, for example, is correlated with an increase in resource depletion or environmental destruction. Here, it is not the risk that is linear, but the impact.

Another strategy employed by the negative to avoid uniqueness arguments is using (and over-using, "decision-rules." Basically, a decision-rule is a framework for evaluating the disadvantage in relation to other arguments in the round. Usually, the negative will select a piece of evidence that suggests that "nuclear war is the most important issue facing mankind" and that it must be "considered before all other issues." Even better, some negatives provide evidence that is more specific to the chain of events that lead to their ultimate impact. This type of evidence normally demands that we reject "every increment" of the link. To return to my example of the ill effects of economic growth, a "choice" piece of evidence to serve as a decision rule might say that if we are to even have a chance of saving our world we must reject every program that increases economic expansion. The effect on uniqueness should be obvious. If the decision-rule is accepted, it does not matter whether or not the disadvantage would occur in the status quo or not. The judge is "forced" to reject the plan because it violates the decision-rule.

Faced with such argumentation, affirmatives have all but given up making uniqueness and link arguments against disadvantages. And even when they are made, they are rarely extended very seriously in the two affirmative rebuttals. Theulp of the second negative who cares about a link, there's no turnaround!" has become more true than most of us would like to admit. Why have the negatives been able to get so much mileage out of linearity and decision-rules? Perhaps one of the primary reasons is that under this type of construction, disadvantages are no longer scenarios for disaster (although they may mean as much as during the first speech they are presented). Instead, linearity argumentation and decision-rules have transformed disadvantages into "paradigms." By asking the judge to reject every increment of link that might bring us closer to the disaster, the negative is, in effect, implicitly acknowledging that within the constraints of a particular debate round there is no way to solve the crisis that the disadvantage describes. Therefore the debaters, through the use of linearity and decision-rules, embrace the "paradigm" that could provide the archetype for solvency. In other words, what the negative asks the judge to do is imagine her/himself as making a choice to always vote against increasing economic growth. Although both the debaters and the judge realize that it will not be the case, like any other higher-ordered paradigm (e.g., hypothesis tester, policy-maker, etc.) the debaters ask the judge to accept their "paradigm" for the particular round. And this should not be surprising. After all, most of the evidence used by the negative to support its position comes from authors who support a certain "world-view" of the problems they describe, hence they write in a manner that reflects the paradigm they happen to accept. Thus, in a very real sense, no longer is the negative claiming that the plan will result in destruction of the world, but rather that it is part of a process that will cumulatively cause catastrophe. No longer are links to disadvantages "tripwires" for apocalypse, but rather they are antagonists to the paradigm of the disadvantage.

Some people might recall at my use of the term "paradigm" when discussing disadvantages, but if we stop for a moment to consider the almost constant plea made by the second negative rebuttalist perhaps it will be clearer. Cries that "you must reject every increment!" or that "the decision-rule means you must vote against it at every turn!" should provide us with the critical cue that
we are no longer talking about developing a policy, but rather we are trying to decide what paradigm to embrace. In kind, affirmatives have become very adept at arguing "turnarounds." Although traditionally there are two types of turnarounds, link turns (proving the plan and thereby does the opposite of what the link claims it does) and impact turns (showing that the impact that the negative has isolated is really a good thing, not a bad thing), this is really not the case with most generic disadvantages. In fact, link turns are probably the only argument that truly shows that the plan will result in beneficial consequences. Impact turns in this case are really just arguments that the "paradigm" that the disadvantage upholds should not be voted for—it is a "bad" paradigm, not a "good" one. I am not suggesting that impact turnarounds merely nullify a disadvantage. In fact, as much as these "paradigmatic" disadvantages are considered as voting issues, the same should apply to the affirmative. But I do not believe that these types of arguments are intellectually very credible—or at least I believe that there are very valid affirmative responses to these kind of disadvantages. In part, I think that with or without realizing it, disadvantages that require a judge to adopt a "world view" like one puts on an apron, destroy one of the key arguments that maintain intellectual honesty in debate—the link. The link is what ultimately allows us to decide which arguments are relevant and which are not. I do not think negative teams really stop and realize what they are doing when they argue linearity and decision-rules, but I think that if the affirmatives recognize it, they will be able to reestablish their ground and hopefully defeat negatives who rely solely on "paradigmatic" disadvantages.

INTERNAL CONSISTENCY: ARGUMENT AND EQUITY

If the role of the link is as important as I have suggested, a valid question is, why are "link presses" and uniqueness challenges given such little impact by both the debaters and the judges? From the debaters’ perspective it is probably because they are unable to get a firm handle on the concept of decision-rules and linearity and hence these arguments completely bludgeon the feeble affirmative cries of "not unique" and "no link." Faced with such poor quality of argument, judges are easily susceptible to the negative team’s decision-rules. But this need not be so. With adequate preparation and foresight the affirmative should be able to convince the judge that at a certain point there is effectively no risk of a disadvantage—or that if the affirmative is so linked to a particular disadvantage, it no longer carries an impact with it. I think what is needed, therefore, is for the affirmatives to develop a series of "sound-winning" arguments against disadvantages—arguments that curb the negative’s ability to avoid discussing the link to their nightmare. At least three types of arguments can effectively achieve this goal: arguments that capitalize on consistency of evidence, arguments that provide standards for viewing decision-rules and linearity, and finally, arguments that turn the case into a decision-rule as well.

Capitalize on Consistency

I have lost many affirmative debates (and undoubtedly will lose many more in the future) not because the negative presented a clear and convincing link to their disadvantage, but rather because I failed to provide a turnaround to the disadvantage. On the other hand, I have won many affirmatives by convincing the judges that the disadvantage in question was so improbable that it did not even warrant consideration. Perhaps the most effective method of demonstrating this, is by capitalizing on the fact that the affirmative has a chance to build their case outside of the rounds with much more precision than the negative. To begin, evidence within a well-written first affirmative is generally internally consistent. In other words, the authors who describe the inherency of the importance of the case. And usually (though by no means always) this is true for most components of the case—i.e., solvency and significance. One reason that this is true is simply because the authors of the affirmative team cites in their case are drawn from the primary literature on a subject and correspond with each other or at least understand the other authors' arguments. Therefore, who deliberately chooses its evidence for the initial presentation of its case, begins the debate with an internally consistent group of "experts" who agree for the most part on the importance of a problem and what should be done about it.

The negative, on the other hand, unloads a potpourri of evidence forced into an artificially consistent "scenario" for destruction. Often (and it would not be that outrageous to say most of the time), the authors used in support of the disadvantage are describing wildly different events and if they all got together for a cup of coffee in Harvard Square, they would soon discover that they embraced radically different ideas about the problem at hand. (In fact, most of them would never really even understand how what they had written had anything to do with the problem of "water quality"). The "link" author and the "decision-rule" authors might have the hardest time of all in understanding why they were being quoted in opposition to a particular water quality problem. Many coaches and debaters would cite this as one of the primary strengths of debate—allowing debaters to read a wide range of literature and come to their own conclusions. The problem with this approach is that it relies on the sanctity of evidence and yet it ignores the underlying assumptions of the authors who have written it.2 In other words, we place much more weight on answers supported by evidence, as opposed to arguments that are not, because "evidence" is the philosopher’s stone of academic debate. On the other hand, we should be absurd to deny the tremendous educational benefits that result from the complex interplay that grows out of well-researched positions, but the picture is not that simple.

One effective strategy that the affirmative team can utilize is to assess the relative consistency of the case advantages vs. the disadvantages. A well-focused attack that demonstrates how the case is orders of magnitude greater in consistency from start
to finish, can be an invaluable weapon against many negative arguments. Although negatives will often read evidence suggesting that "the consensus" of experts agrees with them, sharp affirmatives will always ask themselves: at what level is this "consensus"? In other words, is there a consensus that the impact of the disadvantage is the most important issue, or is a consensus that the plan will bring about the end result? In the final analysis, when the judge sits down to assign relative risks, the evidence will revolve around these paradigm hypotheses-testing, policy-making, etc.) and decision-rules is that higher-order paradigms provide the judge with a way of resolving the conflict of ideas in a given round. When a judge decides s/he will view the debate through the lens of a policy-maker, for example, s/he is deciding on a method of reaching the optimum policy possible in a round. But when a negative asks a judge to adopt a "no-growth" paradigm (aka, decision-rule), the judge cannot realistically expect to be voting for the best solution to the situation. By voting for a decision-rule the judge envisions a series of future actions by others who also adopt this world-view. Otherwise, there is no resolution to the crisis at hand. Thus, one possible affirmative strategy is to question the assumption that the judge can make a future action under this "paradigm." The affirmative team might well point out the judge's fiat should be restricted to the present, and s/he cannot assume that others will follow suit in the future. The argument can be made that the evidence read by the negative to support their decision-rule does not assume the constraints of fiat. Authors in the real-world can try to convince policy-makers to adopt a particular world-view and to act upon it. Clearly this is not the case in debate. The judge should not be empowered to fiat away the burden of uniqueness.

When the negative chooses a less explicit statement of their "paradigm" and offers their disadvantages as linear, there are other steps the affirmative can take. First, an obvious point that is often overlooked is that an effective method of answering "linearity" analysis requires understanding what, exactly, the negative means--linear risk or linear impact. In the case of the negative impact of food aid (expected to feed twenty million people today, twenty will die tomorrow) the negative often gets away with reading impact evidence that posits the end of the world. A wise affirmative should be quick to point out that if the impact is linear, then each increment of link must be quantified with a unique increase in impact. In my example of food aid above, some negatives might suggest that improving the quality of water will have the effect of increasing food production which will wind up feeding the world. This, it is contended, will merely exacerbate the overpopulation crisis and kill more people in the future. Then the negative will read lots of evidence that the impact in grim detail how overpopulation will end the world in any one of a dozen ways. Affirmatives, in my mind, have a lot to gain by noting that the real question is not if each amount of food aid kills more people, but rather, what increment of impact is triggered by the affirmative? Very little, I suspect.

If the negative is claiming, however, that the risk is linear, a different approach is warranted. Initially, the affirmative would do well to argue that "linear" risk does not really strengthen their negative's position very much. Arguments that every affirmative-type plan linearly drag us to the brink of some awful nightmare do not really answer uniqueness challenges. The negative still has a burden of demonstrating what the effect of this particular plan has in relation to the hundred other events that are sweeping us near the vortex of calamity. In my mind this is an excellent opportunity to capitalize on the internal consistency of the case side advantage--demonstrating how it is much more likely and probable that an advantage would be gained, rather than a disadvantage being triggered. Another related argument that can be made is that the judge need not fear each increment of rising risk. In other words, a rational person would not be paralyzed for fear that some small action might be the critical step that finally pushes us into the abyss. When disadvantages are not direct effects or results of the plan, when they are only descriptions of ongoing crises, I think it is a legitimate strategy for the affirmative to ask the judge to "risk" causing the disaster in order to gain the certainty of the case advantage.

The Affirmative Case as a Decision-Rule

One of the most powerful arguments to make against negative decision-rules does not actually deny their legitimacy. Indeed, this strategy actually conditionally accepts the concept of a decision-rule, and attempts to use the negative's argument against them. In short, it argues that the affirmative case (via a choice bit of evidence hidden quietly in the first affirmative) is a "paradigm" just like the negative disadvantage. This strategy is becoming more and more popular, but surprisingly affirmatives are not going more extra step and showing why their decision-rule is actually a much sounder intellectual argument. Here we have come almost full circle, returning to the credibility and consistency of the affirmative's first speech--their case. One way of phrasing this would be to claim that the impact evidence must be as specific as the link evidence in order to be more credible as the case advantage. Some have gone as far as to suggest that the link and impact evidence should come from the same source, but I think this is going a bit too
Debate will continue to be catastrophe. It will continue to focus on the world-ending crises that threaten our existence. And it will continue to produce students who are finely attuned to the really important issues of our day. To say this is bad is nonsense. But to hope that debate can continue to evolve and discuss these catastrophes more intelligently is not. We must always recognize that debate attracts students because it is a competitive activity—it's fun. "Solutions" to problems of debate practice that ignore this critical aspect are doomed to failure. My personal feeling is that if we are to maintain a happy balance between competition and education we should be focusing on the actual causes of catastrophe, the real events that bring about their occurrence. If we do not, our speculations will have no more credibility than those of the apes (although some of us might not think that would be such a bad thing).

NOTES


2 I do not mean to imply that this evidence is "out of context" in an ethical sense. Instead I mean that generally authors do not produce statements of fact written in a vacuum. Especially in debate research, which places such a high premium on predictive claims, statements by authors are directly tied to their own set of assumptions. Assumptions color their "predictions" and debaters often ignore this.

3 Nothing meaningful is ever done alone. I would like to thank Star A. Muir and David Snowball for their thoughts and comments in coaching over the last three years. Although I accept full responsibility for the ideas contained in this article if they are criticized, I would share any praise with them as many of the ideas have stemmed from their coaching. Finally I would like to thank Mark Friedman whose comments and suggestions have been invaluable in preparing this article. I also thank him for the sub-title of this paper, "Escaping the Paradigmatic Disadvantage."