

Group Discussion Questions for "A Modest Proposal"

1. What is the significance of the speaker's use of calculations and numbers in the essay?
Eg. The middle paragraph on p. 455 and his division of the baby into meals on p. 456?
What is the relationship between the "logic" of calculation and the idea of ethical consideration?
2. What is the significance of the speaker's appeals to "authority" in the essay?
Consider his references to "a very knowing American... in London" (455), a "very worthy person, a true lover of his country" (456) and the authority of the well-known fraud, Psalmanazar (457).
What is the relationship between appeals to "authority" of this kind and the idea of substantiating evidence?
3. What is the significance of the speaker's use of particular diction, particularly in his characterization of the Irish and the English?
Consider, for example, his use of the language of "contribution" (455, first paragraph) as compared to the next paragraph where he invokes "murder"? Consider his use of the term "breeder" throughout, and his use of the idea of "care and tenderness" within Irish "breeding" families (458).
What is the relationship between such language and moral or ethical thinking?
4. Compare the speaker to Milton's Satan. How are they alike or different?
Consider the way that Swift frames his argument in terms of benevolence, or the deployment of the "reasonable" argument, or the use of rhetoric to sway an audience or the "likeability" of these speakers.
What do these two characters tell you about language, argument and critical thinking?

NOTES:
