

# Analysing the rich and poor philosophy essay



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“None are so poor that they have nothing to give and none are so rich that they have nothing to receive.”-Pope John Paul II. In *Rich and Poor* Peter Singer argues that we have a duty to aid those suffering from absolute poverty. In his essay, Singer defines absolute poverty as “life at the very margin of existence. The absolute poor are severely deprived beings struggling to survive.”<sup>1</sup> He then contrasts this to those who live in absolute effluence stating “...this means that they have more income than they need to provide themselves adequately with basic necessities.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout his paper, Singer never gives an exact definition of rich or poor, but rather suggests that anyone who is able to give anything to anyone else after they have satisfied their own needs has a moral obligation to do so. His argument is formally split into three premises. First, if we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of significance, then we ought to do it. His second premise is that absolute poverty is bad. Thirdly, there is some absolute poverty we can prevent without sacrificing much. He therefore concludes that we ought to prevent absolute poverty. Thus, Singer’s main argument in his essay is that if we can prevent something bad without sacrificing anything of comparable significance, we ought to do it. Absolute poverty is bad and since there is some poverty we can prevent without sacrificing anything of comparable moral significance, we are obligated to prevent it. Singer’s first premise becomes the substantive premise where the rest of his argument rests on while his second premise is assumed to be unchallenged. Therefore, only Singer’s third premise of his claim becomes the topic of controversy for so many people. This premise claims that only some absolute poverty can be prevented. Since it avoids the objection that aid given to the poor will make any noticeable impression on world poverty,

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it becomes enough to sustain Singer's conclusion. Singer thus uses a utilitarian argument in attempting to prove that we have some moral obligation to the absolute poor considering that giving up small indulges could potentially improve the quality of life of another human being. However, an important objection to this claim has been made regarding the consequences of Singer's claim towards those in absolute poverty. This objection is known as the ethics of triage, which convincingly proves that Singer's main argument for his claim that we have a duty to aid those in absolute poverty has failed. Therefore, by examining Singer's main argument and comparing it to a main objection, it can be shown that Singer has failed to establish that we have a duty to aid those suffering from absolute poverty. One important objection to Singer's main argument is that of population and the ethics of triage. This objection in its most extreme form shows that we should adopt a triage policy. In triage, there are three types of categories: those who are beyond the level of assistance, those who would probably be better off with assistance and those who do not require assistance. In this objection, only those countries that would probably benefit from assistance would receive help since only those in the middle category would benefit from assistance from richer nations. Therefore triage essentially states that we should only apply aid to countries that could benefit from it. We would not aid countries that even without our help would eventually be able to aid their population. We would also not aid those countries whose population could not be controlled even with our assistance. In essence, we would only assist those countries where our help might make a difference between their success or failure in bringing a balance to food and population size. This form of argument is based on consequential ethics,

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which values an action entirely from the value of its consequences. Countries such as Bangladesh and parts of the Sahel region of Africa have been determined to be “helpless” in terms of assistance. This means that helping countries such as those would result in those living in absolute poverty to stay in the same situation as before. Since concluding positive result can come from aiding these types of countries, it's clear that Singer's argument does not hold true for these examples. Therefore, an important objection to Singer's main argument is that the rich should leave the poor to starve lest the poor drag the rich down with them.

This objection shows that Singer has failed to establish that we have a moral duty to aid those suffering from absolute poverty. In his essay, Singer argues that we have a moral obligation to aid those suffering from absolute poverty. He states that buying something to increase comfort when one is already comfortable is morally inexcusable and is equivalent to letting someone poorer starve to death. Hence, Singer's argument reasons that after achieving effluence, anything extra ought to be given to the poor. An objection risen against his claim states that rich nations have a duty to aid only those countries, which would benefit from aid. As well, aiding those in absolute poverty could also lead to massive overpopulation and the decreasing effluence of richer nations. If the population censuses of Ethiopia and Somalia are correct and assuming that the world population continues to grow, this growth cannot continue indefinitely, resulting in a large number of death rates. Therefore, according to the objection of triage, the rich should leave the poor to starve to death unless they themselves wish to be dragged down with them. This would be considered a direct result if Singer's claim

holds true. A popular metaphor for this objection is that of a lifeboat and is known as “lifeboat ethics”<sup>3</sup>. Rich nations are the people represented inside the lifeboats and developing countries represent those drowning in a sea. If all the drowning people were saved onto the lifeboat, the boat would become overloaded and then everyone would drown. Since it is better to save some people rather than none, some people must be left to drown. Some might argue that all people have a right to our aid regardless of the consequences however, while triage appears to be a horrible alternative to this claim, after further examination, it seems that perhaps it may be a solution to a long-term problem. Helping the poor and starving now would only ensure that future generations would be poor and starving as well. Singer’s claim to aid those in absolute poverty therefore would only create a short-term solution with a long-term problem. In terms of consequences, the idea of triage would be ideal in aiding as many as possible without reverting everyone to absolute poverty.

Thus, Singer fails to prove that we have any moral obligation to the poor due to the objection that the consequences would result in a more negative outcome. In conclusion, after evaluating Singer’s main argument for his claim and a main objection, it is clear that Singer has failed to establish that we have a duty to aid those suffering from absolute poverty.