

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”

An essay identifying three different styles of appeals
used in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s
“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

In his response to the "Public Statement by Eight Alabama Clergymen," Martin Luther King Jr. uses a myriad of appeals to reveal logical fallacies, promote his ideas of civil disobedience, and clarify his aspirations and hopes for the city of Birmingham. Though he uses multiple styles of appeals, King tends to be most effective when aiming at ethical, religious and emotional adjurations.

First, he appeals to the ethical conscience of the Clergymen by discussing a philosophical divergence between "*just laws*" and "*unjust laws*." King says that "there are *just laws*, and *unjust laws*," and that he "would be the first to advocate obeying just laws." By saying that, he solidifies his legalistic integrity and respect of the laws currently in place in Birmingham, as well as the other cities of the United States. However, he is not making this statement in vain; he backs up his position by stating that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Knowing that he is primarily writing to Clergymen, he furthers his ideas by backing them with the opinions of a respected theologian, Saint Augustine, who said "an unjust law is no law at all." This type of ethical appeal might have been one of the most effective when debating his point with Clergymen because of their heavily emphasized theological and philosophical educations. However, one of the downfalls of an ethical appeal—at least in this case—is the Clergymen's skewed and corrupt ethical standings illustrated by their seemingly covert degradation of African Americans in their "Public Statement." It is quite difficult to reason ethically with someone that doesn't have a morality firmly rooted in ethos.

Second, King appeals to the religious nature of the Clergymen by referencing Biblical stories with which they would be familiar. He says that there is "nothing new about civil disobedience," which could be seen in the "refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved." This reference would be understood and well-received by theologians, clergymen, and the religious, *provided* they have a

sound Christian worldview and moral foundation. King distinguishes between methods of civil disobedience, reiterating that he does not “advocate evading or defying the law as the rabid segregationist[s] would do,” but rather he asserts that “one who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly*, and with a willingness to accept the penalty.” This differentiation between violence and non-violent revolts separates King from radicals sharing in his same goals. He furthers his religious appeal by relating it to “early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.” This type of religious appeal could be more widely accepted since it doesn’t reference particular Biblical characters, but rather just the common believers. This religious appeal could result in a shortcoming for the same reasons the ethical appeal wasn’t as powerful as it could have been; corruption in the religious foundation of the recipients.

Third, King varies from his other ethical and religious approaches, hoping to emotionally appeal to the Clergymen, as well as other readers of his letter. He, using emotional personal details, is combating the idea that segregation will just have to be waited out. He starts his argument by relating to “those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation.” For them, he says, it must be “easy...to say wait.” He discusses events as drastic and extreme as “vicious mobs lynch[ing] your mothers and fathers at will and drown[ing] your sisters and brothers at whim” to the more mild, but nonetheless gut-wrenching answering a little boy’s question of “Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?” By using many examples of the harsh racial reality, King hopes to show the “depressing clouds of inferiority” that surround the black community throughout their daily lives. He talks of the heart-breaking times that his brethren have found their “tongue[s] twisted and [their] speech stammering as [they sought] to explain to [their] six-year-old daughter why she [couldn’t] go to the public amusement park that had just been advertised on television.” That type of emotional appeal, especially the portions involving family members and

children (because of their innocence), would touch many people of the public and, hopefully, the Clergymen to whom King was responding.

King, being a very intelligent man and copiously influential writer, knew that a single type of appeal couldn't possibly yield the same effects on all the Clergymen, let alone the public. Therefore, he tried appealing to several different aspects of the human spirit, including but not limited to; ethics, religion, and emotion. These three in particular—in contrast to logic and academic—could be understood by the vast majority of the general public and could affect the most people. It is through these types of appeals that he explains his goals in Birmingham and attempts to gain understanding of his “legitimate and unavoidable impatience” with regards to the racist acts and segregation running rampant in that city.