Idealism   
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Affirmative Case by Travis Herche



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At this point in the year, the standard negative case pattern is to go contention-centric with a list of ways that public needs can be used to justify misbehavior from government. This case uses the super-value of Idealism to preempt that pattern, forcing the negative onto unfamiliar ground.

A super-value is technically an external measure for the values, but it’s easier to think of it as a mindset for evaluating all other arguments. Super-values get at some of the most foundational concepts in debate. For example, most judges use an implied super-value of Truth, meaning they’ll throw out arguments that are proven false and accept ones that are proven true.

Most value resolutions don’t need super-values. But the homeschool leagues have recycled the same basic resolution since the very beginning: “the idealistic group ought to be valued over the pragmatic individual.” There are exceptions of course, like last year’s resolutions, but this is still a very familiar conflict. At this point, one might even call it *tired*.

The effect of such a worn-out conflict is that we’re drilling down to the bedrock of the resolution in the first few tournaments, instead of at the end of the year, as one would expect with a healthier resolution environment. And that means we’re seeing the same debate over and over:

*Neg: Public needs justified such-and-such bad thing.  
Aff: Ah, but if it was bad, then it wasn’t public needs.*

At the root, the difference is that the negative is being pragmatic and the affirmative is being idealistic. This case calls out that conflict and goes on offense, making a logical advantage much more likely.

Use your super-value as much as you can. You can safely assume that it pre-refutes the entire negative case; thus, instead of going over the NC point-by-point, you can just run a single group response and move on. Spend as much time as possible on the super-value and make sure you solidly refute any counter-super-values.

Instead of Applications, which are real-world warrants to prove a claim, this case uses Examples, which are hypothetical warrants. Examples are usually weaker than applications, but they do the trick for this case. You’re using them here because you want to avoid even the faintest appearance of pragmatism.

Idealism

Think about the moment when you think you’ve reached the bottom of the stairs, but there’s one more step there – and for an instant, your body feels like it’s falling. You could say: “I thought there were 11 stairs, but there were actually 12.” You wouldn’t say: “I thought there were 11 stairs, and even though I was technically wrong, we should pretend that there were 11 because that’s what I incorrectly believed.”

We need to look at philosophical concepts the same way. That’s why I am “resolved: the needs of the public ought to be valued over individual property rights.”

Let’s start with my

# Super-value: Idealism

A super-value is a broad measure for every argument in the round. Think of it as a mindset to use when you’re casting your ballot.

Idealism is operationally defined as: “The principle that something ought to be judged according to its essential nature, as opposed to how it is perceived or pursued.” In other words, idealism means we should look at what something truly is in order to measure it. This conflicts with pragmatism, which ignores essential nature and focuses on circumstance.

Here’s why idealism is so important to this round.

# Super-Value Link 1: Only Accurate Approach

Try as we might, we still get things wrong sometimes – like the number of steps we’re walking down, or what just punishment is.

Idealism says we look at things according to their essential nature – in other words, *accurately*. Pragmatism says we look at things according to how they are perceived – in other words, we accept wrong interpretations, even if we know that they’re wrong. In debate, which is a formal contest of ideas, we should be very interested in getting it *right*.

That brings me to the deeper issue.

# Super-Value Link 2: Enables Value Debate

A clash of philosophies is impossible unless we look at them accurately.

A pragmatist can reject any idea by pointing to ways that it is misused or misunderstood. The pragmatist says: “Hitler believed he was being Just, so we shouldn’t pursue Justice.” An idealist says: “Hitler was wrong about Justice; the essential value of Justice cannot be changed by Hitler’s ideas.”

If we go into this round with a pragmatic lens, it’s not just that you’ll be stuck with inaccurate ideas. You’ll be unable to make a ruling at all. I’ll spend the debate saying that citizens can misuse the idea of property rights to do dangerous things, like bring a rocket launcher into a mall or assemble a nuclear missile in the backyard. My opponent will spend the debate saying that governments can misuse the idea of public needs to do tyrannical things, like rob or imprison citizens. Just remember: every concept in the world can be misunderstood.

So instead of wading into that quagmire, let’s limit ourselves to accurate arguments: arguments about what happens when we correctly interpret public needs and property rights. No pretending, no falsehoods, no pragmatism.

To do that, we need a

# Value: Benefit to Citizens

Benefit to Citizens is operationally defined as: “The overall health, happiness, and prosperity of the people of a nation.”

Here’s why this is the best way to measure the resolution:

## Value Link: Purpose of Government

The choice between public needs and property rights falls to government. Individuals can’t choose between them; they just have to live with whatever the government decides. So we have to ask ourselves: what should government be doing? And the simple answer is that governments must serve the people.

Now we complete the picture with my two contentions.

# Contention 1: Public Needs Benefit Citizens

The concept of public needs describes things that are generally essential – like food, water, and shelter. In the 21st Century, public needs include infrastructure: sewers and garbage services to keep waste from piling up in the street; internet to participate in the modern economy; roads that move traffic efficiently from one place to another. Losing our infrastructure would cause a collapse of our advanced civilization. The grocery stores would empty, the lights would go out, and chaos would ensue. Many lives would be lost.

The conflict in the resolution is usually a question of infrastructure.

## Example 1: Water Rights

If a rancher wants to keep all the water that flows through his land, we might invoke public needs. We’d say that he has to let most of the water continue to flow to the other ranchers and farmers and cities that need it. We’re more interested in avoiding a drought than in protecting the property rights of one rancher.

Here’s another example.

## Example 2: Freeways

Suppose this same stubborn rancher owned a huge tract of land between Dallas and Houston. The government was trying to construct Interstate 45, which runs directly between the two cities. They’d ask the rancher to sell a small strip of land running through the ranch. If the rancher refused, the government would have two choices: respect property rights and add hours to the trip by going around his land, or respect public needs and build the road anyway, giving the rancher market value for the land.

Again, our whole modern civilization works because of public needs.

# Contention 2: Property Rights Harm Citizens

Now let me be clear here. I am all in favor of property rights most of the time. But when they conflict with public needs, they become harmful.

The conflict in the resolution is actually pretty narrow. Normally, public needs and property rights get along fine. But sometimes, we do have to choose – and when we do, property rights are what stand between us and a railroad, or an airport, or a hospital, or a police station, or a military base.

We must look at the resolution as idealistically as possible – in other words, as accurately as possible. The accurate view says that there are 12 steps, and that governments should choose public needs first. Thank you.

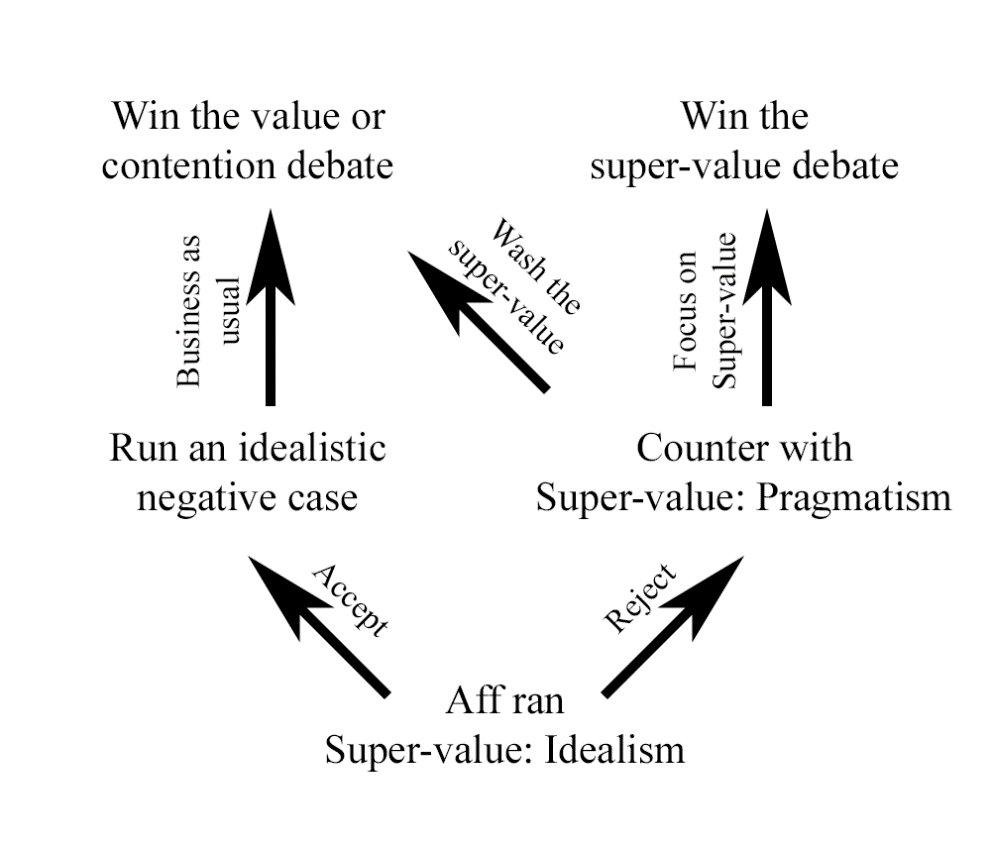
Negative Notes

Start by asking yourself this question: do you need to argue against Idealism?

If not, accept it and kill all the affirmative’s momentum. Then run your case, being careful to only run arguments that are rooted in the essential, technical meanings. Negative cases like these aren’t common, but they do exist. For example, you might argue that property rights are a moral imperative, while public needs aren’t. This is the strongest possible counter to the idealism case, because it means you completely neutralized the affirmative’s main plan for winning. But remember, accepting the super-value drastically limits the kinds of arguments you can run. Be absolutely sure your case works with it before accepting.

Chances are good that your case is not idealistic. In that, you’ll need to reject idealism – and since it was explicitly articulated and supported, that will take some time. You’ll want to run Pragmatism as a super-value, with at least one reason to prefer it, and you’ll need to specifically refute the super-value links. From there, you have two options.

First, you could lean into the idealism vs pragmatism debate. Spend at least four minutes on it, accept the affirmative value, then run very minimal contentions/applications. Tell the judge that the affirmative wins idealistically, you win pragmatically – it’s just a question of which one to use. This approach gives you a better chance of gaining a logical advantage, but it’s strategically and persuasively risky.

Alternatively, you could minimize the super-value debate. You still run pragmatism, but you say only what you absolutely have to and you push through it as quickly as you can. Your goal isn’t to win the super-value conflict, it’s merely to not lose it. Then you spend your time on a different strategic center like your value or your contentions. Your hope is that the judge will be so intrigued by the other arguments in the round that he or she will be uncomfortable throwing them out just because of the super-values. This approach is stronger strategically, but you run a serious risk of losing the super-value debate entirely – and if you do, you’ve logically lost the round.

There is no silver bullet for this case. As always, the answer for which approach works best lies in the negative case you bring into the round.