

Debates

In this course we will have two debates, one at the end of the first half and one at the end of the second half. The debate questions will be determined closer to the debate times.

What These Debates Are

These are not formal debates, and they are not about winning. The word “debate” is used here for lack of a better one. What is actually being asked of you is something closer to *adversarial collaborative inquiry*. You and the opposing team are not trying to defeat each other. You are trying to use the structure of disagreement to dig deeper into the question than either team could on its own.

The core principle is this: **if both teams dig deep, both teams win. If the discussion is shallow, both teams lose.** The opposing team is not your enemy; they are your collaborator, and the antagonism between your positions is the *mechanism* by which you collectively make progress. Without their pressure, your position would never get tested. Without your pressure, theirs would never get tested. The point of the exercise is to subject both positions to the kind of scrutiny that only a committed opponent can provide.

This Is What Disagreement Looks Like in Real Life

Forget what competitive debate looks like in school debating societies. That is an artificial format with artificial incentives, it is merely a *game*. It bears almost no resemblance to what serious disagreement looks like in the rest of life.

Imagine you are working in an organization, and two groups within it have different ideas about what should be done. There is no judge. There are no points. Nobody is going to step in at the end and declare a winner. The only thing that matters is that *the best decision gets made*. And the only way to get there is through the two groups working out, between them, what is actually true, what considerations actually matter, and why.

In that setting, “winning the argument” is incoherent. If your side comes out on top but the decision that gets made is worse than the one the other side was proposing, you have *all* lost.

Your job in these debates is to persuade the other team, but to persuade them honestly: by giving them reasons that genuinely move them, not by maneuvering them into corners. And equally, your job is to *be persuaded*, where there is good reason to be. The point is for both teams, together, to arrive at a better understanding of the question.

This means a number of things that may run against your existing instincts about what debating is for.

Good Debating

- **Pressing the other team's strongest argument**, not their weakest. A debate that focuses on the opposing team's worst formulations is a debate where nothing has been tested. You should be looking for the version of their position that you find hardest to answer and pressing on that.
- **Conceding what should be conceded.** If the other team makes a point that genuinely lands, the right response is to acknowledge it and modify your position accordingly. This is not weakness; it is what philosophical progress looks like. Refusing to concede a good point because it would make your side "lose" guarantees that both sides lose.
- **Refusing easy victories.** If the other team relies on an ambiguous term, a question-begging definition, or an unstated assumption that happens to favor your side, *call it out anyway*. Letting an unproductive move stand because it currently helps you is a betrayal of the joint inquiry.
- **Sharpening, not just opposing.** A productive antagonistic move is one that exposes a real difficulty in the opposing position. An unproductive one is mere contradiction, scoring points, or rhetorical maneuvering. If you don't know *what your objection is supposed to teach the other team*, you probably shouldn't make it.
- **Keeping the question in view.** A debate that wanders into side issues, technicalities, or definitional skirmishes that don't bear on the central question is a debate where progress has stopped. Both teams have an interest in not letting this happen.
- **Not being boring.** One legitimate criticism that can be raised against an opposing team's definition or argument is that it is *boring*. Something is "boring" (in a philosophical sense) when nothing turns on it: when nobody would disagree, and nothing further follows from accepting it. A boring move has no philosophical stakes. "Our definition is better because yours is boring," i.e. accepting it doesn't get us anywhere on the question, is therefore an entirely legitimate criticism.
- **Rhetorical wins.** Outmaneuvering the other team through speed, confidence, or persuasive technique, in a way that doesn't actually engage with the substance of what they said, is worse than losing.
- **Treating disagreement as personal.** The antagonism is between *positions*, not people. Frustration, defensiveness, or contempt directed at members of the other team is a sign you have lost track of what you are doing.
- **Pulling punches to be nice.** The opposite failure: declining to press a real difficulty because you don't want to make things uncomfortable. The other team needs your pressure. Withholding it is its own kind of disrespect.