

Chris Xu

Mrs. Small

Humanities

December 19, 2025

Easy Way Out

In our lives, we often try to look for the “easy way out” because they are straightforward to understand and implement. However, these solutions often fail to address the actual problem and create additional issues. In 18th century Ireland, poverty, famine, and unemployment dominated the society, causing people to be pushed to their limits as they called for reform. Satirist Jonathan Swift wrote “A Modest Proposal” to criticize political exploitation by skillfully providing an easy solution for a complicated societal issue. He proposes for the Irish people to sell babies as food, simultaneously reducing the number of poor people in the country and creating a sustainable food source. In his grotesque proposal, Swift uses several rhetorical devices and logical fallacies to hint at flaws within his seemingly logical proposal. In “A Modest Proposal”, Swift satirically illustrates the dangers of simple solutions to complex social and economic problems by moving from emotional detachment, calculation, defense, and to rejection of reform, revealing how easily unethical ideas can be defended and why they ultimately fail to address the root causes of societal crises.

Before talking about his proposal, Swift begins by emotionally distancing the audience from the poor by transforming poverty into an abstract social burden that appears to require logistical management rather than morality. He describes starvation and homelessness with a detached, almost administrative tone. Swift illustrates “These mothers instead of being able to

work for their honest livelihood are forced to employ all their time in strolling to beg sustenance for their helpless infants" (Swift). By presenting the suffering of mothers through an observer's lense, Swift presents the reader with a problem of management rather than empathy. This tone minimizes the emotional weight of the suffering of people in poverty. Swift deliberately employs understatement to highlight the severity of the problem. He describes the state of Dublin with "the roads and cabin doors crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms" (Swift). Starvation and homelessness are treated as a routine inconvenience instead of a societal crisis. The situation is presented as an inconvenience to observers rather than a crisis for the ones experiencing it. The poor are further dehumanized by Swift's specific word choices such as "professed beggars", "breeders", and "saleable commodity", stripping individuals of their identity and reducing them to objects for economy utility (Swift). Additionally, Swift uses a false analogy describing poor people as livestock "which is more than we allow to sheep, black cattle, or swine, and my reason is, that these children are seldom the fruits of marriage" (Swift). This analogy equates human reproduction with animal breeding, which serves to reinforce the argument that the poor exist as resources instead of moral beings. By dulling moral sensitivity, Swift prepares the reader to accept his extremely grotesque proposal as a rational response.

As Swift begins to describe his proposal to the problem, he shifts his satirical persona to become more calculating which increases his credibility. Swift begins his actual proposal with "I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I hope will not be liable to the least objection" (Swift). He clashes with the content of the proposal with "humbly" and the title "a modest proposal" as verbal irony. Swift relies heavily on statistics and data for his proposal as he tries to make estimates of how his proposal could be applied to the country: "the charge of

nursing a beggar's child [...] to be about to shillings per annum, [...] and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which [...] will make four dishes" (Swift). Swift reduces human life into numbers: cost, profit, and utility. He only considers it from the perspective of economic gain, disregarding all morals in the argument. By framing children exclusively in terms of economic loss and gain, Swift exposes how logical reasoning can be used to justify cruelty. After applying all the numerical calculations to strengthen the proposal, Swift uses false dilemma to imply his proposal is the only successful one by focusing on the faults in other potential solutions. By eliminating complex, systematic reform from the proposal's considerations, Swift presents a false choice between his proposal and national collapse. Eventually, it allows him to conclude that "I can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom" (Swift) These rhetorical tools appeal to logos by presenting a internally coherent economic argument that readers can easily follow, revealing the use of logic to legitimize cruelty. Although internally consistent, the proposal uncovers how logic divorced from ethics can legitimize violence, proving that logical coherence is insufficient in solving complicated problems.

Swift's defense of his proposal reveals how expert endorsement and economic efficiency are falsely treated as solutions, even when they perpetuate exploitation rather than resolve it. He appeals to authority by referencing "a very knowing American" who says that baby flesh and human carcasses are prime delicacies (Swift). Americans were not considered to be reputable sources during the time this proposal was written. The authority is unnamed, unqualified, and geographically distant, making this an ironic reference. Instead of actively citing a professional, the proposal is supported by an appeal to authority, which serves a double negative critiquing

extremely immoral solutions proposed by the people in control. Swift additionally uses hyperbole to turn exploitation into consumption: “I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children” (Swift). Using descriptive language depicting the phenomenon. Economic exploitation is literalized, revealing that the landowning “rulers” are consuming the poor with rent and unfair policies. The landlords do not physically eat the parents, but Swift exaggerates the effect into physical consumption. The use of hyperbole transforms the situation into a grotesque scene to expose the economic abuse of society. Swift’s forceful defense reveals that the proposal requires relentless justification as it lacks morality. At this stage in the essay, Swift begins to expose the moral emptiness and true problems beneath the proposal.

Swift uses a simple extreme solution over more reasonable solutions to critique the considerations of people holding power using straw man. He rejects economic solutions that allow the economy to become more stable such as expedients “Of taxing our absentees at five shillings a pound [...] Of utterly rejecting the materials and instruments that 195 promote foreign luxury: Of curing the expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our women” (Shift). This is a subtle attack on the greed of the ruling class, as Swift reveals how those holding power prioritize economic advantage and political convenience over meaningful reforms that fix societal problems. Swift also dismisses embracing national pride by “learning to love our [Irish] country” (Swift). This is because the rich separate themselves both religiously and through processes. They view themselves arrogantly because of their beliefs and social class. Each of these reforms are applicable to target systematic or moral failures, yet Swift simplifies these reforms into impractical fantasies, mirroring how policymakers often dismiss morally responsible solutions to maintain personal gain. This technique mirrors the decisions of

policymakers who only consider economic benefits. In this way, Swift points out the problem is rooted in systematic and political failures, not in human nature. The whole proposal is empty since Swift constantly reaffirms his moral neutrality and neglect of personal interest, making it clear that failure lies in a lack of will to fix problems. By rejecting all reasonable reforms, Swift completes his satirical progression.

By progressing through emotional detachment to rejecting ethical reform, Swift demonstrates how cruelty can be framed as reason. “A Modest Proposal” shows that simple solutions cannot address the root causes of complicated societal problems. Swift’s modest proposal chooses convenience over rationality, so it is the “easy way out” since it avoids the difficulty of addressing issues involving societal inequality, political corruption, and economic exploitation. By exposing the logical appeal of the easy way out, Swift emphasizes that simple solutions detached from ethics fail in society.

Works Cited

Swift, Jonathan “A Modest Proposal.” 1729