THE ETHICS OF DEBATE:
A FUNCTIONAL APPROACH

BY

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The quality of judgement of communication ethics usually would be improved (1) by specifying exactly what ethical criteria, standards, or perspectives we are applying, (2) by justifying the reasonableness and relevancy of these standards. . . .

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During the past twenty-five years there have been numerous attempts to develop an ethic of speech communication. J. Vernon Jensen writes, "The evidence seems to reveal that since 1952 the ethical aspect has been increasingly stressed."\footnote{1} Specifically, efforts have been expended in the attempt to devise an acceptable ethic of debate. The "proper" ethic has itself been debated, most notably by Richard Murphy and Nicholas Cripe in the 1950s, yet no ethic of debate has been proposed that has achieved widespread acceptance. Analysis of the arguments for or against a particular ethic reveals that the difference of opinion arises over a question of definition. What is debate? Is it a means of persuasion? Or an educational tool? Is it either of these? Or both? Or perhaps something else? Debate, as practiced in the United States, serves many functions, with each function placing the speaker under different ethical obligations. My purpose is to develop a construct for assessing ethics which is applicable to debate in its various functions.

**METHODOLOGY**

In approaching any concentrated study, it is imperative that one develop a systematic methodology.

However, procedures or specific methods necessary for an application of a particular standard (of ethics) have not been widely discussed. A critic is generally able to select any standard and draw mental conclusions regarding the morality of a speaker. However, for formal critical analysis and for teaching purposes, an explicit critical method
is essential for applying any ethical standard to a particular case of communicative behavior.\textsuperscript{2} Although the speech communication journals contain a number of scholarly articles concerning the ethics of debate, only James Cheseboro's article, "A Construct for Assessing Ethics in Communication",\textsuperscript{3} presents an explicit critical method. An adaptation of his model will be used in this work.

Cheseboro's construct is based upon an analysis of the major ethical standards proposed by speech communication scholars. He extracts five standards and aligns each of them with an element of Kenneth Burke's Pentad and a philosophical position in an attempt to develop a systematic sketch that offers the critic not only a choice of method, but also an understanding of the different emphases implicit in the five standards.

The first criteria he reports is that ethical standards should be patterned after the political structure of the society. He discusses this theory in terms of a democratic political structure. He concludes, "Ethical communication, then, would be consistent with the intended ideals, tenets, and forms of a democratic government."\textsuperscript{4}

A second position that he describes is that ethical standards should reflect a humanistic perspective of man. "Ethical communication, in this case, would be consistent with the principles which ensure the development and expanded opportunities for the individual."\textsuperscript{5}
Another perspective he recounts is that ethical standards should concentrate on the means used to attain an end. "The third ethical standard would require that the speaker employ means consistent with society's prescriptions." 6

The fourth standard he relates is that ethical standards should focus on that which enhances communication. "In this view, the ideals and forms essential to sustaining freedom of speech and good communication are advocated." 7

The fifth and final position is that ethical standards should be determined by the situation or context. "(This) would require that the speaker determine wisely the stress of the situation in setting goals and techniques." 8

Although these five positions are not the only ethical standards proposed in communication, they are the primary ones. Cheseboro continues his analysis of these standards, examining them by way of Kenneth Burke's Pentad and a major philosophical position. Cheseboro believes that "Kenneth Burke's theory of dramaticism provides a rhetorical critic with a complete and systematic method for assessing the ethical behavior of a public speaker." 9 (emphasis in the original)

Although a Burkian analysis will not be pertinent to the discussion of the debate ethic which will be proposed in this work, it is presented to offer a complete description of the Cheseboro construct, which is diagrammed below.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication Standard</th>
<th>Frame of Reference for Critical Assessment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pentadic Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Does the rhetor’s discourse enhance the political ideals of democracy?</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
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<td>2. Does the rhetor’s discourse enhance the development of the individual?</td>
<td>Agent</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Does the rhetor employ means consistent with society’s preconception of universal and desirable means?</td>
<td>Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Does the rhetor’s discourse enhance the communication process?</td>
<td>Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Does the rhetor determine wisely the stress of the situation in setting goals and techniques?</td>
<td>Scene</td>
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Cheseboro offers a rather lengthy explanation of how this construct is to be used.

A method is devised here that should be flexible enough to allow all situational variables, as well as relevant ethical principles, to be included in a final assessment of a speaker's morality. . . . The critic, then, would seek to understand and describe the relationships that exist between the communicative act or message and the nature of the speaker, rhetorical situation, the rhetorical techniques, and the stated motives given by a speaker. . . .
The pentad can isolate all relationships defining the communicative behavior only if we note that the pentad possesses flexibility. The five terms of the pentad can interact providing a set of the interrelationships or "ratios" as indicated (in Table 2). 

---

**TABLE 2**

**THE PENTADIC RATIO: AS AN ASSESSMENT CONSTRUCT**

| Actor | Scene 
|-------|-------
| Agent | Purpose 
| Agency | 
| Agency | 
| Scene | Agent 

| Scene-Agent | Agency-Purpose |
| Agent-Purpose | Agent-Agency |

| Scene-Purpose | Agency-Purpose |

**SOURCE:** Cheseboro, p. 111.

Cheseboro believes that "the ten ratios provide the critical framework for complete, systematic, and responsive analysis," yet he challenges rhetoricians to develop additional communication standards derived from this classification.

From this perspective, it is appropriate to describe the kinds of creative possibilities such a placement (the Cheseboro construct) allows in the field of communication and the study of ethics.

First, the critic may create a hierarchy of "importance" among the five ethical standards in communication.

The construct outlined below, which is an original adaptation of Cheseboro's classification, presents such a hierarchy of importance.

First, ethical standards must be based upon the political structure and values of a society. The two primary values of a democracy are the belief in individual human dignity and
in rational decision-making. These essential values determine and prescribe the standard for assessing the means used to attain a specified end. This standard can only be applied when there is a knowledge of the context in which the communication occurred.

**Table 3**

A HIERARCHICAL CONSTRUCT FOR ASSESSING ETHICS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Structure</th>
<th>Humanistic Perspective</th>
<th>Enhance Communication Process</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DEMOCRACY</td>
<td>INDIVIDUAL HUMAN DIGNITY</td>
<td>RATIONAL DECISION MAKING</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Means

Context

FUNCTION

It is this ethical construct which should be applied in assessing democratic debate.
As a subject of study ethics deals with questions of right and wrong conduct, of the good and the bad, and of moral obligation. In one sense we all know a good deal about such questions, but in another sense we know very little. Without any formal study of ethics we can all point to or describe many acts we would unhesitatingly call wrong, and others we would call right. We feel there are some things we ought to do, and some things we ought not to do.

We are aware, however, that it is often difficult to decide whether an act or a statement is morally right or wrong.\(^3\) (emphasis in the original) it may be difficult, but it is essential that rules be prescribed to facilitate the evaluation of the ethics of an act or statement, in this case, the ethics of democratic debate.

(But) students of ethics are apt to be disappointed to find that, although the subject has been studied for over two thousand years, it does not seem to have produced any established systems of truths comparable to those of mathematics and the natural sciences.\(^4\)

No one ethic has been proposed that has achieved universal acceptance. Consequently, a combination of the classical and the contemporary theories will be used as a model for this "study of values and the basis of their application."\(^5\) The concept of ethics presented here is derived from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and from William Frankena's *Ethics*. These works were chosen as representative of the contemporary and classical approaches to the study of ethics.

It must be noted that this paper will not present a broad overview of the field of ethics. Rather, a model of
ethics will be described which can be applied to evaluate democratic debate. Necessarily, great bits of both the works of Aristotle and Frankena will be deleted.

Both the *Nichomachean Ethic* and *Ethica* describe an ethic of virtue. Martin Ostwald explains, "The aim of ethics is to act in a certain way... to act virtuously."\(^{16}\) Aristotle and Frankena both describe the virtues or characteristics that a person must possess in order to act ethically.\(^{17}\) But the objective of this work is to develop a means for evaluating the act, not specifically a means for evaluating the actor. Therefore, the discussion of the personality of the actor will not be of primary concern. Rather, the discussion of the relationship between ethics and politics and the constraints implicit in the application of an ethic, which both Aristotle and Frankena discuss, will be presented.

Both authors state that the first constraint in the development and application of an ethic is that the ethic cannot be applied absolutely. This is not meant to imply that there are no specific actions that are always unethical.

There are some actions and emotions whose very name connote baseness, e.g., spite, shamelessness, envy, and among actions, adultery, theft, and murder... It is, therefore, impossible ever to do right in performing them: to perform them is always to do wrong.\(^{18}\)

But the great majority of actions can only be judged on an individual basis to determine whether, within the confines of the specific situation, the actions were unethical. This
flexibility must be reflected in the ethic. Aristotle writes,

Our discussion (of ethics) will be adequate if it achieves clarity within the limits of the subject matter. For precision cannot be expected in the treatment of all subjects alike, anymore than it can be expected in all manufactured articles. . . . Therefore, in a discussion of such subjects, which has to start from a basis of this kind, we must be satisfied to indicate the truth with a rough and general sketch; when the subject and the basis of discussion consist of matters that hold good only as a general rule, but not always, the conclusions reached must be of the same order. 19

Frankena echoes this same belief, "Actually, I doubt that there are any substantive principles or rules of actual duty that ought always to be acted on or never violated, even when they conflict with others." 20

A second constraint is that the ethic should only be applied to a situation in which the actor meets three qualifications. Both Aristotle and Frankena 21 outline these essential characteristics.

(A)n act is not performed justly or with self-control if the act itself is of a certain kind, but only if in addition the agent has certain characteristics as he performs it: first of all, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose to act in the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake; and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchangeable character. 22

An ethic can only be used to evaluate an act that the agent freely, rationally choose to perform.

A third constraint is that the ethic should reflect the values and beliefs of the political system in which it is to be applied. This relationship between ethics and politics
was described by Aristotle.

Since this science (politics) uses the rest of the sciences, and since, moreover, it legislates what people are to do and what they are not to do, its end seems to embrace the ends of the other sciences. Thus it follows that the end of politics is the good for man.23

It appears that Aristotle believed that the ethics of a society, including that ethic which would govern the use of argument, should be based upon the political values of the society. In the applied case, an ethic used to evaluate debate would necessarily be based upon the principle democratic values.

Three values may be named whose proper relationship determines whether we are justified in calling our group democratic. These values are power, respect, and knowledge. Where the dignity of man is fully taken into account, power is shared, respect is shared, knowledge is shared. A society in which such values are widely accepted is a free society. A free society is by no means restricted to these values; it must, however, make certain that other goals are not incompatible with them. Within the framework of shared power, respect, and knowledge, many other values are sought. . . .24

These three values that Harold Lasswell describes can be condensed into two essential democratic values: a belief in the human dignity of each individual and a belief in rational decision-making.

A belief in the human dignity of each individual encompasses the notion of shared respect. Lasswell continues, "The cardinal value of democracy we have already specified as the realization of human dignity in a commonwealth of
mutual deference."25

But what of knowledge and power? Lasswell explains, "By 'power' we mean participation in or the ability to participate in the making of important decisions."26 For this power to be most effectively exercised, knowledge must be shared. Both of these principles are embodied in the second value of democracy described in the hierarchy, the belief in rational decision-making.

At the heart of the Aristotelian system is the assumption that man is rational. . . . Associated with this concept is the belief that man has personal worth, dignity, and goodness. Those thinkers of the 18th century who fashioned our democratic institutions and philosophy put their faith in the rational man. . . .27

The construct for assessing ethics of debate proposed in this paper is one which defends the dignity of the individual and the belief in rational decision-making as essential values.
In 1955 Karl Wallace posed the question, "Is there an ethic of communication?" Speech communication scholars have sought to provide a definitive response, proposing five major standards of ethics. These standards have been outlined by James Chesebore, who developed a construct for evaluating speech communication ethics. He attempted to present these five standards as distinct proposals, but in fact, there is a significant amount of overlap among the standards. For this reason, this paper proposes a hierarchical construct, based upon Chesebore's original model, which acknowledges the influence of one standard on another.

The first standard that Chesebore reports is the belief that an ethic should be patterned after the political structure of the society in which it is to be applied. He discusses this theory in terms of a democratic society. Those who advance this position believe that ethical communication would necessarily be consistent with democratic values. Most of the articles published in the speech communication journals adopt this principle as an implicit value. It is my contention that ethical standards must be based upon the values of the political structure. Karl Wallace advocates a like position, concluding,

Thus, the instrumental art, rhetoric, shares the
controlling eas of the master art, politics. Hence, communication must inevitably stand for and must reflect the same ethical values as the political society of which it is a part.

If we can clearly state the essential values of democracy, we can then suggest an ethic of communication.°

What are the values of democracy? Intuitively, "democracy" implies decision-making by the masses; the individuals sharing political equality. But it goes beyond that. "First, it is the assumption not only of political equality, but also of the rationality of the citizens. . . . "° The citizens are afforded an equal opportunity to participate in the decision-making process, the underlying assumption being that each individual is of value with something to contribute to the process of rational rule. Stated more succinctly, "the (democratic) values. . . are these: a belief in the intrinsic worth of the human personality; a belief in reason as an instrument of individual and social development."°

These primary democratic values serve as the second layer of the hierarchical construct: belief in the dignity of each individual and a belief in rational decision-making.

Cheseboro catalogs these two standards of communication ethics as points two and four in the Pentad Classificatory Construct which is reprinted on page four of this work.

The first of these, the humanistic belief that an ethic should respect the development of the individual,° was advocated by Virgil Baker and Ralph Eubanks in two essays pub-
lished in the early sixties. They proposed, "that we adopt as our value touchstone the **democratic ideal** of the fullest possible development of human potentialities."³⁵ (emphasis added) It must be noted that the authors assume that this humanistic perspective is an explicit democratic value. Baker and Eubanks continue,

Democracy is far more than just polity; it is a life sustaining attitude about human beings. It is a way of life which says Yes to life -- that affirms the possibilities of Man and forever beckons the better angels of his nature. For its central and controlling concern, Democracy takes no less a value than the dignity and worth of the individual person.³⁶

In essence, an ethic based upon this humanistic perspective is in actuality an ethic based upon the values of democracy.

The other view assumes the enhancement of the communication process as the fundamental value of an ethic of speech communication. Cheseboro cites an article by Dennis Day as an example of this position. Day writes, "The highest ethical obligation of **democratic** debate is a commitment to full and effective expression of arguments and opinions relevant to decision."³⁷ (emphasis added) Day proposes this perspective within the confines of democracy; his acceptance of the importance of the quality of communication is based upon his belief in the democratic principles. As he describes it,

Democracy as a political philosophy... provides a methodological framework within which each individual may seek to fulfill his own conception of the good life... (A) primary function of democratic government is to provide a means for
establishing public policies. . . . Debate is the essential procedural feature of the decision-making process. 38

In sum, both standards, that which emphasizes the development of the individual and that which emphasizes the process of communication, have democratic values as implicit foundations. For this reason, they have been proposed as the second level of the hierarchical construct, subsumed in the belief that an ethic must reflect the political values of the society.

The third level of the hierarchical construct consists of the standard that considers the means used to attain an end. As Chesbroom notes, the question asked by those who propose such a perspective is, "Does the rhetor employ means consistent with society's preconception of universal and desirable means?" 39 Again, the implicit assumption is that acceptable means are determined by the society's values. For this reason, this ethical perspective is considered dependent upon the two democratic values outlined in the hierarchy. Thus, this means perspective composes the third level of the construct.

The fifth and final standard of speech communication ethics proposes that the situation or context in which the communicative behavior occurs should determine what ethical criterion will be employed. This view reflects the belief that the "ethics of persuasion is a function of context." 40
Edward Rogge advocated such a stance in an article published in 1959, entitled "Evaluating the Ethics of a Speaker in a Democracy." He proposed that the ethical standards governing the conduct of a speaker vary as the situation varies, reasoning that "if the audience is to know how to react to a speech, it is imperative that the rules governing the occasion be their rules, not those of the speaker." Rogge's conclusion is based upon the premise that democracy represents rule by the polity, or audience, therefore, "democrats should be willing to accept the group's decision on mores governing extra-legal conduct of public persuaders." Although Rogge's essay does offer an ethic based upon a situational analysis, in essence, the ethic is based upon democratic principle. He writes, "As the principle of democratic determination is applied in this paper, . . . (it) suggests that speech critics must evaluate the ethics of a speech by the standards developed by society." This situational approach to communication ethics implies a foundational belief in democratic values as a determination of the acceptable means. Hence, the situational analysis of the ethics of an act is presented in the hierarchy as dependent upon the preceding three levels of the construct.

In short, five major standards of ethics have been proposed by speech communication scholars. These standards have been arranged hierarchically, creating a construct that posits
the political values of the society at its apex. The ethics of a society must be based upon those political values. The two primary values of a democracy are a belief in the human dignity of the individual and a belief in rational decision-making. These values determine and prescribe the standard for evaluating the means used to attain a specific end. This standard is then applied to a communication act within its context.

No discussion of speech communication ethics would be complete without mentioning Thomas Nilsen's *Ethics of Speech Communication*, which "remains the first and only book in the discipline devoted to the relationship between communication and ethics." 44

Nilsen states that "one of the purposes of this book will be to urge that in public discourse, . . . the good is served by communications that preserve and strengthen the processes of democracy. . . ." 45 He proposes a communication ethic that embraces the principle that ethics should reflect democratic goals and values. The Nilsen analysis accepts the values of democracy outlined in the second level of the hierarchical construct.

Each man, we have assumed, is a being of intrinsic worth, a being with a capacity for reason. . . .

. . . Our concept of the dignity of man is in large part based on and derived from our belief in the rationality of man. It is the rational autonomy of the individual that makes possible a sense of his dignity.
Nilsen then describes the situation or context in which this ethic can be applied. Although his ethic would not be labelled "situational", Nilsen does believe that the ethic can not be applied absolutely.

What may be considered right at one time may be thought wrong at another. It is not so much that the basic values or ideal changes as that its application to and relevance for specific acts changes.47

The ethic is only applicable to a situation in which the agent meets three qualifications: the agent must know what he does, he must have some intent, and he must exercise freedom of choice. "Morality implies an active agent with intentions and the opportunity for choice."48

Ethics of Speech Communication presents a cogent model of democratic ethics which is consistent with the hierarchical construct proposed in this paper. It is this concept of speech communication ethics which will be used as a basis for evaluating the ethics of debate.
III

In 1957, Richard Murphy, then Professor of Speech Communication at the University of Illinois and past editor of *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, and Nicholas Cripe, former Head of the Department of Speech and Director of Forensics at Butler University, published three articles in *The Speech Teacher* which presented juxtaposed views concerning the ethics of debate. The articles served to spur the "debate about debate", and since then, the speech communication journals have published a continuing list of essays concerning the ethics of debate, although no ethic has been proposed that has achieved widespread acceptance. The continuing conflict over the ethics of debate results from a lack of clarity in defining precisely what "debate" is. Professor Cripe stated with great insight, "The whole problem seems to be one of definition, of defining what 'debate' is or what 'ethical' means." 49

The previous chapters of this paper have attempted to present a concise definition of ethics, and in this last section the question of clarifying what is meant by "debate" will be addressed.

Exactly one year after the publication of the first Murphy article, *The Speech Teacher* published an article by George Dell which, although brief, presented an answer to the debate ethic dilemma. He wrote, "In other words, ethical standards of debate should be evaluated in terms of the pur-
poses, circumstance, and times. . ." Debating serves various functions, and the ethics of debate can only be assessed in terms of the purpose of the debate. As Nicholas Cripe noted, "The purpose in speaking differs; therefore, what might be "right" for the one may very well be "wrong" for the other, though they may both say the same words."\(^{51}\)

The speech communication journals and textbooks outline five different functions of debate.\(^{52}\) First, debate can be used as an educational tool to teach public speaking. Second, debate can be an intellectual game played at intermural tournaments. Third, debate can serve as an informational medium. Fourth, debate can be used as a means of persuasion. And fifth, a debate can be viewed as a form of public statement.

The first function of debate, debate as an educational tool, is perhaps the most obvious. Most secondary schools and colleges offer at least a basic course in debate, designed to teach the student the skills of investigation, analysis, criticism, organization, and oral presentation of ideas. More succinctly, "Debate is an educational activity designed to improve the research, thinking and speaking abilities of the students."\(^{53}\)

Second, debate can function as an intellectual game fostered by competitive intermural debate tournaments. This paper recognizes this as a practiced purpose of debate without making a value judgement of whether it should be. Russel
Windes, a faculty member at Queens College, the City University of New York, had this to say about debate,

How do we define academic debating? Academic debating is a generic term for oral contests in argumentation, held according to established rules. The purpose being to present both sides of a controversy so effectively that a decision may be reached— not on which side was right or wrong but on which side did the better job of arguing. Academic debating is gamemanship applied to argumentation, not the trivial and amusing gamemanship often thought of, but sober, realistic, important gamemanship. I think it is important to remember this fact. If we set academic debating in this context, we can then properly assign to it certain goals and objectives well within our reach. We can also reject and refute criticisms of academic debating which stems from a misunderstanding of what this type of debate actually is.

A third function of debate is to provide a flow of all relevant information. Those who advocate this position see debate as a means of getting all the available information into the marketplace of ideas. Professor Dennis Day writes,

The ethics of debate are inherent in debate as the technology of decision-making in a democratic society.

Decision is meaningful only if there are alternatives from which to choose; it is intelligent only if the alternatives are understood. Thus, the prime requisite which must be met if debate is to provide sound decisions is that it is to be thorough and complete, that all arguments and information relevant to the decision be known and understood.

Debate serves a fourth function; that of persuasion. Some view debate as an attempt by both sides to persuade the audience. M. J. Carmen writing in the California Journal of Secondary Education stated, "Debate is no less concerned with the truth; however, it assumes that each individual has
found the truth on his side of the question and is attempting to persuade others to accept it. . . . (D)ebate is persuasive."

A fifth function of debate is to serve as a forum for statements of public commitment. This is the view that Professor Murphy holds. He writes, "Debate, the argument goes, is a form of public speaking. A public statement is a commitment. Before one takes the platform, he should study the question, he should discuss it until he knows where he stands. Then he should take the stand." E. C. Buehler stated this position more succinctly and more vehemently, writing, "The debater speaks as an individualist who firmly and aggressively takes a stand for or against a specific proposal."

Five different functions of debate have been categorized, each requiring different ends of the debater. It follows that the different ends also require different evaluations of what is ethical or unethical.

Writing in 1931, before the great "debate about debate" had its inception, H. C. Harshbarger authored an essay entitled "Debate Purposes". This brief essay presented perhaps the clearest understanding of the issues involved in prescribing an ethic of debate. He wrote,

And how then should debate be conducted? Let the purpose govern their conduct. If truth really is to be discovered, let a suitable technique be formulated; if debate is a game, let it be popularized; if decisions are the end-all, let them not be maltreated, allow them to serve as a legitimate
measure of skill; if debate is directed toward human beings, let their characteristics be remembered. When debates are held to accomplish acknowledged purposes much of the current discussion will disappear. 39

Mr. Harshbarger believed that the purpose of debate should govern how it is to be conducted. It is this same position that this paper once again advances.
IV

In the previous chapters a construct for assessing speech communication ethics was proposed. This construct based upon democratic principles can only be applied to a communicative act within its context. The utility of this hierarchical model can perhaps be best demonstrated by applying it to evaluate the approaches to debate proposed by Professors Murphy and Cripe respectively.

It is interesting to note that although Murphy and Cripe define the function of debate differently, they both ascribe to the same underlying value in determining the ethics of debating both sides. Both assume that the ultimate inherent value is truth-telling.

Professor Murphy writes, "The end (of debate) is to discover where the truth lies." For him, the truth is an absolute. He believes that there is only one "right" side to an argument.

Professor Cripe perceives truth as the ultimate value also, but he believes that truth can lie on both sides of the issue simultaneously. He advocates this approach to truth-telling:

Once a cause has been undertaken, the advocate has a responsibility to present the best possible case for his proposition within the limits of the facts as he knows them or believes them to be. He should not deliberately do less nor does he have any moral right to attempt more. No man has a moral right to lie, cheat, or intentionally distort, much less a responsibility to do so...
We are presented with two views of what truth-telling requires. But what is truth?

In his book *Ethics of Speech Communication*, Nilsen devotes a whole chapter to truth-telling. He concludes that, "The truth of discourse depends upon its being consistent with the purposes and values it presupposes, as well as appropriately related to the objective reality it represents."

In defining truth-telling in terms of debate, he writes,

> When speaking takes place under known and accepted rules of procedure, such as formal debate, ... certain responsibilities for the presentation of information are compensated for by complementary sources of information and provision for immediate accountability.

> ... Where complex states of affairs are being described, there is not just one true description or one valid conclusion to be drawn. Especially important, therefore, to the achieving of social and political truth is the expression of many diverse views and interpretations.

Nilsen's approach to truth-telling is more akin to that described by Cripe.

Given that Murphy and Cripe perceive debate as fulfilling different functions and given that they both assume truth-telling as their underlying value, how can the hierarchical construct be applied to assess the ethics of debating both sides?

Murphy believes that a debater makes a public statement of his convictions. Using the construct, the evaluator must ask, "Is the speaker employing means consistent with the values of democracy, i.e. Does the communicative act affirm
the belief in rational decision-making and the belief in the individual human dignity of his audience members?" If the debater were to say something inconsistent with his own beliefs, in this context that would be unethical because the audience expects him to speak the truth concerning his actual beliefs.

On the other hand, assume, as Cripe does, that the debater was using debate as an academic exercise to teach public speaking skills. Applying the same democratic values to a statement inconsistent with the speaker's personal convictions, one need not conclude that the act was unethical. Why? Because the audience was not necessarily expecting a statement consistent with the speaker's actual beliefs. Neither their dignity nor their ability to make a rational decision would be undermined by such action. The information the speaker provides is true, although it may not be reflective of his personal opinion.

"Again, the truth that needs to be told is determined by what the listeners need to know and feel in order to make the most constructive response." In both contexts, this truth is supplied.

Both Murphy and Cripe advocate truth-telling as their implicit value, yet they describe different functions of debate. Analysis using the hierarchical construct demonstrates that this value can indeed be affirmed in both situations.
During the past twenty-five years, scores of essays have been written concerning the ethics of debate. Scholars have clashed repeatedly over the issues, yet the argument is still unresolved. In his article "The Ethics of Debating Both Sides", Professor Murphy cited this purpose for writing:

When there is such sharp disagreement among worthy men, whose individual systems of ethics are presumably equally impeccable, there must be some misunderstanding, some difference in purpose, or some failure to focus on the essence of the matter. It is with the thought that a close analysis may help to clarify the dispute, rather than to add to the literature of the controversy, that I write.

I am compelled to echo Dr. Murphy's concern. In this paper I have attempted to clarify the issues and present a construct that can be used to assess the ethics of debate.
## APPENDIX

### Table 4

**FUNCTIONS OF DEBATE**

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**NOTE**: This is an incomplete listing of the functions of debate as described by various speech communication scholars. For more complete information about each author and his work, please see the Bibliography.
ENDNOTES

1 J. Vernon Jensen, "An Analysis of Recent Literature on Teaching Ethics in Public Address," The Speech Teacher 8 (September 1959): 221.


3 Ibid., pp. 104-114.

4 Ibid., p. 106.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., p. 108.

7 Ibid., p. 106.

8 Ibid., p. 109.

9 Ibid., p. 105.

10 Ibid., p. 111.

11 Ibid., p. 112.

12 Ibid., pp. 109, 112.


20 Frankena, p. 55.

21 Ibid., p. 75.

22 Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 2. 4. 1105a. 27-38.

23 Aristotle *Nichomachean Ethics* 1. 2. 1094b. 4-8.


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid., p. 219.


29 See pages 4-5 for an explanation and diagram of this construct.


Baker and Eubanks, "Democracy," p. 75.

Ibid., p. 72.


Ibid., p. 5.

Cheseboro, p. 107.

Brembeck and Howell, p. 16.


Ibid., p. 92.

Ibid., pp. 92, 101.


Nilsen, p. 18.
46. Ibid., pp. 14, 43.

47. Ibid., p. 12.

48. Ibid., p. 15.

49. Nicholas Cripe, "Debating Both Sides in Tournaments is Ethical," The Speech Teacher 6 (September 1957): 209.


51. Cripe, p. 212.

52. See the Appendix for an abbreviated listing.


60. Murphy, "Is Debating?", p. 3.
61 Argumentation and Debate Techniques of a Free Society, quoted in Cripe, p. 212.


63 Ibid., pp. 38, 41.

64 Ibid., p. 27.

65 Murphy, "Is Debating?" p. 2.
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Cripe, Nicholas. "Debating Both Sides in Tournaments is Ethical." *The Speech Teacher* 6 (September 1957): 201-212.


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