Two Views of Affirmative Action

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal….” Even before it became a nation, America was heralded as a land of equality. Thomas Jefferson’s statement begs more than a few questions, one of which is: “How can we ensure equality to everyone?” Beginning in the late 1960s, the federal government provided an answer to this question in the form of affirmative action. In recent years, many people have called this policy into question. Interestingly, affirmative action is sometimes attacked by the people it helps, and defended by those it hurts. In particular, two recent essays demonstrate that people’s race does not necessarily determine their beliefs on the issue of affirmative action. “Why I Believe in Affirmative Action” is by Paul R. Spickard, a white man who is defending affirmative action, while “A Negative Vote on Affirmative Action” is by Shelby Steele, an African-American who is attacking the program. When the two essays are considered as responses to each other, Steele’s logical explanations of the effects and implications of affirmative action expose the flaws in Spickard’s ethical arguments supporting it.

Both authors structure their arguments to appeal to their respective audiences. Since Spickard’s essay is written for Christianity Today, he makes a lot of ethical appeals that a Christian audience could easily relate to. Steele, on the other hand, is writing for The New York Times Magazine, so he relies on logic that would appeal to a more general audience. Spickard begins his ethical appeal by establishing his credibility through focusing on his support of affirmative action even though he has been denied employment because of the program. He says, “I am willing to take second best if overall fairness is achieved,” and backs up his position by referring to Philippians 2:3-6, which instructs Christians to look out for the welfare of others before their own. He is, in
effect, saying that his position must be right because he supports affirmative action out of the goodness of his heart, rather than because he benefits from it.

In contrast to Spickard, Steele begins with the opposite scenario, stating how he could really be helped by affirmative action through financial aid for his children’s college education. However, he says that he does not want the assistance of affirmative action, because he believes the help should go to those who are truly at a disadvantage, not to those whose only “disadvantage” is the color of their skin. To him, it simply makes no sense for African-American students who are “well removed from the kind of deprivation that would qualify [them] as ‘disadvantaged’” to receive scholarship and grant money when that assistance is denied to poor white students.

Next, Spickard claims that affirmative action is a way to help make life fair for minorities. He states that “America’s initial push for equal opportunity resulted in very little progress,” so affirmative action was needed to ‘level the playing field.’ Steele, on the other hand, contradicts Spickard by saying that “blacks had made great advances during the 60’s without quotas,” and that the quotas involved in affirmative action actually slanted the ‘playing field’ in the opposite direction, rather than leveling it. However, neither author provides any evidence to back up his claim, so both statements must be dismissed as unsubstantiated opinions.

Unfortunately, the unsubstantiated opinions mentioned above are used as evidence to support later assertions. For example, Spickard uses his assertion that America’s first attempts at creating equality were failures to explain that “blacks and others had… been shut out of jobs… [and] the education necessary to qualify for jobs.” By using his opinion as evidence, Spickard assumes that his readers will accept his opinion without further thought, thus providing evidence to back up his assertion that affirmative action is necessary. Steele makes a similar assumption about his statement asserting that blacks had been making great advances without affirmative action. Like Spickard, he attempts to deceive the reader by using an unsubstantiated opinion to back up another assertion. In this case, his assertion is the polar opposite of Spickard’s. While Spickard is using an assumption to try to show the reader that affirmative action is right, Steele uses the same tactic to try to
show the reader that it is wrong. This tactic tends to cut down both authors’ credibility, since—whether intentionally or not—it is deceptive.

Spickard now begins attacking those who oppose affirmative action. He focuses mainly on their terminology, particularly the term “reverse discrimination,” which has been used many times to describe affirmative action’s negative effects on white males. According to Spickard, this term implies “that there is a normal, proper direction for discrimination,” that is, it implies that it is acceptable for white males to discriminate, but not to be discriminated against. This would make “reverse discrimination” a discriminatory term, since the implication is that whites should be allowed to discriminate against minorities. Once again, this refers back to the ethical concept of fairness—it is not fair to allow white males to discriminate, while preventing other groups from discriminating back. Steele takes the logical approach, examining the origins of the term “reverse discrimination.” He argues that affirmative action effectively made black the color of preference, bringing back “the very marriage of color and preference (in reverse) that we set out to eradicate.” With this statement, Steele is saying that the “reverse” in “reverse discrimination” does not mean that the wrong people are being discriminated against; it simply means that the discrimination has shifted directions—it has been reversed. The direction has not been reversed from the proper direction, it has merely been reversed from the historical direction. The problem with “reverse discrimination” is not that the wrong group of people is being discriminated against; the problem is that anyone is being discriminated against.

There are a few aspects of the affirmative action debate that Spickard does not cover in his essay. However, Steele does address many of them by voicing his objections to affirmative action, instead of simply refuting the statements of its supporters. One of his main objections is that, because it states that minorities need extra help, affirmative action implies that they are inferior to whites. Although subtle, this implication is very important, since most people unconsciously equate a need for assistance with an inability to function without that assistance—inferiority. Steele then follows a logical sequence of events to show that, since affirmative action makes minorities appear to be inferior, they are often passed over when promotion time comes. He claims that minorities are often passed over because of “discrimination against the stigma of questionable
competence that affirmative action marks [minorities] with.” In other words, affirmative action creates a “glass ceiling” which minorities cannot break through because employers are not willing to risk entrusting important jobs to people who may be incompetent. When this occurs, affirmative action becomes a very real disadvantage for minorities, since the employer’s perception may be that affirmative action was the only way they were able to get the job in the first place. If this is the case, then their competence is deemed questionable, and they are usually not given an opportunity to defend themselves. It would be interesting to see how Spickard would respond to this situation, but this issue is not addressed in his essay. It is possible that, being more of an observer of affirmative action, he is not even aware that this is an issue.

Spickard is aware that society has been unfair to minorities for centuries. He explains that his ancestors profited from things like the slave trade, and says, “I am standing on the shoulders of my ancestors and their discriminatory behavior.” He believes that affirmative action can help repay the wrongs that have been done to minorities in the past. This seems like a strong argument, as most Americans would consider any opposition to payment for past wrongs unkind, or even evil. However, when Steele examines this argument more deeply, he exposes its major flaw with simple logic. He states that “it is impossible to repay blacks living today for the historic suffering of the race,” demonstrating the absurdity of trying to make up for what our ancestors did. According to Steele, these attempts to pay for the wrongs of our ancestors grow out of a need “to impose on the world a degree of justice that simply does not exist.” In other words, affirmative action seeks to correct wrongs that cannot be corrected because the people who were involved are no longer living.

When Spickard’s essay is examined alone, its arguments are quite convincing. However, Steele’s essay effectively addresses the arguments of his opposition. As a result, his essay becomes much more effective than Spickard’s, because he is able to point out all of the faults in Spickard’s arguments. When these essays are read together and compared to each other, Steele’s logic is much more convincing than Spickard’s moral appeal, and exposes the flaws in the affirmative action program.