

Excerpted from

## Strategy in a Value or Fact Debate

### *Proof*

A fact or value debate poses very substantial difficulties of proof. The matters of fact suitable for debate are necessarily those on which the evidence is not conclusive; matters of value are inherently matters on which persons of intelligence and good will can come to different conclusions. So it is impossible to “prove” your case, and it is this fact that sometimes leads a team to try to avoid its responsibilities by defining away difficulties. If “Women are better than Men” means, “better able to bear children” it is a very easy resolution to prove.

I’m going to suggest that there are two ways out of this difficulty: to realize that proof is not absolute, and to be selective in what you seek to prove.

“Proof” is whatever “tends to create belief.” In mathematics and physics we begin with certain assumptions that make it possible to have absolute proofs (subject to those assumptions). In debating, those assumptions are absent and nothing can be proven absolutely. But nor is that necessary. The debate is won by doing a better job than your opponent, not by an absolute proof. The winner is the team who the audience believes is more likely to be right.

Inherent in debating is a limited time for argument. In most high school debates, it would be rare for a team to have more than about 15 minutes of constructive speaking time. It is impossible in 15 minutes to say everything there is to say about the differences between men and women and why one is better than the other.

So the key is being selective, and making an assumption (just as we do in math and physics). The assumption in debating is that if you choose two or three important characteristics, and can convince the audience about the correctness of the resolution with respect to those characteristics, then the resolution is more likely to be true than false if the characteristics you have chosen are representative. So in the debate that “Women are better than men” you might consider the relative ability of the sexes as parents, wage-earners, and peace makers. But be prepared not only to explain things on those fronts, but to defend your choice of those three characteristics. The opposition may agree with the characteristics you have chosen, but challenge your conclusion, or the opposition may disagree with some or all of the characteristics you have chosen. A debate on whether the 21st century is a better century to be living in than any in the past might consider (1) standard of living, quality of life and distributions of income; (2) culture; (3) security.

In each case—and in these two sorts of debate generally—you begin with the assumption that if you’re right with respect to these characteristics, you’re probably right as a whole. The other team may (and frequently will) challenge the particular examples or parameters of your proof, either as a whole or in part. (“We agree that it’s appropriate to look at the relative ability of men and women as parents and peacemakers, but we don’t think their ability as wage earners tells us which is better. We live in a world in which men have monopolized the positions of power, and they pay their own sex more than they pay women. This is not inherent in the sex, but rather is a function of power in society. If women controlled the positions of power, they might well pay their sex more, and that would be equally irrelevant in deciding which was the better sex. The real focus of this debate should be on the characteristics of each sex which are inherent.”)

If you choose two or three characteristics, and limit the debate to those particular characteristics, you may be able to cover the subject reasonably well in the time available to you.