

Waddell's Advice on How to Improve the Ehrlichs' Rhetorical Strategy

In Perils of a Modern Cassandra, Craig Waddell suggests that the Ehrlichs should revise their rhetorical strategy in The Population Bomb because it is ineffective in attracting readers to their argument. Particularly problematic are the Ehrlichs' alienating attitude towards non-educated non-environmentalists in his audience, a lack of both an inviting ethos, and a lack of compassion for the reader. Since the goal of a book is usually to inform or persuade readers, the Ehrlichs' book does not serve its purpose and is therefore ineffective. The same "ineffective argument" problem can be seen in Betrayal of Science and Reason, since many of the Ehrlichs' key ideas on environmental problems (along with their contestable use of rhetoric) in The Population Bomb are mirrored in Betrayal of Science and Reason.

The following passages were taken from Betrayal of Science and Reason to demonstrate what Waddell sees as problems in the Ehrlichs' rhetoric:

“...Paul began to appear on radio and television to condemn the behavior of human beings in general. The possible public response worried him less than his colleagues' reactions because, as is the case for most scientists, Paul's ego rewards come mostly from the approval of his peers” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 8).

This passage supports Waddell's claim by showing that one of the Ehrlichs is lacking in compassion toward humankind. When reading this passage, the reader gets a sense of ethos that revolves mostly around Paul Ehrlich's ego, and consequently, the reader feels that the entire environmentalist argument of the book was written to satisfy his ego. This is because Paul Ehrlich liked the approval of his educated, environmentalist peers, and therefore, he really did not need to care about others in his audience.

“Anti-science as promoted by the brownlash is not a unique phenomenon in our society; the largely successful efforts of creationists to keep Americans ignorant of evolution is another example, which is perhaps not entirely unrelated” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 12).

This is a good example of how the Ehrlichs inadvertently alienate large sections of their actual, not invoked, audience. The Ehrlichs may have invoked an audience full of educated, environmentalist readers, but this is not the audience who is reading Betrayal of Science and Reason. There are also creationists who *might*

happen to harbor some environmentalist sentiment and who *might* want to share a stronger environmentalist view given that the Ehrlichs' argument is persuasive enough. However, this passage is an insult to creationist readers, since the Ehrlichs are essentially identifying them using the strong, suggestive words "ignorance," "anti-science," and "brownlash."

"The public was blissfully unaware, and no one cared unless some toxic brew exploded"
(Ehrlich and Ehrlich 54).

Here again, the Ehrlichs toy with the idea that the American public is largely composed of ignorant, non-caring people. I feel that insulting an audience by exercising ideas of superiority over it is not a good way to make people listen to an argument. For evidence of this small claim, I cite all the remarks people in our class have made toward the Ehrlichs' use of ineffective, demeaning rhetoric in Betrayal of Science and Reason.

In reading Betrayal of Science and Reason, I saw that many of the rhetorical problems Waddell identified in the Ehrlichs' earlier book are also present in Betrayal of Science and Reason. Waddell not only identifies these rhetorical problems, of which I have given examples above; he also offers one necessary suggestion to Ehrlich. Waddell includes a section on Carolyn Merchant's "taxonomy of ethics" in his Perils of a Modern Cassandra to suggest that the Ehrlichs need to be aware of the three types of ethos (63). They are egocentric, homocentric, and ecocentric. While the Ehrlichs ideally want to convince readers to adopt a harmonious, ecocentric outlook on the environment, their ineffective rhetoric casts an egocentric shade on Betrayal of Science and Reason. This is a major inconsistency in the Ehrlichs' argument, and Waddell briefly raises the section on Merchant's "taxonomy of ethics" to offer the Ehrlichs advice on how to make a stronger, more attractive argument (63).

References:

Ehrlich and Ehrlich. Betrayal of Science and Reason. Island Press: Washington D.C., 1996.

Waddell, Craig. Landmark Essays: on Rhetoric and the Environment. Hermagoras Press: New Jersey, 1998.