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RHETORICAL TOPOI AND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE POLISH OXFORD DEBATE: UNDERSTANDING TEENAGERS' MORAL REASONING

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Abstract

The chapter examines how Polish high school students recognize and articulate ethical dimensions within the framework of the Polish Oxford Debate (POD). Drawing on empirical material collected during youth debate tournaments in 2023, the analysis employs selected elements of grounded theory to identify recurrent motifs, rhetorical topoi, and general argumentative strategies. The study reveals that adolescents instinctively introduce moral reasoning even when debating theses that are not ethical per se. Ethical motifs – including justice, responsibility for the future, safety, freedom, and the common good – serve as consistent anchors that shape both sides' reasoning. The findings indicate that engagement and rhetorical quality increase when theses resonate with students' lived experiences, generational concerns, and awareness of contemporary challenges such as technology or social inequality. Teenagers tend to approach debates as moral laboratories, testing their collective values and civic identity through reasoning and persuasion. For educators, the study highlights the importance of formulating theses that incorporate implicit or explicit ethical considerations, as these seem to increase reflective participation and motivation. The chapter concludes that POD can function as an effective educational tool, connecting rhetorical training with ethical awareness and strengthening deliberative competence among young citizens.

Keywords: Polish Oxford Debate, topos, moral reasoning, deliberative debate



1. Introduction

Oxford-style debate in Poland, locally known as the Polish Oxford Debate (later abbreviated as POD), has become a significant pedagogical tool in recent years. Although its current popularity stems mainly from tournament practice, it is increasingly used during school and university classes. POD provides students with a structured forum for developing public speaking, critical thinking, in-depth analysis, and collaborative reasoning (Rogowska and Będkowski 2025, 23). The format, consisting of two opposing teams of four participants debating an affirmative thesis under the guidance of a moderator, emphasizes rhetorical skill and argumentative coherence. Each debate (in the case of the tournament) is carefully observed and evaluated by a team of at least three judges – specialists in debate and rhetoric, and sometimes experts in the field related to the thesis. The criteria typically include the degree to which the discussion remains centered on the thesis, the persuasiveness and consistency of the team's reasoning, the formulation of complete arguments, and the ability to counter opposing claims. Within this framework, debates serve not only as exercises in persuasion and public speaking but also as an innovative means of deepening participants' knowledge. It is particularly worth noting POD's value as an educational laboratory for exploring political, social, historical, moral, and philosophical ideas.

The research project, on which this chapter is based, analyzed deliberative theses used in youth debates in Poland. While the broader project examined whether POD could serve as a method of ethical and philosophical education in high schools, the present chapter narrows its scope to explore what interests teenagers when they debate ethical questions. The research framework was grounded in selected elements of Kathy Charmaz's grounded theory, particularly the open and selective coding procedures applied to data collected during debate tournaments (Kathy 2014). Rather than reconstructing the complete set of findings obtained by the research team, I will examine recurring motifs and argumentative topoi and their consequences: the general rhetorical and substantive tendencies students most often employed. The central objective is to identify which themes and contexts most strongly engage adolescents and why these topics resonate with them. I will also explore what these tendencies reveal about the development of POD and the argumentative potential of young debaters.

This focus arises from a practical concern that emerged during the primary analysis: debates that genuinely fascinated students tended to be more vibrant, coherent, and persuasive, even if emotional intensity sometimes affected their formal quality. While not every thesis used in tournaments or classroom settings can be designed to be immediately captivating, there is pedagogical value in understanding which ethical motifs resonate most with teenagers. Such knowledge may help educators (including school teachers) and debate trainers frame theses that are both intellectually rigorous and rhetorically engaging, thereby raising the quality of deliberation. The aim is not to exclude topics perceived as less engaging, but rather to recognize which elements – when embedded in a thesis – enhance identification and encourage deeper reflection and more meticulous research, especially in ethical reasoning.

Naturally, the debating arena is not a spontaneous exchange between two opposing sides. From both the observer's and participant's perspectives, POD remains a structured simulation. However, the argumentation and engagement it generates are entirely authentic. As Będkowski and Rogowska (2024, 176) note on competitive debates in general, "Despite the simulation aspect, the rhetorical and argumentative phenomena in debates are genuine and provide a fertile ground for scholarly exploration" [my translation]. The analysis of deliberative theses revealed that ethical elements were present in nearly all cases, even when not immediately visible. For example,



a thesis on the reconstruction of the Saxon Palace in Warsaw (*The reconstruction of the Saxon Palace will unite Poles just as the reconstruction of the Royal Castle in Warsaw did 50 years ago*) – a topic seemingly political or cultural in nature – was interpreted by students as a moral dilemma over cost, solidarity, and national identity. They did not so much use these keywords for the singular arguments as built complex strategies around them, thus situating these motifs as topoi. Similarly, a thesis on the development of a finfluencing strategy by a state-owned company (*As the president of the management board of a state-owned company supervised by the Ministry of State Assets, I would incorporate a finfluencing strategy into the company's activities*) quickly raised questions about responsibility for education and the feasibility of such an approach. These examples demonstrate that moral dimensions, even when implicit, are often identified by young debaters and become central themes to their argumentation.

This chapter, therefore, pursues three guiding questions: Which motifs and topoi recur most often in teenagers' ethical debates? In which topics do they most readily identify moral elements? And how can this knowledge help educators select theses that resonate more strongly with students' lived experiences and cultural contexts, so that young people can benefit from POD as fully as possible? To address these questions, I will first outline the study's methodological framework, then present general tendencies observed in the debates, and finally provide a detailed analysis of the use of topoi. Finally, I will discuss why these themes are particularly attractive to teenagers and consider the practical implications of these conclusions for debate practice in schools.

2. Methodological Framework

The empirical basis of this study consisted of data collected during youth debate tournaments in Poland between April 27 and June 13, 2023. The research team, including the author of the following article, observed and analyzed debates held in five cities: Tarnów (tournament organized by *Stowarzyszenie Nowe Przestrzenie*), Toruń, Włocławek, and Poznań (all three hosted by the foundation *Projekty Edukacyjne*), and Warsaw (organized by the *Institute of National Remembrance*). We gathered material using specially prepared research cards designed to record both the formulation of theses and the course of the debates. As a previously trained team of researchers, we filled out these cards in real time while listening to debates that typically lasted about 1 hour.

In total, twenty-two cards were analyzed: fourteen corresponding to seven deliberative theses and eight corresponding to four demonstrative theses. In the final corpus, we counted only deliberative cards presenting ethical theses; thus, four cards representing three deliberative, but non-ethical theses were excluded. The analytical framework drew selectively on Kathy Charmaz's *grounded theory*, applied fragmentarily as a methodological orientation rather than a complete research design. The method's open and selective coding procedures were used to structure the data reduction and category formation processes. This approach enabled moving beyond mere description and identifying recurring ethical motifs and argumentative structures emerging from the data.

To maintain the material's relevance to our ethical focus and keep analytical coherence, the dataset underwent several rounds of selection. Each debate was documented on a standardized research card containing questions about the thesis content, the problem it raised, the axis of dispute, and its formal scope. Using these criteria, we identified whether the thesis contained a decision-making moment tied to ethical considerations and, if so, how this element was expressed. We retained theses that clearly involved moral dilemmas and could be debated from both affirmative



(proposition) and negative (opposition) positions – thus symmetrical in nature. Theses lacking an ethical component or balance between sides were excluded. In the end, fourteen cards represented seven deliberative theses with explicit or implicit ethical elements, and eight cards reflected four demonstrative theses used for comparative purposes. Multiple cards on the same thesis occasionally served to verify interpretations and to test the internal consistency of the analysis. This approach helped isolate debates with theses that can serve as examples of good practice for future educational use.

When examining the ethical dimensions, we paid particular attention to the use of *topoi*, understood as patterns of reasoning or argumentative “places” that structured the speeches. In addition, this paper includes remarks on the basic Aristotelian triad of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, since these modes of persuasion allow us to trace adolescents’ tendencies in debates on ethical themes. Each research card required us to note the arguments and counterarguments raised by both teams and to identify the *topoi* on which they relied. In this way, we could reconstruct how students connected specific claims to broader ethical or social frameworks.

While the cards offered a structured tool observation, inductive interpretation – characteristic of grounded theory – remained integral to the analysis. We identified recurring motifs and noted instances in which participants framed arguments in atypical or surprising ways. The identification of ethical motifs and decision-making elements formed the core of the analysis, whereas *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*, and *topoi* served as supporting categories for understanding argumentative strategies. Although the corpus yielded valuable insights, our study faced several limitations. The data came exclusively from debates held during selected tournaments in five cities, meaning that the corpus reflected contexts shaped by specific organizers, the competitive nature of the events, and the fact that debating teams often encountered one another for the first time – conditions that do not usually apply to school-based debates. We relied on research cards we had designed specifically for this project, which ensured a strong focus on ethical aspects while also setting the frame for how arguments could be recorded and analyzed. Time pressure during live debates also limited the depth of note-taking, making it easier to capture recurring *topoi* and general argumentative patterns than subtle rhetorical nuances. Despite these limitations, the consistency of procedure and comparability across debates strengthened the validity of the findings.

Taken together, these methodological choices provided us with a coherent framework for examining how Polish teenagers engage with ethical dimensions in Oxford-style debates. This foundation enables me to transition from the methodology and primary goal of the entire study to the broader tendencies observed in the debates themselves.

3. General Tendencies

The analysis of the debates revealed several general tendencies in how teenagers respond to ethical questions. First of all, topics that directly addressed everyday concerns or broader social relevance tended to spark the most vivid engagement. Theses related to new technologies, such as the development of chatbots (*Further development of chatbots will do more harm than good*), quickly led students to consider questions of safety, responsibility, and the future of human work – particularly given that the wording “chatbots” misled them and the debate in practice revolved around ChatGPT, the most recognizable large language model in the first half of 2023. Debates framed around cultural or historical matters, such as the reconstruction of the Saxon Palace in Warsaw or the granting of voting rights to women in Poland (*Granting women voting rights in Poland in 1918*



enabled their active participation in politics), also prompted ethical reflection, with participants weighing the value of national identity and solidarity against the financial costs and their social consequences in each case. Even when a thesis was not explicitly formulated as a moral dilemma, adolescents consistently introduced ethical considerations into their arguments. This pattern suggests that the appeal of a debate topic for teenagers lies less in its formal classification and more in its potential to be interpreted through the lens of justice, responsibility, or collective well-being. This becomes particularly significant when one recalls that the majority of the analyzed theses, although clearly connected to ethical reflection, cannot formally be classified as value debates but rather as policy debates (Houtlosser 2001, 39). The students' recognition of values appeared proportional to the perceived importance of the problem under discussion.

Among the thematic areas, debates on technology, bioethics, and social justice stood out as particularly engaging. When confronted with theses on technological innovation, students often moved quickly beyond pragmatic calculations to address broader consequences for human autonomy, critical thinking, or the distribution of opportunities between generations. In bioethical contexts, such as discussions of human enhancement or medical responsibility, participants displayed a strong tendency to frame arguments around the sanctity of life and the limits of scientific intervention. Issues of social justice: gender equality, education, or economic fairness, elicited passionate emotional appeals, though these were often accompanied by well-structured rational arguments characterized by the interplay of pathos and logos. In contrast, topics of primarily historical or commemorative character tended to elicit less spontaneous involvement unless students reframed them in terms of present-day dilemmas. This pattern indicates that adolescents are most engaged when the debate topic connects directly to challenges they perceive as relevant to their own futures. Such a tendency aligns with the deliberative nature of these debates, which, following Aristotelian classification, naturally orient themselves toward the future. Intuitively, students echoed Aristotle's description of deliberative rhetoric, in which reasoning frequently relies on examples – sometimes applied with greater, sometimes with lesser precision (Budzyńska-Daca 2017, 43).

The quality of argumentation varied depending – not solely but mainly – also on the topic being discussed. Although argumentation is often still studied without consideration of context, in this case, the situation was crucial (Gerritsen 2001, 68–72). Factors such as the participants' age, their generational background, and the nature of artificial disagreement characteristic of POD all influenced their reasoning patterns. These issues suggest that the full range of elements in the thesis significantly influences not only student engagement but also the rhetorical complexity of their responses.

From comparing different debates, a preliminary hierarchy of attractiveness emerges. At the top are themes directly linked to contemporary challenges – technological development, environmental crisis, and various forms of social justice – which students often interpreted as shaping their own futures. This pattern also remains Aristotle's observation that the perceived credibility of the speaker enhances the quality of persuasion (Aristotle 1995, 2194–5). Thus, the more authentic or truthful the issue appeared – regardless of which side the speaker represented – the more engaging the debate became for both participants and the audience. Slightly less captivating, though still intellectually productive, were cultural and economic topics, in which the ethical dimension was less immediate but could be activated through discussions of fairness, responsibility, or collective benefit. Historical or retrospective theses generally occupied the lower end of this hierarchy, as they required students to bridge temporal distance and seek relevance in contemporary contexts. Nevertheless, when participants successfully drew connections – linking past events, such as the twentieth-century reconstruction of the Royal Castle, to current concerns about sovereignty or



solidarity, as in the debate on rebuilding the Saxon Palace – these topics also generated substantial ethical deliberation.

This hierarchy should not be read as fixed but as indicative of general tendencies: adolescents tend to value POD debates that combine ethical dilemmas with tangible implications for their own lives and societies, and allow them to articulate moral reasoning through concrete, culturally resonant examples.

4. Motifs and Topoi in Teenagers' Argumentation

The analysis of debate transcripts and research cards revealed several recurring motifs and topoi, shaping the argumentative landscape of the discussions. In understanding the notion of topos, I follow Sara Rubinelli's definition, "that the value of a topos rests on its having two functions, namely a selective function (a topos is a device to find arguments) and a guarantee function (a topos is a kind of inference link that grants the plausibility of the step from certain premises to controversial claims)" (Rubinelli 2009, 23).

Among the most prominent was the motif of justice, which students often linked either to equality of opportunity or to fairness, mainly in terms of gender, and in the distribution of social goods. Closely connected to this was the topos of responsibility – especially focused on the future – where debaters emphasized the consequences of present decisions for future generations. Another concern was individual freedom, frequently pitted against appeals to the common good, allowing students to explore the tension between autonomy and collective responsibility. Issues of safety also arose regularly, particularly in debates over technology, where participants expressed concerns about risks to human health, critical thinking, and social cohesion. These motifs functioned as interpretive anchors, enabling students to translate abstract theses into concrete moral dilemmas that resonated with their own experiences and cultural environment.

At this point, it is worth returning to the topos of the future – one of the strongest and most consistent topoi identified in the debates. Students often framed their arguments by stressing the long-term consequences of present decisions, especially when discussing technological development or state policy, even when the thesis did not include a specific political or formal rule. In the debate on chatbots, for example, participants highlighted the risk of diminishing human critical thinking and reducing job opportunities for younger generations, suggesting that unchecked technological progress might undermine society's capacity for self-governance. In economic debates, the same topos appeared when students argued that short-term financial gains should not outweigh the obligation to create sustainable conditions for future citizens. Even in cultural or historical theses, teenagers frequently shifted the perspective from past or present concerns to what these decisions would mean for those who come after them.

A vivid illustration of this perspective appeared in the debate on the thesis *The narrative claiming that only popular artists should be considered successful is to be regretted*. The opposing team argued that many artists depend on public funding and that, given the ease of gaining popularity today – often unrelated to talent – the number of "successful" artists could expand to the point of overburdening the state budget. This orientation toward the future reflects a generational sensitivity to intertemporal justice, where responsibility is perceived both as an individual moral duty and as a collective imperative.

Another visible topos opposed individual freedom to the common good. Teenagers treated autonomy as a central value, arguing that citizens should be free to make personal choices without



excessive state interference. This perspective was evident in debates over economic policy, where some participants insisted that market actors should retain the freedom to act in their own interests. At the same time, many debaters countered such claims by invoking collective responsibility, stressing that individual actions must be limited when they harm social stability or undermine fairness. In the debate on state-sponsored investments, this tension between private initiative and public control formed the central axis of dispute, as students weighed the potential benefits of freedom against the moral obligation to protect the well-being of the broader community. Such persistent opposition between liberty and responsibility provided a recurring framework for argument, enabling adolescents to test the boundaries of both concepts in ethically charged contexts.

The topos of naturalness and progress also appeared with notable regularity, particularly in debates involving science, technology, and cultural change. Students frequently drew a contrast between what they considered “natural” human capacities or social arrangements and innovations that might disrupt them. In the debate on technological development, for instance, some participants argued that reliance on artificial systems such as chatbots – or, in practice, large language models – risked eroding authentic human interaction and violating the natural basis of community. Others countered by emphasizing the moral value of progress, claiming that innovation represents a collective obligation to improve living standards and expand opportunities. This tension between preserving what is perceived as natural and pursuing progress led students to articulate complex positions, sometimes blending both perspectives by acknowledging the benefits of technological development while advocating safeguards to protect human dignity and social cohesion.

Taken together, the above observations reveal a relatively consistent repertoire of topoi and motifs – repetitive references that do not quite meet the requirements of being the topos – which teenagers rely on when debating ethical issues. Justice, responsibility for the future, freedom, and the common good, safety, solidarity, and progress appear most frequently, often serving as the backbone of argumentation. Less common, but still significant, were references to sovereignty, participation, or superficiality, which broadened the ethical scope of certain discussions. The repeatability of these motifs indicates that adolescents instinctively approach public questions through ethical categories, even when the thesis itself does not explicitly demand such framing. Such a pattern suggests that the moral imagination of young debaters is shaped not only by school curricula or tournament contexts but also by broader cultural discourses in which values of fairness, responsibility, and collective well-being hold a central place.

This tendency finds indirect confirmation in supplementary materials produced within the POD community. One example is a manual prepared by high school debaters themselves, focused on climate change and environmental misinformation (Gajewska et al. 2024). Beyond the main topic suggested by the title, the position incorporates subtle linguistic choices – such as the consistent use of feminatives and gender-neutral expressions, which are highly visible when used in Polish – reflecting the exact value of equality observed in the analyzed debates (Gajewska et al. 2024, 5, 14). Similarly, findings from Natasza Lubik-Reczek’s survey of Polish students support these observations: teenagers tend to find politics and social life the most interesting as per the POD topic. Although this study focuses on more general subjects, it clearly shows that many fewer teenagers find economics and history as highly captivating (in a 5-stage scale answer as “definitely yes”) than worldview issues and social life, situating politics and culture in the middle of “definitely yes” (Lubik-Reczek 2024, 207–15).



5. Argumentative Strategies

Beyond the systematic appearance of motifs and topoi, this analysis highlighted several strategies that teenagers consistently used to make their arguments more persuasive. One of the most common approaches was to structure reasoning around clear contrasts – between safety and risk, tradition and innovation, or freedom and control – which allowed debaters to frame complex issues in accessible terms. Students also frequently employed examples drawn from contemporary life, such as references to social media or educational practices, to ground their arguments in familiar experiences. Another often observed strategy involved recasting the thesis itself, either by narrowing its scope to make it more manageable or by broadening it to connect with broader ethical concerns – although not always in full alignment with the formal rules of POD. These practices suggest that teenagers were not only reacting to the content of the theses but were also actively shaping the terms of discussion to strengthen and contextualize their positions.

Analyzing PODs through the Aristotelian triad, there appear some clear tendencies as well. Rational strategies (logos) were particularly evident in debates where students felt confident in using measurable criteria or causal reasoning. Participants often cited financial costs (past or potential), the efficiency of public policies, or projected long-term outcomes to justify their claims. Not all the logical arguments were, however, based on numbers. In the debate on state-funded investments (*The state should be the sole sponsor of strategic investments*), for example, several speakers argued that public sponsorship was the only way to guarantee stability and prevent misuse of private capital, grounding their reasoning in pragmatic assessments of economic risk. In other contexts, debaters referred to historical precedents or comparative cases from other countries as evidence that specific policies were either workable or doomed to fail. Although not always supported by precise data, these appeals demonstrated an effort to present arguments in a rational form and to frame decision-making as a matter of weighing probabilities and practical consequences.

Emotional strategies also played quite a substantial role in teenagers' debates, often making their arguments more immediate and memorable. Students appealed to empathy by highlighting the suffering of individuals or groups that might be affected by a given policy, such as workers displaced by automation or communities excluded from social assistance, in order to develop cultural projects. At other times, they drew on fear, warning that unchecked technological development could erode human autonomy or that neglecting cultural heritage might weaken collective identity. Anger and indignation were also occasionally mobilized, particularly in debates on fairness and equality, where participants denounced perceived greed, corruption, or social injustice. These appeals rarely stood alone; instead, they tended to intensify rational arguments, giving them urgency and a stronger connection to shared values.

Lastly, ethos-based strategies emerged when students sought to strengthen their position by appealing to credibility, authority, or shared identity. Some debaters invoked expert opinions or institutional authority, presenting them as reliable sources that could legitimize a particular stance. Others relied on historical figures or national traditions to anchor their arguments in a sense of continuity and collective experience. In several debates, participants appealed to their own role as responsible young citizens, suggesting that their generation had a special duty to reflect on long-term ethical consequences. These ethos-driven moves did not always introduce new evidence, and a valid explanation of the quotation did not always support them. Still, they provided a moral frame that made the argument appear more trustworthy and aligned with widely respected moral principles, as well as personal engagement.



In addition to these broader strategies, teenagers frequently employed some specific, often simple rhetorical figures and stylistic devices to reinforce their arguments. Rhetorical questions were commonly used, typically designed to expose weaknesses in the opposing side's position or to prompt reflection on an implicit moral choice. Contrasts and antitheses were also common, enabling speakers to sharpen distinctions between progress and decline, freedom and control, or solidarity and selfishness. Analogies drawn from everyday life or popular culture served to make abstract dilemmas more relatable and concrete. Hyperbole occasionally appeared in debates on technology, as students exaggerated potential risks to emphasize the need for caution. Particularly noteworthy was their advanced ability to construct arguments by association (Garssen 2001, 84–85), connecting seemingly unrelated elements within the hypothetical world of the debate to support a claim. While not always used systematically, the above techniques added intensity and clarity to speeches, helping participants capture attention and sustain engagement throughout the discussion and link their reasoning to shared moral principles.

A vivid example of these strategies appeared in the debate on whether further development of chatbots would bring more harm than good. The affirmative team built its case around rational arguments, pointing to the risk of reduced critical thinking and loss of human jobs, while reinforcing these claims with emotional appeals to the anxiety of a future shaped by machines. The opposing team, in turn, relied on ethos by invoking expert authority on technological progress and by framing themselves as advocates of innovation and social advancement (it seems that both strategies work regardless of whether our discussion is about chatbots per se or about large language models). Both sides employed rhetorical techniques: the affirmative speakers used rhetorical questions to challenge the necessity of chatbots, while the opposition used analogies to earlier technological revolutions – such as the introduction of personal computers – to argue that society ultimately adapts and benefits. Such a combination of logos, pathos, ethos, and stylistic means made this debate particularly dynamic, demonstrating how different strategies could be combined to transform a technical thesis into an ethically charged confrontation.

6. Why These Topics Fascinate Teenagers?

The debates we analyzed suggest that adolescents are most engaged when a thesis resonates with their lived experience or with issues they perceive as shaping their future. Topics related to technology, education, or social justice stood out because students could easily connect them to their own daily concerns – such as how they study, how they communicate, and what opportunities might be available to them in adult life. Even when a thesis appeared abstract or politically distant, participants tended to reframe it in light of questions that mattered directly to them, such as fairness, safety, responsibility, or financial security, and the collective obligation to make it possible. This tendency suggests that fascination arises not only from the novelty of a topic but also from its perceived relevance and its capacity to create space for ethical reflection grounded in everyday realities.

Cultural and social factors also shaped which debates captured students' attention. Adolescents often responded most strongly to topics that echoed broader public discussions visible in media, politics, or school life. Questions of technological development or state-sponsored projects, for instance, resonated because they mirrored national conversations on innovation, public spending, and cultural heritage. Likewise, issues of equality and gender reflected ongoing debates about social change in Poland and beyond. When theses tapped into these larger discourses, students appeared more motivated to participate, as they could situate their own reasoning within



narratives already circulating in their communities. This connection between debate topics and the public sphere suggests that fascination arises not only from personal relevance but also from the opportunity to engage with themes that teenagers recognize as part of collective cultural conversations.

Generational factors also contributed to the intensity of students' engagement. Many teenagers constructed debates in terms of their collective responsibilities and vulnerabilities, often contrasting their perspectives with those of older decision-makers. Concerns about climate change, technological dependence, social inequality, and technological awareness and capability to be a vivid part of this enterprise were frequently articulated as problems that the young would inherit, even if they had little power to influence present choices. This sense of limited agency, combined with a heightened awareness of long-term consequences, made debates a space where adolescents could voice aspirations for justice and sustainability. Their fascination with ethical dilemmas thus reflected not only intellectual curiosity but also a desire to assert generational identity and to position themselves as moral stakeholders in shaping the future.

Another critical factor was the extent to which a thesis addressed experiences close to students' everyday lives. When debates addressed education, the use of technology, or the distribution of cultural resources, adolescents often drew on their own experiences as learners, consumers, or community members. This immediacy enabled them to argue with greater confidence and emotional investment, since the dilemmas were not abstract but connected to choices they themselves faced. Even seemingly distant issues could become engaging once reframed in terms of everyday relevance – for example, linking the reconstruction of a historic building to questions of how public money should be spent during a financial crisis. The closer the thesis aligned with personal or collective experience, the more likely it was to stimulate active participation and nuanced ethical reasoning.

These observations have broader implications for both education and communication. If fascination in debate arises when topics resonate with everyday experience, generational concerns, or broader cultural discourses, then the design of theses can directly influence the quality of students' engagement. Ethical elements appear to serve as an entry point, allowing teenagers to link abstract policies or historical events to their own values and expectations. Recognizing this tendency may help educators and debate trainers craft topics that are not only pedagogically valuable but also rhetorically complex – by provoking more than just logos-type arguments, recently enormously popular in POD – thus encouraging deeper preparation and more reflective participation. In this sense, debates become more than exercises in public speaking: they provide a framework for adolescents to explore how their voices matter in conversations about justice, responsibility, and collective futures.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of aligning debate theses with themes that adolescents find both relevant and ethically stimulating. When students perceive a direct link between a thesis and their own lives or generational concerns, the quality of deliberation improves significantly: arguments become more developed, rhetorical strategies become more diverse, and engagement becomes more sustained. For educators and trainers, this suggests that the selection of theses should balance pedagogical objectives with the motivational potential of the topics. The value of selecting debate theses that inspire young participants was also observed by one of the authors of another POD manual (Kozaczewska 2024, 41) and confirmed by research showing that young people, through debating (not limited to POD), “apply their learning to real-world situations” (Akerman and Neale 2011, 16). Ethical framing need not dominate every debate, but even indirect incorporation of elements such as justice, responsibility, or fairness can help transform abstract issues into dilemmas that students are eager to explore.



7. Practical Implications for Debate Practice

The findings of this study highlight the importance of aligning debate theses with themes that adolescents find both relevant and ethically stimulating. When students perceive a direct link between a thesis and their own lives or generational concerns, the quality of deliberation improves noticeably: arguments become more developed, rhetorical strategies more diverse, and engagement more sustained. For educators and trainers, this suggests that the selection of theses should balance pedagogical goals with the motivational potential of topics. Ethical framing need not dominate every debate, but incorporating elements of justice, responsibility, or fairness can help transform abstract issues into dilemmas students are eager to explore.

The analysis demonstrates that teenagers instinctively seek ethical dimensions in almost every debate thesis, even when the topic appears to be strictly technical, historical, or cultural. The motifs of justice, responsibility for the future, freedom versus the collective good, and safety were the most recurrent, while solidarity, patriotism, and progress also shaped many discussions. A clear pattern emerged: fascination and rhetorical quality grow when theses resonate with adolescents' lived concerns and allow them to articulate moral dilemmas in tangible terms. Not all theses engage students equally – those linked to contemporary challenges such as technology, social justice, or identity tend to activate ethical reasoning more effectively and sustain motivation over time. It is worth remembering that in tournament contexts, motivation itself often plays a decisive role in determining debate quality (Gondek 2024).

These findings suggest that the pedagogical strength of debates lies not only in their format but in the careful selection of theses that align with teenagers' ethical curiosity. For educators and organizers, it is not enough to emphasize debate as an exercise in speaking and reasoning; what matters equally is to design theses that contain latent or explicit moral choices that students can identify with. From the theoretical perspective, this highlights the importance of rhetorical topoi as bridges between abstract theses and personal experience. In practice, debate design should consciously account for themes that young people recognize as ethically and culturally relevant.

It is also worth noting that while many POD theses are deliberative in character, a separate educational format known as *deliberative debate* exists and shares similar objectives. Both formats, though structurally distinct, aim to promote reflective civic participation through ethical reasoning. Their pedagogical goals may – and perhaps should – converge to integrate the strongest features of each approach, thereby enhancing the educational value of both (Kochan 2025).

Future research should extend this analysis by exploring how adolescents themselves perceive the ethical weight of different theses, perhaps through post-debate interviews or reflective essays following tournaments. Comparative studies across cultural contexts could also determine whether similar motifs dominate in other national debate traditions or whether local histories and discourses shape adolescents' ethical imagination differently. Another valuable direction would be to analyze how moderators and teachers frame debate theses in school settings and to what extent subtle variations in wording influence students' engagement with moral dilemmas. Deepening these inquiries would allow researchers to understand not only how teenagers construct arguments but also how debate topics can be tailored to include sustained ethical reflection and civic awareness.



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