

# Rhetorical analysis "lifeboat ethics" by jorden house-hay



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Jorden House-Hay Rhetorical Analysis- Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor I chose Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor, by Garret Hardin, to analyze because, out of all the readings I have ever done for English, this particular one is by far the most memorable. It is also perfectly suited for my argument, because it is appropriately as offensive as it is logical. The essay, in short, is a rhetorical argument that claims that helping the poor or unfortunate people of the world-though it is considered the “right” thing to do- is, in actuality, harmful to the very future of our species.

The actual message of the essay, however, is not what I want to endorse. When this essay was assigned to my class junior year, the almost overwhelming reaction was immediately a dismissal of the essay’s content, even though we had only so far been given the title. This can be attributed to the modern sense of morality regarding charity, or what the “politically right” thing to do is; my classmates were so outraged by the idea of not helping the poor that they formed their opinion before even being presented with the argument.

This reaction- sensibility before rationality- is what I wish to argue against. I think that this takes place a lot in society, with public support unanimously given to the general agreement of what is “morally right”, even though what is considered “morally right” today may not actually be a good thing at all, and is arbitrary at that; different generations and societies over time- and even different cultures in the same time period- can have totally different views on what is moral and what is not.

Therefore, there should always be, for the sake of intellectual purity, a detachment of sensibility from logic, especially regarding major decisions that can affect the entire country, or even the entire world. The essay is crude in terms of the modern western sense of morality, yes, but it is also very logically sound in a lot of ways, and worth at least dissection for truth before dismissal. So my purpose, or what I want to demonstrate in my analysis, is to show that just because something is offensive does not mean it is automatically incorrect.

In regards to the essay, I am going to be analyzing the ways the argument against helping the poor is constructed, and why it is written at all. For my purpose, it is essential to my point- that something morally “ wrong” can still have merit- that I demonstrate clearly that the argument Hardin makes is well thought out, written for a legitimate reason, and, above all, logically sound. In order to make my case, I think it is necessary for me to prove that Hardin did his research, and is writing the essay not just to offend people or get a reaction, but out of genuine concern and actual belief in what he is saying.

This is important because when the essay was released in 1974, it did indeed generate a public reaction, and was published in a well-known magazine, PsychologyToday, so the argument can be made that Hardin wrote the essay for the singular reason of getting attention and provoking people, which, if true, would debase everything I am trying to prove in regards to its validity. My goal in analyzing, then, is to provide enough rhetorical evidence of the legitimacy of Hardin’s argument that my own argument is subsequently well supported.

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To prove that Hardin's argument- and therefore my argument- is legitimate, I am going to analyze four major rhetorical devices he uses to help deliver his message. The first, and arguably most prominent, of these devices is metaphor. Hardin constructs the world in terms of an ocean, with its people floating in it. Wealth, in this metaphor, is a lifeboat, or safety, while poverty is being stranded in the ocean, unprotected from almost certain death.

The second device is logos; Hardin uses fact based evidence and logical appeal in his argument as opposed to emotional appeal or personal accreditation. A third major device found throughout the text is refutation; frequently, Hardin addresses opponent's arguments to his own points, and then ably refutes them. The final major device I will describe that Hardin employs is specific example; instead of just talking in general terms, Hardin uses specific examples of policies and perceptions that were current at the time of the essay.

I chose these devices to analyze in the essay because I think they are the most prevalent, and that together they provide very solid evidence that Hardin makes a sound argument. The first device, metaphor, is brilliant in the respect that it takes a complicated, general principle, and simplifies it down to a specific and easily understandable scenario, which in turn makes the point Hardin is trying to make more easily grasped.

Hardin sets up the metaphor as this: a lifeboat has a capacity of sixty people, and this safety is related to wealth. So, a lifeboat is the rich nations, and all around it in the water are the poor people of the world. There are fifty people in the lifeboat, according to the metaphor, so that leaves room for ten more.

The dilemma, however, is that there are significantly more than ten people that need to be saved.

This is the basis of Hardin's whole argument; it is considered morally right to help the people in the water, or the poor people in the world, but given the situation helping them all is just not possible; to do so would mean the demise of us all, just like letting one hundred people on a lifeboat that can afford ten, at the very most (Hardin actually demonstrates that even this is too much due to the need for "excess capacity" as a safety measure against disease and famine, but for the purpose of the paper I will not go into too much detail about that), will inevitably swamp it and save no one.

Thus, Hardin's argument is made clear; if we help the needy, we will all die in the long run, and in the short run suffer resultant consequences. This metaphor is used throughout the paper in addition to Hardin's support to make the message perfectly clear... for example, in addressing the guilt factor of ignoring the needs of the "drowning" people, he memorably states "Get out and yield your place to others. The point he makes is that short of switching places with a poor person, there is almost nothing we can do to help people that will not do more damage than good, so for reasons of absolute necessity we must be, to the appropriate extent, callous. While metaphor serves to make his argument clearer, Hardin's other devices work to give it logical and fact based support. The next device, logos, is a prime method Hardin uses to support the essay.

He argues from evidence, and logic, not emotion, and thus his information, which relies on the established credibility of others, cannot be refuted on

basis of opinion, as the essay without evidence would almost certainly be handled that way. For example, in arguing that the population of poorer nations is increasing much faster than the richer nations, he uses actual data amongst his argument: "As of 1973, the U. S had a population of 210 million people, who were increasing by .08 percent per year... [poor nations] are increasing at a rate of 3.3 percent per year. Using real evidence, he makes his point that poor reproduce faster in modern times, supports it with evidence, and then logically feeds the information back into his argument, again using the metaphor for clarification: not only are there more people in need of help-getting on the life boat- than we can afford to help, the numbers of the needy are creasing substantially faster, and the amount of people we cant afford to help is growing, making it necessary to become even more callous, or as Hardin puts it "The harsh ethics of the lifeboat become harsher".

Another example of this is in reference to an actual quote made ironically by a former senior member of a corporation Hardin is criticizing. He laces the specific point he is trying to make at the time with evidence from a source that can hardly be called unfairly biased, and thus sets up the same dynamic; he states his point, backs it with evidence, and logically ties it back to his thesis, which is a classic and textbook application of logos. By constructing his argument from logic, and fact -logos-, and not just opinion, Hardin makes it significantly more reliable.

The next device, refutation, is extremely important given the context of Hardin's thesis. Stating a case against helping the poor is understandably going to cause controversy, as it goes completely against the "politically

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correct" system of beliefs that state the opposite: helping those less fortunate than you is moral, and admirable. So, because of the touchiness of the subject, there is likely to be no shortage of counter arguments- by addressing some of what he probably considered the major ones, Hardin reinforces his case to some of his critics before they even start criticizing.

A prominent example of this is when he addresses an argument he know will arise against his point of limiting immigration. He imitates an opponent and describes their argument: "'You say that immigrants should be kept out. But aren't we all immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants? '" Having addressed his opponents case, Hardin then logically defeats it; he states that if we are to operate out of an inherent sense of guilt and " pure justice", then it follows that in the case of America, we must return all land, as well as all the assets and profit gained as a result of it, back to what natives remain.

It would be very hard to find even the most liberal opponent who would endorse this solution, thus Hardin shows that we have to operate based off real world situation, and " must begin the journey to tomorrow from the point we are today", essentially refuting the refutation and logically demonstrating that argument from perspective of absolute justice is absurd, and irrelevant. Through employing this method of refutation here, and also at other particularly controversial points in the text, Hardin shows conclusively that his argument is well thought out, and also defends it in the process, adding yet another level of validity to the essay.

Finally, in order to avoid being abstract and opening the door wide for increased criticism and skepticism , Hardin uses specific, real word examples

to go along with his general statement. One of these is The WorldFoodBank, an organization in the process of being established during the time of the essay's publication. The goal of the organization, in short, was to provide food for people in countries that had a lack of it. This is, of course, completely in opposition to what Hardin argues we should do, and so it is a very good example. To demonstrate why a global food bank is a bad idea, Hardin attacks it from several angles.

First, he debases its intention, stating that while it "appeals powerfully to our humanitarian impulses", it is not as pure of motive as its lobbyists claimed it to be. He outlines that an organization like that would mean "'Billions for U. S Business'", using the past example of the "Food for peace program" that did indeed, in historical fact, profit its creators much more than its supposed benefactors. After showing corruption in modern institution of charity, Hardin then defeats it in its own terms, or in other words he argues against it as if it was in reality pure in its intentions.

He argues that helping the overpopulated poor only leads to more overpopulation, and therefore a greater demand, that defeats possibility and would ultimately deplete the world's resources, leading to the suffering of our posterity. Here, Hardin thoroughly defeats the advantage of charity in a specific scenario relevant to his time, which solidifies his thesis and makes it much harder to refute than if he had stated it as opinion; the argument was made relatable to the current political system and functioning that Hardin wished to criticize, and by doing so he criticizes much more effectively.



Reading this essay years later gives us the advantage of analyzing his statements for truth, and subsequently having a better idea as to whether his argument was a valid one or not. One particular piece of assumptive data that jumped out of me was Hardin's prediction that India's population would increase from what it was in his time, " 600 million", to " 1. 2 billion in a mere 28 years. " Today, 37 years later, India's population is estimated around that number.

This gave me pause because, while it didn't increase quite as fast Hardin claimed, it was close enough that it proves the population numbers he was working with and the predictions he made were fairly accurate. I do not know the extent to which Hardin was right, and how much we should trust his solution to overpopulation, but I do know based on this evidence along with the clarity of his logic and the completeness of his argument that it certainly should not be dismissed without giving what it proposes careful consideration.

The reaction of my class, then, in rejecting it immediately was ill advised, and if that is at all an indicator of the habits of people in general, it can be a very dangerous thing; what Hardin claims will be a result of ignoring his advice is the suffering of our posterity and, eventually, the demise of our race and ruin of our environment.

As a concerned member of an overly sensitive society, I want to urge with this essay that we consider all proposal given from every source with any sort of legitimate or fact based ethos, and that we absolutely must take on this intelligent and logical consideration in order to avoid the mistake of

disregarding something that could be as serious as the subject addressed in Lifeboat ethics, especially for the poor reason of adherence to arbitrary, current morality. The fate of our country, of our children, and of the world itself could depend on it.

Literal application of this essay is tricky, because it argues for a general attitude more than a specific action, and an attitude is something that you apply constantly. A great example of a way this attitude can be applied, however, is in an election of any kind, obviously including the upcoming presidential one in 2012. A literal application of this essay would be to encourage people to really analyze what the country needs and what a candidate offers without including personal and irrelevant opinion into the decision, such as whether abortions should be legal or whether the candidate offers support or disapproval to gay marriage.

I understand that these are powerful issues to people, but given the state of the country I think there are definitely more important things- foreign policy and financial plans for example- that deserve more consideration. This encouragement could take place in a campaign to convince people of the necessity to logically and intelligently evaluate campaigns, or something of the sorts.