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# A Communitarian Critique of Dr. Phil: The Individualistic Ethos of Self-Help Rhetoric

Eric K. Jones

*Communitarians have criticized liberals for being too focused on individual rights and responsibilities. But not many scholars have raised this criticism in the area of self-help rhetoric. To address this void, this essay formulates a communitarian critique of the rhetorical devices Dr. Phil uses to counsel guests on his television program. Many scholars have published insightful work on the communitarian/liberalism debate. This paper extends that debate by providing a moral critique of the rhetoric espoused in this popular form of self-help entertainment. Dr. Phil's persuasive appeals to his guests reveal how notions of individualism appear during the show's dialogue.*

Daytime talk-shows have emerged as one of the most popular forms of television programming. Since Phil Donohue ushered in the interactive talk show format during the 1970s, a steady stream of disciples have adopted it to offer their own fare. Many of these shows have failed to earn the ratings necessary to garner profitable returns. In spite of this, Dr. Phil McGraw's self-help talk show continues to prove that this genre is capable of attracting millions of viewers. A nationwide television audience now religiously watches the lucrative Oprah Winfrey show spin-off. According to the Nielson ratings, The Dr. Phil show consistently earns the second highest ratings average among all talk shows and consistently reaches the top 25 syndicated programs among adults from 18-49 years of age.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Phil McGraw has become one of television's most popular personalities<sup>2</sup> He staunchly advocates personal responsibility during his counseling sessions. This article argues that his on-air counseling environment often cultivates a narrow perspective where individuals immerse themselves in their own world and they hardly ever consider the larger communal context. Dr. Phil delivers his counseling advice through rhetorical devices which indicate strong individualistic appeals.

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The author contends that the widespread popularity of Dr. Phil's program reflects a climate of obsessive individualism among today's society. The term individualism is defined as the result of a general trend in which people have downplayed the importance of civic duties and social responsibilities (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). This partially results in a compulsive interest in protecting personal rights (Glendon, 1991) and an idiosyncratic approach toward personal well-being (Raz, 1986) and self development (Lukes, 1973). Among all of the other talk shows, this program was chosen for criticism because of his success as an author of self-help books<sup>3</sup>. In this regard, the term "self-help" implies his bias toward an independent road to personal improvement. One prominent communitarian scholar has argued against such a focus because it exists at the expense of social responsibility (Etzioni, 1993). According to this view, individuals have the right to self improvement, but they must balance these efforts by serving the people within their community. In many cases, Dr. Phil's counseling stops at the individual level because he rarely encourages them to share their self-improvement lessons with others. (Some notable exceptions to this argument will be addressed later in this article.) For communitarians, this kind of individualism has contributed to the erosion of close-knit community networks that characterized the social climate of earlier times (Putnam, 2000). When such a large audience accepts Dr. Phil's individualistic approach, they are not actively considering how they can benefit other community members who may learn from their example.

Dr. Phil's persuasive appeals to his guests reveal how notions of individualism appear during the show's dialogue. These appeals can be categorized into seven different patterns of rhetorical devices. I identify these patterns while constructing a communitarian critique. This will build on the work of other communitarian scholars who have laid the theoretical groundwork for communitarianism as a moral alternative to the liberalism perspective (Christians, Ferré, & Fackler, 1994; Etzioni, 1993; Glendon, 1991; Sandel, 1982). Specifically, communitarians have criticized liberals for being too focused on individual rights and responsibilities. Similarly, some scholars have criticized the genre of self-help literature for being too fixated on personal aspiration. Woodstock (2006) examines the concept of self in narrative authority and McGee (2005) criticizes America as a makeover culture obsessed with self improvement. But not many scholars have raised this criticism in the area of self-help rhetoric. Many scholars have published insightful work on the communitarian/liberalism debate (Caney, 1992; Hodges, 1996; Mulhall & Swift, 1992; Rawls, 1971; Rawls, 1973; Sandel, 1982). This paper extends that debate by providing a moral critique of the rhetoric espoused in this popular form of self-help entertainment.

To advance this argument, the author summarizes the communitarian perspective, identifies some effects of obsessive individualism on community and reviews the communitarian critique of liberalism. The author then points out how Dr. Phil uses rhetorical devices during his program. The argument is concluded by discussing the implications of this paper for the morality of self-help rhetoric.

### The Communitarian Perspective

In the eyes of communitarian scholars, private and individualistic aims can damage the moral climate of a society if they are unchecked by an active participation in social and political life. In Etzioni's (1993) description of communitarian thinking, he argues that individual freedom relies on mutual respect and strong social and political networks.

A communitarian perspective recognizes that the preservation of individual liberty depends on the active maintenance of the institutions of civil society where citizens learn respect for others as well as self-respect; where we acquire a lively sense of our personal and civic responsibilities, along with an appreciation of our own rights and the rights of others; where we develop the skills of self government as well as the habit of governing ourselves and learn to serve others-not just self. (pp. 253-254)

Sirianni and Friedland (2003) have added that without this balance between individual rights and social responsibilities, the entire culture will become self-centered and directed by special interests.

One way to support this balance is to identify how scholars have addressed some key concepts that are at the center of this perspective. Etzioni (1995) outlines three of these issues in his description of communitarianism. A fourth issue was added because of its value for this article. They include the relationship between individuals and their social environment, the issue of rights and responsibilities, the definition of community, and the relationship between nurturing family and building strong community.

When considering the first issue, the relationship between individuals and their social environment, Etzioni (1995) argues that a person and their social surroundings are inextricably linked. The strict separation between individuals and their surrounding communities is pointless. In particular, he believes that a community molds the opinions, actions, and moral fiber of its individual members. This does not mean that he ignores the significance of individual freedom. On the contrary, he sees responsible individualism as attainable in conjunction with the establishment of strong communal bonds.

Etzioni also explains communitarian thinking as a philosophy where individual rights are connected to social responsibilities. He mentions that “Communitarians are in the business of defining and promoting societal balances. They recognize that most individual rights have a social responsibility which is their corollary” (p. 20). This is where communitarians make their moral argument for practicing social responsibility. In this regard, people strive to earn the privilege of individual liberty. The practice of one’s civic duty becomes the payment for enjoying one’s individual freedoms. It becomes morally right to serve your community because of this trade-off between rights and responsibilities.

Another issue Etzioni deals with is the definition of community. He points out that one of the primary criticisms of communitarian thought is the lack of a clear and coherent definition. Fowler (1995) identifies three different categories of community definitions in his work. Without going into detail about their meaning here, the labels he used were communities of ideas, communities of public crisis, and communities of memory<sup>4</sup>. Two definitions are germane to the purpose of this essay because they will guide its labeling. Etzioni’s (1995) definition is pertinent because it establishes that communities are networks of collaborative associations. “Communities are webs of social relations that encompass shared meanings and above all shared values” (Etzioni, 1995, p. 24). This underscores the criticism that the notion of community can be quite vague. With such a wide-ranging definition, it is possible to consider a neighborhood, a city, or a country as a legitimate community. Even so, the bottom line is that a community cannot be considered an isolated individual. Walzer’s (1983) definition of community is germane because it is generally accepted as a robust explanation. Fowler (1995) supports this by making the following observation in his work: “Michael Walzer’s conception of community, restrained, pluralistic, and hostile to even a hint of tyranny is widely and rightly admired” (Fowler, 1995, p. 93). Walzer’s notion of community is relevant to this argument because he incorporates the fundamental idea of “communal provision”. In this notion, members of a community provide for one another’s needs in order to be safe and secure.

Indeed, one might say that the original community is a sphere of security and welfare, a system of communal provision, distorted, no doubt by gross inequalities of strength and cunning. ... Different experiences and different conceptions lead to different patterns of provision. (p. 65)

Walzer recognizes that individuals display different levels of commitment and resources in their efforts to give back to community.

This definition is useful because it is consistent with how many people in American culture deal with community issues. They choose to give back in their own way instead of choosing to give back out of obligation (Croft, 2001).

It is also important to clarify the aspect of communitarianism that deals with the role of the family in creating a healthy community. Some scholars have proposed defining the family as a community (Fowler, 1995). Others consider the family not as a community, but as a prerequisite to strong community building. For example, Etzioni (1993) argues that rebuilding the ethical basis of a community depended on cultivating its families. Walzer (1983) says that social institutions must be available to publicly accept the needs of a society to be considered communities. The typical American family with its reliance on privacy does not perform this important function. In his book he writes, "but one of our needs is community itself: culture, religion, and politics. It is only under the aegis of these three that all the other things we need become socially-recognized needs" (p. 65). Many families depend on the institutions of culture, religion and politics to fulfill their own "socially-recognized needs." This shows that communities have a broader scope than families. Therefore, families should not be considered communities. This does not mean that families are insignificant in their relationship to community. In fact, Bloom (1987) argues that the breakdown of the family is harmful to any effort to rejuvenate strong community ties. The author is convinced by Walzer's conception of community that the family should not be considered by itself a community. As Bloom (1987) and Etzioni (1993) argue, the family should be a vehicle where parents instill the importance of community building in their children.

### The Effects of Obsessive Individualism on Community

Obsessive individualism leaves harmful effects on the cohesion of community networks. In his classic work, *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed the tendency of Americans to develop a careless attitude about contributing to the social welfare of their democracy (de Tocqueville, 1835/1966):

As social equality spreads there are more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. ... Each man is forever thrown back on himself

alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart. (p. 478)

In this passage, de Tocqueville supports the claim that individual citizens who routinely avoid civic duties and social activities can suffer from loneliness, disconnect and apathy. On the other hand, civic participation makes people more concerned about their community's primary issues and concerns. They begin to consider the broader scope of communal issues around them and they spend less time focusing on personal and private matters.

Individualism is also counterproductive when people attempt to exchange meaningful ideas in a democratic society. According to Glendon (1991), individualism has corrupted what she calls "rights talk." Rights talk is when citizens invoke their individual rights too enthusiastically during public debate. In Glendon's view, rights talk has had a very negative impact on the climate of public and political discourse.

Our rights talk, in its absoluteness, promotes unrealistic expectations, heightens social conflict, and inhibits dialogue that might lead toward consensus, accommodation, or at least the discovery of common ground. In its silence concerning responsibilities, it seems to condone acceptance of the benefits of living in a democratic social welfare state, without accepting the corresponding personal and civic obligations. In its relentless individualism, it fosters a climate that is inhospitable to society's losers, and that systematically disadvantages caretakers and dependants, young and old. In its neglect of civil society, it undermines the principal seedbeds of civic and personal virtue. (p. 14)

The absoluteness Glendon mentions is damaging to civil dialogue because it indicates intransigence on the part of citizens to work toward compromise and collaboration.

For self-help television, individualism tends to cultivate an attitude where there is too much focus on individual welfare. Here, the term individualism stems from two liberalistic ideas. One is the concept of personal well-being and the other is the concept of self development. These notions emphasize the American ideal of free will. But they need to be balanced responsibly with communal sacrifice and contribution. Without such a balance, individuals may become self absorbed in their efforts to help themselves.

The concept of personal well-being was described by Raz (1986) as an assessment of a person's lifestyle according to their own perceptions of success. For example, Raz, who is cited often in liberalism

scholarship, wrote a chapter on the moral justification of personal well-being. The following definition of personal well-being was taken from his work:

...an evaluation of a person's life [that indicates] how good or successful it is from [her or] his point of view ...It is not an evaluation of [her or] his contribution to the well-being of others, or to culture, or to the ecosystem, etc. (p. 289)

Raz's conception lacks a responsible balance with communal sacrifice because individuals rely on their own notions of success to evaluate their lifestyle. As people strive for this definition of well being, they become inconsiderate of others around them, and unaware of their connection to their community.

The concept of self development was described by Lukes (1973) as a freethinking approach to deciding how to go about personal improvement. Part of Lukes's definition draws on the writings of John Stuart Mill (1873), who supported this idea as an activity that should not be burdened with restrictions. When he wrote *On Liberty*, Mill described self development as an important activity for people who live in a changing society: "The importance to man and society, of a large variety in types of character, and of giving full freedom to human nature to expand itself in innumerable and conflicting directions" (p.177). According to Mill, self development should be encouraged as a path to self improvement that places no limitation on human nature. In many ways community involvement can impose limits on self improvement, but this is not necessarily a bad thing. Such limits can reflect a healthy struggle between personal growth and communal contribution. By drawing on Mills, Lukes's work lacks a responsible balance with communal sacrifice because individuals decide how to go about improving their lives with no consideration for community contribution. Dr. Phil's show is an appropriate vehicle to look for these notions because he often avoids community concerns. The author asserts that obsessive individualism in this context can be just as unhealthy as it is in other areas because it can encourage people to think only of helping themselves and not others.

### The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism

One of the most prominent communitarian scholars to argue against the liberalism perspective in ethics is Sandel (1982). In his work, Sandel focuses on criticizing the work of John Rawls (1971), one of the most prominent liberalism scholars. Sandel's criticism focuses on Rawls's conception of the individual self, which Sandel describes as an isolated



individual who can in no way become attached to her or his moral aim. For instance, a woman who decides to help a beginning college student by providing him with a school loan cannot be changed individually or spiritually by such an act. For Rawls, individuals remain forever separated from their perceptions of moral good. Sandel argues that this conception is flawed, and portrays an inaccurate representation of moral experience.

Sandel's (1982) second criticism centers on the notion of community. For Rawls, the notion of community constitutes a collection of "individuated selves." This collection of individual selves can be described as a group of individuals working together, but they never become a truly cohesive unit. They always maintain their individual "asocial" character. For instance, a group of community members who decide to raise funds for the funeral of a family's slain son cannot form a cohesive bond during the moral experience to create a new collective identity. Rawls would say that individuals would maintain their unique identity even though they are collaborating with others on a moral duty. For Sandel, this is a threat to the person's need to feel like they are a part of her or his community.

Another philosophical difference between Sandel and Rawls lies within the objectivist versus the subjectivist view of morality. Rawls's view on morality is considered an objectivist view. Supporters of an objectivist view emphasize individual preferences during moral decision-making. Sandel (1982) argues that this view "reduces moral choices to arbitrary expressions of preferences" (p. 41). On the contrary, Sandel believes in a subjectivist view of morality. Supporters of the subjectivist view contend that people don't make sense of their moral activity without regard for its community impact. Rather, people interpret moral experience based on their shared views with others in a common moral aim.

### Observations of Individualistic Rhetoric

For this article, the author sampled 31 episodes aired on NBC affiliate WIS channel 10 in Columbia, South Carolina from June 5 to July 16, 2003. The observations focused on ten randomly-selected episodes from this period. Rhetorical statements to show how notions of individualism appeared within the content of Dr. Phil's show were identified. In order to do this, the author established how scholars conceptualized individualism within the communitarian/liberalism debate. Second, the author made an educated guess about the results. The author was the only person who identified rhetorical statements on the program. There was no intercoder reliability conducted for this article.

To establish the conception of individualism, the author looked at the notions of self development (Lukes, 1973) and personal well being (Raz, 1986). This was necessary because both concepts build on Rawls's liberal conception of the self as a disconnected and isolated individual. The observations were completed with the following guidelines. If Dr. Phil expressed an emphasis for the individual's ability to act responsibly for themselves, and he ignored the person's ability to contribute to the welfare of community in his rhetoric, then his persuasive devices were labeled as having a strong respect for individualism. Lukes's (1973) notion of self development is about a person's freedom to decide how they want to improve their lives. This idea is useful because Dr. Phil's guests have chosen to pursue his advice from among hundreds of other self-help mediums. This emphasis on self choice indicates an absence of community consideration. Raz's (1986) notion of personal well being is useful for this analysis because it distinguishes individualistic welfare from community welfare. For instance, Raz makes it clear in his definition that a person does not have to contribute to the well-being of others to achieve personal well-being. This will demonstrate a lack of concern for communitarian values.

The author focused on how Dr. Phil used rhetorical devices to persuade his guests. This was done by targeting the persuasive strategies he used during the on-air counseling sessions. A number of scholars have shown in their work that rhetorical patterns can emerge in a variety of public situations. Hart and Daughton (2004) have examined the analysis of public rhetoric in text, media, and political discourse. Hariman (1990) has pointed out that popular trials covered through the mass media have displayed rhetorical form in many ways. Flower (2008) wrote about a rhetorical model of community engagement and pedagogy for marginalized and privileged groups. According to Kohrs-Campbell (1996), rhetoric is defined as "the study of what is persuasive. The issues it examines are social truths, addressed to others, justified by reasons that reflect cultural values" (p. 6). Accordingly, the author looked for evidence in Dr. Phil's counseling sessions that his rhetoric made sense to others, was based on solid reasons or purposes, and was accepted as strong values of a culture.

The following rhetorical devices were categorized as individualistic because they all placed the onus of recovery on the individual person. Solutions were based primarily on individual initiative, individual responsibility and individual agency. They included personal development, personal responsibility, and personal health.

*Personal Development Rhetoric*

In the following cases, the distinguishing feature of personal development rhetoric was the role of Dr. Phil in his attempts to persuade his guests. During his counseling sessions with these guests, his role was mostly that of a motivational speaker. As such, he was trying to persuade these guests to reach their full potential.

The first case in this category was taken from the show that aired on June 10 (Stewart & Casey, 2003). The overall theme was called “taking off your social mask.” In this particular show, Dr. Phil was counseling a guest named Jim, a middle-aged white male who was afraid of revealing his baldness. As a result, he would constantly walk around with a hat on his head to conceal his hair loss. In this session, Dr. Phil used analogy as a rhetorical device to convince Jim to stop wearing his hat and to shave his head completely bald. The following conversation occurred when Dr. Phil (who had embraced his own baldness) related a personal experience to Jim:

[My wife] Robin asked me before, “Have you always been bald?” when I first met her. I said, “Yea! Grass won’t grow on a busy street!” [Laughs] And being forever cute and a definite smart ass, she said, “No and it won’t come up through concrete neither!” [Laughs] So you just accept it! If it is who you are, why would you not accept who you are? (June 10, 2003)

His use of analogies, in this case, effectively brought humor to the situation and relaxed Jim to the extent that he removed his hat and revealed his baldness before millions of people later during that show.

Another case in this category of personal development rhetoric appeared during the show that aired on June 23, 2003. The theme of this show was called “moochers, part II,” a show that focused on adults who were still living at home with their parents. During this show, Dr. Phil agreed to counsel a man named Dominic who was still living at home with his mother Dale. Dominic’s age was not revealed but he looked like he was probably in his late twenties to early thirties. Dominic was not only still living with his mother, but he also was spending his days sleeping on the couch, playing video games, and surfing the internet. Dr. Phil used the rhetorical device of appealing to a cultural value in order to convince Dominic to seek employment. The cultural value he appealed to was the value of a strong work ethic. To paraphrase his advice in this case, he affirmed Dominic’s goal to become a fire fighter, but he warned Dominic that his couch potato habits were ruining his chances of doing anything. In this instance, Dr. Phil underscores the importance of being active in obtaining employment and having personal income. These are

both key components of the cultural appeal to aspire to a strong work ethic. This cultural appeal was widely supported by the audience because they clapped in agreement. This increased the impact of Dr. Phil's persuasive appeal and it appeared to place more pressure on Dominic to try harder to become self sufficient.

Another instance of self-development rhetoric occurred during the show that aired on June 18, 2003. One of Dr. Phil's guests that day was Amy, who was 18 years of age. She was not happy with her body image so she wanted breast implants and a liposuction procedure. In an effort to convince Amy that she could not improve her psychological insecurity through physical surgery, he set out to show her the difference between body image and self image. In this case, he used the rhetorical device of refutation to make his point.

Dr. Phil: Let's say you have the breast implants and it's no complications and everything. Tell me what that fixes in your life?

Amy: The way I feel about my body. My confidence.

Dr. Phil: See you just crossed the line. You said the way I feel about my body. That's one thing. And you said my confidence. You just crossed into the psychological realm. Because confidence has nothing to do with cup size! [Audience claps in agreement] (June 18, 2003)

The idea behind a refutation rhetorical device is to acknowledge an argument, and then expose its weakness (Kohrs-Kampbell, 1996). Dr. Phil first gets her to reveal her basic rationale for getting the implants. Once she does, he then explains the weakness of her thinking. On the surface it appeared as though Amy was receptive to this point, but ultimately it was not clear if she was convinced to give up the idea of getting breast implants.

The table below summarizes the different rhetorical devices Dr. Phil used for personal development rhetoric. These devices reveal a variety of persuasive approaches used during the program. By using analogy, appeals to cultural values, and refutation, Dr. Phil shows how diverse he can be in motivating his guests.

Table 1. *Personal Development Rhetoric*

Rhetorical Device	Description
Analogy	Counseling Jim about his fear of hair loss
Appeals to Cultural Values	Counseling Dominic about developing a strong work ethic
Refutation	Counseling Amy about her body image

### *Personal Responsibility Rhetoric*

If the role of Dr. Phil during personal development rhetoric was one of motivator, his role during personal responsibility rhetoric was analogous to that of a father lecturing his children about their transgressions. His purpose during these cases was to get people to change their existing attitudes or behaviors. In short, Dr. Phil insisted that these guests take full ownership of their problems and take responsibility for their actions. These cases presented some of the most difficult obstacles to his persuasion techniques because in many cases he was dealing with denial. His approach during these cases tended to be more animated. In some instances, the counseling sessions seemed to stop just short of an outright argument.

The first case in this category occurred during the show that aired on June 17, 2003. In this particular show, Dr. Phil was helping a woman named Caron. Caron was experiencing difficulty potty training her daughter. She was concerned because her daughter was getting older and was afraid to use the public rest rooms at her school. According to Dr. Phil, Caron did not realize that she was making it easier for her daughter to avoid potty training. In order to convince her, he used the rhetorical device of appealing to a cultural value. In this case, the cultural value was common sense, which he delivered through sarcasm and humor. Dr. Phil told her that buying pull-ups for her little girl was counter-productive. It was encouraging her to continue her current behavior. Caron then asked Dr. Phil if making her child stop cold turkey would traumatize her. He then made the following response which sparked laughter and applause from the studio audience:

Dr. Phil: [A brief second of silence and a look of slight irritation came across his face. He then sarcastically answered her question.] But, we're talkin' about peein'?! I can just see her. She'll be here on the show in ten years. Well what's wrong with

you? Oh my mother made me pee. I just can't get over it. I had to actually sit on the toilet and use it! (June 17, 2003)

The appeal of common sense here resonated with her and the studio audience as indicated by their laughter. The validation by the audience placed pressure on Caron to heed Dr. Phil's advice.

Another example of personal responsibility rhetoric occurred during the same show. The name of the guest was Sherrie. Sherrie was asking Dr. Phil to help her figure out her obsession with country music star Tim McGraw. Sherrie was a middle-aged woman who was married and had a teenage daughter. Sherrie's obsession with McGraw led her to run up a \$6,000 bill from concert tickets and paraphernalia. In addition, she said that if Tim McGraw ever expressed any interest in her, she would leave her husband and child behind. As a rhetorical device, Dr. Phil appealed to the family value of devotion. He advised her to apologize to her husband for slighting him when she said she would leave him for a total stranger. He then counseled her to learn how to enjoy Tim McGraw's music without alienating her family. This is probably one of the most vivid examples of Dr. Phil's penchant for personal responsibility. His appeals to her need to be a devoted mother and wife come from his respect for nurturing a strong family structure. These values seemed to resonate strongly with the studio audience. Although many people expressed agreement, it did not appear as though Dr. Phil convinced her to change. She seemed to be more interested in finding out why she was such an obsessed fan, than changing her actual behavior.

The next case of personal responsibility rhetoric occurred during the show that aired on July 18, 2003. During this show, Steve and Tami shared their story. They were asking Dr. Phil to help them rejuvenate their relationship. They were at a point where they no longer felt passion for each other. In this case, Dr. Phil appealed to Tami's need to be confident in dealing with the ups and downs of her relationship. He told Tami that her real problem was being able to trust herself. Until that point, she was mainly concerned with trusting her husband Steve. Even though Dr. Phil believed that her husband was probably trustworthy, he still emphasized Tami's need to trust herself first. In this case, Dr. Phil did not seem to treat the issue as a relationship problem. He treated it as an individual responsibility. This is evident because he described the solution as something that only Tami could correct. A collective solution between husband and wife was not even considered. But it appeared as though Tami bought into his advice. She may have found the appeal to control only those things within her grasp to be simple and therefore less overwhelming.

The table below summarizes the different rhetorical devices Dr. Phil used for personal responsibility rhetoric. In these cases, his focus on

values (both cultural values and family values), stand out as a common theme.

Table 2. *Personal Responsibility Rhetoric*

Rhetorical Device	Description
Appeals to Cultural Values	Using common sense to advise Caron about potty training
Appeals to Family Values	Lecturing Sherrie about family devotion
Appeals to Individual Needs	Advising Tami to trust herself to solve her relationship

### *Personal Health Rhetoric*

The distinguishing feature of Dr. Phil's personal health rhetoric was related to the fact that these guests were dealing with serious issues; these were tragic and grave situations. In these cases, Dr. Phil became more of a grievance counselor. He took a different tone when he was working with these guests because the issues were more sensitive. The sessions also tended to be longer and much more detailed. The strategies he used in these cases were the closest he got to doing actual therapy.

The first case in this category occurred during the show that aired on June 5, 2003. Cynthia's daughter, Heather, was suffering from Cystic Fibrosis. Their ages were not revealed but judging from their appearance it looked like Cynthia was about 50-60 years of age, while Heather may have been about 30-35 years of age. On the show Heather wanted Dr. Phil to help her reconnect with her mother because she wanted to build a more solid emotional bond with her. As a nurse, Cynthia was finding it difficult to become close to her daughter because she was shielding herself from the pain of possibly losing her daughter to the disease. The rhetorical device Dr. Phil used in this case was an emotional appeal. Through their active involvement in his counseling exercises, Dr. Phil was able to persuade these two guests to reexamine their relationship by evoking sincere emotions. During the exercise, Dr. Phil made them position their chairs to be facing each other. He then instructed them to look each other in the eye and honestly talk about their feelings. At first, it appeared to be a difficult task for both of them.

Dr. Phil: [Responding to Heather avoiding eye contact.] Don't look away! Do not look away another time. Look at her! Do not hide! You are hiding in your head and you're doin' therapy on her. I want you to be selfish for a minute and I want you to tell her, "I want my mom back." (June 5, 2003)

Dr. Phil's strategy of getting them to look at each other appeared to have a strong impact on both of these guests. The direct eye contact and the honest conversation that took place appeared to generate a strong emotional release. Dr. Phil then proceeded to tell Cynthia how important it was for her to be supportive toward her daughter. It appeared from the reaction shots of the audience and the somber tone created by this exercise that the audience was interested in Dr. Phil's message. The session ended when Cynthia gave Heather a hug. At this point, it seemed that she began to realize how important she was to Heather's recovery.

The next case of personal health rhetoric occurred during the show that aired on July 9, 2003. The featured guest was Amber, a young teenager who was struggling with anorexia and bulimia. Amber's situation had become so desperate that she began excusing herself from the family dinner table to throw up her food. At this point, Dr. Phil resolved to help her. He began to focus his rhetorical devices toward Amber's family. He made a persuasive appeal to Amber's mother, Sandy, to support her daughter as an addict and not as a child who just chooses not to eat anything. Earlier in the show, Sandy said that her way of dealing with Amber's problem was to distance herself from her daughter and to insist that she correct the problem on her own volition. So Dr. Phil used an illustration to show the extent of Amber's addiction. He did this by bringing out a group of pictures lined up side by side. They were five full-body-image pictures of young girls. They were arranged in a continuous pattern where on the extreme left, the body image was a skinny figure. On the extreme right the body image was a full figure. Dr. Phil asked Amber to pick out the image that was closest to her own. She chose the image on the extreme right. Dr. Phil then explained the difference to Sandy as he pointed to the skinny body image on the left. "This, mom, is Amber to you in your eyes." Then, pointing to the full-figure body image on the right, he said, "This is Amber to her in her eyes." (July 9, 2003) Dr. Phil's demonstration appeared to convince Amber's family that she was going to need more help from them to get through her struggle. His demonstration of the body images made the problem more vivid and clear in the eyes of Amber's family. His description of Amber as an addict highlighted her vulnerability and weakness toward the problem. When they expressed their agreement with Dr. Phil's demonstration, it appeared that the family walked away with a dedication to change their approach in helping Amber.



The other case in this category was taken from the show that aired on July 14, 2003. In this particular show, Dr. Phil agreed to help a guest named Abby. She had discovered that her deceased husband had cheated on her. She blamed herself for his infidelity and his death even though it wasn't her fault. She mentioned that he had died partly from complications with his heart after he apparently took some Viagra pills. In this session, Dr. Phil used another analogy to convince Abby to relinquish her strong sense of guilt over her husband's death and infidelity:

I want you to make two separate trips to the cemetery. Not on the same day. You gotta make two separate trips. On one of those trips, you need to go chew his butt out! [Audience claps in agreement.] ... You need to say that was your choice! That was your fault and I do not blame myself and if you were here, I would pinch your head off! [Audience claps in agreement.] And you just need to get that out. Then you need to go back on a second day, and say you were my husband, and you're gone, and I miss you. You need to let these two things exist, mutually exclusively. (July 14, 2003)

In this case, Dr. Phil's appeal was strengthened by his explanation and his activity for Abby. The two separate trips to the cemetery presented an analogy for Abby to separate her conflicting emotions over her husband's death. These trips made Dr. Phil's purpose explicit and easy for Abby and the audience to understand. Abby then openly agreed to visit her husband. Thus, the appeal must have been somewhat convincing.

The table below summarizes the different rhetorical devices Dr. Phil used for personal health rhetoric. These devices reveal a variety of persuasive approaches used during the program. By using emotion, illustration, and analogy, Dr. Phil shows a wide range of strategies designed to encourage his guests to get help.

Table 3. *Personal Health Rhetoric*

Rhetorical Device	Description
Emotion	Making Cynthia confront her repressed emotions about her daughter Heather's disease
Illustration	Showing Amber's perception of body image
Analogy	Separating Abby's conflicted emotions through separate trips to her husband's gravesite

Surprisingly, most but not all of Dr. Phil's rhetoric was categorized as individualistic. There were some instances where Dr. Phil showed a strong respect for the role of community in helping people overcome their personal problems. Two of these instances were identified as communitarian rhetoric cases. In order to explain them, it is necessary to describe how the term community was used to guide these observations.

The following guidelines were used for the notion of community. Communities were described as webs of social relations rather than isolated individuals (Etzioni, 1995). Communities also were defined on the basis of communal provision where members provided safety and security by looking after one another's needs. In addition, the definition of community was extended to go beyond the normal relationships that exist within the American family and into the relationships that exist on the level of neighborhoods and institutions (Walzer, 1983). Therefore, if Dr. Phil's rhetoric included a respect for people working together, providing for one another, and working for more than familial relationships, then his persuasive devices were labeled as having a strong respect for communitarian ideals. These cases were categorized as social responsibility rhetoric.

### *Social Responsibility Rhetoric*

These cases were different from individualistic rhetoric because people were being asked to reach out to others. In these situations, other members of the community (beyond family) were considered key to helping people work through their problems. Solutions were largely collective ones based on social responsibility. In these cases, the solutions were aimed at gaining more than a personal benefit. They were aimed at gaining a collective benefit. These situations also tended to be very serious problems that needed to be solved by community efforts because individual will power was not enough.

The first instance of social responsibility rhetoric occurred during the show on July 14, 2003. Dr. Phil was talking to Stephen and Gail. They were a middle-aged couple whose marriage began in infidelity. Gail was having an extremely difficult time living with her own sense of guilt. She was at the point where she couldn't enjoy her family life because she had internalized a sense of punishment for her unfaithful act. Dr. Phil convinced her to find value in her misery. He urged her to get over her guilt and use what she learned from her pain to help other people. He suggested that she either write a paper about her experience or offer to talk to a women's church group. He believed that she could experience a therapeutic value if she helped others learn from her mistake. During this session, Dr. Phil introduced a strong component of communal provision.

This was one of the few times Dr. Phil recommended helping other community members as a curative activity. If he engaged in more of these kinds of solutions, his show may have achieved more balance in terms of self-help solutions and community-help solutions.

Another instance of social responsibility rhetoric occurred during the show that aired on July 16, 2003. The purpose of this show was to expose the problem of bullies among teenage kids. With the help of his son Jay, he organized his show around appeals that were aimed at finding a balance between individual and community solutions. The show involved counseling individual children who were both victims of bullying and bully perpetrators. It also contained efforts to deal with this problem on a community level. For instance, Jay visited a middle school in Texas and had the entire student body sign a contract that was designed to commit them to report instances of bullying at their school. Most importantly, Dr. Phil acknowledged that the locus of accountability for this problem existed at a much higher level than the individual. In this case, Dr. Phil was clearly indicating that the solution to this problem partly rested with community officials like school administrators and teachers. In this sense, his perspective was broader and his focus was more inclusive of forces that existed outside of the individual. Approaches like this reinforce the idea that sometimes people do need to rely on their community for assistance.

The table below summarizes the different rhetorical devices Dr. Phil used for social responsibility rhetoric. Both devices indicate a need for people to help themselves by working with others.

Table 4. *Social Responsibility Rhetoric*

Rhetorical Device	Description
Appeals to Individual Needs	Telling Gail to make meaning of her guilt by helping others
Appeals to Cultural Value	Acknowledging the need for community accountability and collaboration

### Conclusion

This paper argues that the widespread popularity of Dr. Phil's program reflects a climate of obsessive individualism among today's society. In her work, Glendon (1991) argued that too much emphasis on individual rights can lead to the erosion of responsible civic dialogue and

consensus among community members. This paper attempts to justify the view that the same kind of individual emphasis may be operating in the area of self-help media. By generating a moral critique of self-help rhetoric through this show, the author hopes to demonstrate how the communitarian perspective can be used to critique the individualistic focus of the self-help television genre and other genres as well. Most of Dr. Phil's shows are usually organized around a common theme and then he counsels four or five different guests that serve as different examples. Each different example warrants a unique solution, so everyone who appears is encouraged to help themselves in a different way. Shows like this can be very effective in dealing with problems that need to address individual differences. But these shows need to be balanced with shows that require more than individual effort. Among the very limited amount of episodes observed for this article, nine cases of individualistic rhetoric and two cases of communitarian rhetoric were found. This indicates a tendency of Dr. Phil to encourage individual solutions and focus on individual problems. Taking this lack of balance into account, the author hopes to justify the need for more research documenting the obsession of individual welfare among American viewers.

There also is a need for research involving quantitative content analyses of individualistic appeals in popular talk shows. Apparently, this kind of individualistic counseling is appealing to a significant amount of American viewers. When examining the ratings of Dr. Phil's show, one can estimate an average weekly audience of a little more than 1.8 million viewers<sup>5</sup>. Given this kind of popularity, it is important to outline the dangers of overemphasized individualism. The communitarian perspective helps identify these dangers. This makes it an ideal perspective to construct criticism that calls attention to a very important issue for media literacy. Do we see too much individualism in media content? The ethical debate between communitarianism and liberalism is the appropriate context to discuss the moral implications of this issue. By applying a communitarian critique to Dr. Phil's show, the ideas of this perspective are brought into the arena of popular culture. Even though he occasionally espouses communitarian principles in his rhetoric, his penchant for individual responsibility and self-help advice contributes to the overemphasized self-improvement message of millions of self-help themes flooding the American marketplace. It seems evident that more of a balance is needed between self improvement initiatives and community improvement initiatives. Without such a balance, we are in danger of becoming a nation obsessed with individual welfare and private interests.

<sup>1</sup> In December 2007, the Nielson Media Research Syndication Service Ranking Report indicated that Dr. Phil earned an average rating of 1.5. Only Oprah at 1.8 earned a higher ratings average.

<sup>2</sup> Since Oprah invited Dr. Phil to come on her show, Dr. Phil has amassed a multi-million dollar media enterprise which includes authoring self-help books, giving motivational speeches to corporations and universities, and sponsoring the official Dr. Phil website.

<sup>3</sup> The 2003 Bowker Annual Library and Book Trade Almanac has reported that Dr. Phil's book entitled "Self Matters" sold 1,350,000 units in 2002. This was ranked number 1 among non-fiction best sellers.

<sup>4</sup> Fowler describes how different scholars have conceptualized community in their work. He mentions notions like participatory communities, communities based on nationalism and communities deriving from tradition and religion.

<sup>5</sup> Figure derived from the Nielsen Media Research Syndication Service Report released in April 2008, which indicated an average rating of 1.6. 1 rating point equals 1,128,000 households.

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