Yiyang Chen wrote "Altruism in Hypothetical and Statistical Situations" in Spring 2013 for the second major assignment, a comparative analysis, for WR 098. For this assignment, students analyze aspects of similarity and/or difference in any two texts from our set readings; the assignment requires an interesting, not obvious claim, a demonstration of critical reading and a purposeful structure suitable to the type of comparison made. These aims are well demonstrated in Yiyang's final draft, which compares two discussions of altruism: Garrett Hardin's "Lifeboat Ethics" and Peter Singer's "The Singer Solution to World Poverty."

What cannot be seen from this final version is the process Yiyang went through to arrive at this critical and insightful analysis. Initially, the thesis was a statement of what the essay would achieve: an analysis of the two texts. However, through self and peer revision, Yiyang was able to identify the claim she had implied but not yet specified: inaccuracies can lead readers to false conclusions. A particular strength of her claim, and the essay as a whole, is that it not only demonstrates her strengths as a critical reader, but also that it discusses the importance of critical reading. Additionally, through revision, Yiyang was able to develop a strong structure which allowed her to present her ideas more clearly and effectively. The concept of a naysayer was introduced in the course at the same time this piece was in development; Yiyang was able to apply that concept effectively to demonstrate her development as a thinker and a writer within a broader conversation. Her work contributes not only to discussions of altruism, but also to discussions of the importance of critical reading.

— Jennifer Sia

WR 098: Introduction to College Reading and Writing in English

From the Writer

The idea for my paper, "Altruism in Hypothetical and Statistical Situations," originated from one of my reading journals. In this reading journal, I identified that Hardin's and Singer's essays are similar in that both discuss the ethical issue of altruism by constructing hypothetical situations that can be applied to real-life situations, but they are very different in their perspectives of the act of altruism. This observation inspired me to examine the practicality of the examples constructed in their essays. To have a more comprehensive analysis, I inspected their use of statistics and found the potential issues I could work with.

During my writing process, I had a problem in separating the main ideas into points of suitable length. My professor suggested that I divide my main ideas into two larger points, hypothetical examples and statistical data, and then divide each larger point into two smaller points. After confirming the structure for the essay, I added a naysayer to each point. In the first few drafts of my essay, my discussion was not explicit enough. I revised by introducing the metaphors and hypothetical scenarios mentioned by the two articles more specifically, refining my topic sentences, and adding more connections between sentences. In this way, I finally made my essay clearer and more concise.

— Yiyang Chen

YIYANG CHEN

ALTRUISM IN HYPOTHETICAL
AND STATISTICAL SITUATIONS

The ethical issue of altruism has been a question of debate among philosophers for many decades. Considering the abstract nature of the concepts, debaters frequently explain them in more intimate and specific situations, either to illuminate the concepts or to evoke responses from the audience. In "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor," Hardin employs the metaphor of a lifeboat to illustrate the potentially destructive consequence of unlimited foreign aid, as to oppose the act of altruism; in "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," Singer creates two hypothetical scenarios to inspire the audience to contemplate their responsibilities in helping third world children. At first glance, the audience might say that they are distinctly different in their views of altruism, but a closer inspection of both imaginary situations reveals a distorted reality that will give the audience affected views on the issue. The usage of hypothetical scenarios and statistics in both texts involves the problems of misrepresentation and oversimplification of actuality, which can cause the audience to exclude some possible resolutions in facing ethical dilemmas. The inaccuracies of the evidence of both essays will likely cause readers to reach false conclusions regarding the authors' suggested solutions.

The first problem associated with the constructed examples is the inaccurate representation of reality caused by the use of extreme cases. In the description of the relationship between rich and poor nations, Hardin depicts the scene in which a "lifeboat" representing the rich nation is surrounded by the ocean where the poor nations swim (149). The lifeboat has a certain capacity that cannot be exceeded. Otherwise, "The boat swamps, everyone drowns" (149). By using this metaphor, Hardin highlights the

potentially catastrophic consequence of helping the poor countries and makes the audience contemplate the pragmatic implications behind the act of altruism, such as it adds great pressure on human survival and the environment (156). However, this metaphor is not a truthful reflection of reality as it over-states the negative consequence of foreign aid. The audience would probably question whether helping the poor countries in the real world is really as dangerous as the author describes. Few people would believe that aiding poor countries will result in such disastrous consequences as a result of lack of real life evidence. The author commits a logical fallacy here by equivocating the extreme case with the real world one. Thereby, this "lifeboat" metaphor distorts the real world situation by over-exaggerating the negative consequence of foreign aid.

Similarly, in "The Singer Solution to World Poverty," Singer misrepresents reality when he creates two extreme hypothetical situations in which a person confronts a moral dilemma in choosing either to save a child or to sacrifice his or her interests. In the second hypothetical scenario proposed by Singer, the character Bob faces the choice of either switching the railroad to save a child but letting the train destroy most of his savings, or watching the child die but conserving his savings. In this case, most people will criticize Bob for not saving the child (298). Singer argues that because there is no significantly distinguishable line between the hypothetical situation and the real life issue of donating money to third world children, rich people are also morally obligated to give their money to charitable organizations (299). According to Singer, "it is hard to deny that it is also wrong not to send money to one of the organizations listed above. Unless, that is, there is some morally important difference between the two situations that [he has] overlooked" (299). In fact, he indeed overlooks the fundamental differences between the imaginary situation and the real life situation. Just like the metaphor used in Hardin's essays, this scenario created by Singer is also an unusual case that people are unlikely to encounter in real life. Considering the length of response time given in the second hypothetical scenario, we can discover that Bob is required to react to an urgent event. This is to say, his action is more likely to be a result of human instinct instead of thoughtful decision. The audience might imagine themselves saving the child on the railroad but stop at donating more than their fair share, as human intuitions can be different from thoughtful decisions

made in reality. Therefore, the simulation may not work as Singer expects because the framework constrains the audience to think about the circumstance as being different from reality.

The second shared problem is the oversimplification of how the real world operates through using constructed examples to simulate reality, which results in partial conclusions from the audience. Hardin describes the world with the metaphor of a "lifeboat." He simplifies the current world state by putting all the entire world's countries under two circumstances: rich countries are inside the lifeboat while poor countries are swimming in the sea (297). However, the relationships among nations are much more complex in reality. It is improbable that the rich nations isolate themselves from the poor nations in a world that is not polarized and that has become more interdependent under the tide of globalization. Moreover, the assumption that poor countries are swimming in the sea is not appropriate. Although most African countries are underdeveloped; they possess abundant amounts of natural resources. With technological help from the developed countries, they can make more efficient utilization of those resources to create a "lifeboat" of their own.

Likewise, Singer's constructed scenarios are oversimplified in the sense that he disregards the practicality of his solutions in real life. In Singer's hypothetical example mentioned above, choosing to save the child means giving up most of a person's savings. Considering Singer's suggestion in terms of Hardin's lifeboat metaphor, we can see how ineffective Singer's idea is. According to Hardin, a lifeboat with a capacity of 60 can only board 50 people to ensure the safety of people inside the boat (150). If people abdicate their excess savings, they will lose their "safety factor" and become part of the poor who then need help. Therefore, it is impractical to donate all of one's savings, as Singer proposes.

Another similarity is that both essays use one-sided statistics to prove their points, which can lead to the audience's misconception about the issue. In "Lifeboat Ethics," Hardin explains the limited capacity of the lifeboat by assigning numerical values to the supply and demand of resources. He assumes that the lifeboat has a capacity of 60 and saving all the poor people is similar to "making a total of 150 in a boat designed for 60," which will make the boat sink (149). This point can be rebutted by the statistics in Singer's essay. As Singer mentions in his article, the

United States government spends 0.09 percent of gross domestic products on overseas aid, which is far below "the United Nations-recommended target of 0.7 percent" (302). This shows it is unlikely that rich countries will help poor countries beyond their own financial capabilities, which is contrary to Hardin's metaphorical situation in which rich countries give unlimited foreign aid to poor countries. Just like Hardin, Singer also gives one-sided statistics in his article. Although the United States' foreign aid is not a high percentage of its overall GDP, the absolute value is the highest among all countries in the world. When looking at the other side of the statistics, Singer's claim about America's insufficient commitment in foreign aid is no longer valid. Both authors have chosen statistics that favor their points; as a result, their evidence is not substantial and comprehensive enough to reach a fair and promising resolution. From the above analysis, we can see that drawing conclusions from one-sided statistics is not rigorous and can result in partial judgment. However, people who hold opposite views will probably argue that Singer's estimation gives the audience a range of the amount of efforts they need to pay in helping third world children. Nevertheless, those numbers are misrepresentations of reality. Theoretically, they are derived correctly; pragmatically, they may not be feasible when applied to reality.

Moreover, both essays have manipulated the data in a simple way that excludes the subtle and complicated implications of other non-negligible factors that can influence the data. In "Lifeboat Ethics," Hardin calculates the population growth rate of developed countries and developing countries. According to Hardin, the American population doubles every 87 years, while the population outside the lifeboat doubles every 21 years. After 87 years, "each American would have to share the available resources with more than eight people" if they adopt the idea of sharing their resources equally with the poor (151). This idea is similar to Malthus' population theory; one factor that has been overlooked by Hardin is the development of the third world country over time. The economic growth rate of African countries is around 5% in recent years. Through innovating their agricultural technology, they may become self-sufficient after 87 years. Thus, the scarring future highlighted by Hardin's calculation is an inaccurate prediction of reality. Comparatively, Singer's estimation that donating $200 can save a child in the third world country (299) is overly

optimistic. What the audience should notice is that this solution does solve the root problem of the poverty issue. As Hardin mentions in his essay, "as an ancient Chinese proverb goes 'Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach them how to fish and he will eat for the rest of his days'" (155). Simply donating money to meet the basic financial needs of some third world children is not a sustainable resolution to the issue. Instead, the donors need to put their money in the right channels, such as in education and technological development, to make their aid meaningful in the long term. At this point, I would like to raise an objection that Hardin's statistics are persuasive as population growth indeed adds much pressure on the world's resources. However, refusing to help poor countries cannot lessen the problem. The reproduction rate in the underdeveloped countries may become higher due to the lack of awareness and the need for more labor force. Moreover, the spread of disease resulting from poverty may influence the entire human population. Thus, the two essays both overlook the implications behind the statistics as a result of dismissing other determining factors in their interpretations of data.

Nevertheless, some readers may insist that the metaphor employed by Hardin and the hypothetical situations created by Singer are still dissimilar in their appropriateness, as the "lifeboat" metaphor in fact does not exaggerate the severity of the problem; instead, it highlights the importance of survival in the real world. Other people may disagree with me by noting that discussing abstract problems in more specific hypothetical situations simplifies the complex relationship between objects, hence allowing the audience to pass judgments that they would otherwise not make in real life. However, thinking inside the framework offed by the two authors eliminates other possible perspectives and solutions to the issue, such as technological help and more advanced education. Since we are not facing a single-choice question in the act of altruism, the answers can be open to more possibilities. Thus, although the two essays offer opposing views, both have employed constructed examples that involve overstatement and oversimplification susceptible to partial and monotonous conclusions.

Admittedly, these two essays are notably different in their views towards the issue of altruism; however, they are similar in the way that the use of examples and evidence in both essays is selective and misrepresentative, which can lead the audience to biased conclusions. With a meticulous

analysis of the imaginary examples, we can find the rhetorical and statistical weaknesses hidden in the situations constructed by the two authors. This allows readers to distinguish the implications behind the literary strategies and statistics employed by the authors, helping them to avoid being misguided by rhetorical, evidential, and logical tricks. As the issue of altruism has profound significance for human survival, it is important for us to look at the issue from a panoramic view. Only with a more comprehensive understanding of the issue can we make wise and intelligent choices in facing ethical predicaments in real life.

Works Cited

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