

**Emma Maione's WINNING ESSAY
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Writing in response to the question: Is it ok to buy stuff like iPods and designer clothes when you could instead use that money to save a life?

To Buy or Not To Buy

Every year, over eight million people die as a result of poverty¹. Most of these victims are children – the most vulnerable, innocent, and precious of the world. On the other hand, over eighty million iPods are sold annually: Apple earned a profit of over \$3.38 billion in the first fiscal quarter of 2010 alone². Despite these jarring statistics, buying electronics and designer clothes is accepted and even encouraged by our society. However, I maintain that this behaviour cannot be morally justified.

The contrast between the above scenarios is so stark as to be grotesque, and I realize, with a sinking feeling in my stomach, that I am contributing to them. I have spent my money on an iPod, hair dye, and other frivolous luxuries while every night millions of children go to bed hungry. This topic is extremely challenging to write about, because as I address this issue I am also examining myself. The selfishness that has taken over our society has taken hold of me as well. Nevertheless, personal discomfort cannot be allowed to subvert the exercise of determining what is right.

Ultimately the issue comes down to the value of human life and what we are willing to sacrifice—or not—to preserve it. Asked whether an iPod is worth more than a human life, any sane person will answer “Of course not.”³ Yet our actions speak otherwise: every time we purchase a Gucci bag or the latest iPhone, we are effectively putting our desire for that item before the life of a human being.

A popular response to this dilemma is to plead a principle of balance. Many would say that as long as they are contributing to charity in some way, such as volunteering at a food bank or sponsoring a child, they can live the rest of their lives as they please. Admittedly, giving something is better than nothing; nonetheless, it is impossible to deny the fact that money spent on a designer blouse remains money not spent on a hungry child. A dollar used philanthropically to offset a dollar used at another person's expense does not justify the dollar misspent. This rationalization betrays a consumer mindset that turns morality into just another commodity for sale.

The ironic dilemma of our current situation, however, is that because the developing world depends on the economies of developed nations, the consumerism fueling the latter seems to be essential for the well being of the former. The push to buy more and more goods is what drives technology, innovation, and commerce forward. To halt consumerism dead in its tracks would bring on a collapse of the worldwide economy: the current recession and the spending

¹ Jack Liu, “Facts on World Hunger and Poverty,” End Poverty Campaign, 27. November 2010, Hearts and Minds Network, 14. December 2010 <<http://www.heartsandminds.org/poverty/hungerfacts.htm>>

² “Apple Reports First Quarter Results,” Apple, 2010, 14. December 2010, <<http://www.apple.com/pr/library/2010/01/25results.html>>

³ Relevant rescue cases are discussed in Singer, P. “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” Philosophy and public affairs, 1972.

stimulus packages ushered in as rescue measures are evidence enough that the principal of acquisition is foundational to our modern economy. Can one then justify the purchase of an iPod by claiming innocent participation in a system already in place, arguing from the standpoint of helping prevent marketplace collapse and the worldwide economic devastation that would ensue?

Such an argument is specious. The fact we have built our world to operate in this fashion does not mean that this is the only way of doing business, nor does it imply its morality; it simply means that we have found it the most expedient thing to do. We must aim for higher moral ground. We need to demand that the leaders of our world build an equitable global economy and then put our money where our mouth is and not spend our dollars on selfish consumerism.

Many people will say that until the entire system is changed, individual action is pointless. Even if I donated all I had, let alone the small amount I might otherwise use to buy an iPod, that money couldn't end poverty; thus, one might argue, a single person's efforts don't really matter. However, it is this attitude that helps perpetuate the current inequities of our world. True, while the \$200 I could donate to a relief foundation instead of buying an iPod won't end world hunger or save an entire village in Africa, it is enough to buy water filters for three families. Saying that because I can't save a lot of people, and that therefore I needn't bother trying to save any, is akin to saying that ten people are worth more than an iPod, but one isn't. That rationalization is a gross undervaluation of human life. Giving just one family clean water is worth my going without music on the bus. In our society there is a prevailing attitude of "I come first" and our mantra is "look out for number one." We are so concerned with my rights that we forget about your rights.

As tough as it is to admit, the difficult truth is that when we purchase an iPod, we are simultaneously choosing not to help relieve someone else's dire suffering. Every time we buy a luxury item to make our lives a little more entertaining or easy, we are saying that a modicum of comfort for us is worth more than alleviating the poverty of a fellow human being, who, but for accident of birth, might have been ourselves.

This essay cuts close to the bone: forced to face this issue head-on, I don't feel like I can continue living my life in the manner I have been accustomed to. It would be hard to be the only kid without an iPod, to feel left out. But the whole point is change. Using culture as an excuse is just that - an excuse. It's a way of shrugging off individual responsibilities. If we can convince ourselves that there's nothing we can do, then we can continue our habits, wrong as they may be, without feeling bad. I have to make a change. Effective immediately, every second month I am donating all the money I normally spend on leisure to charity. It is not a perfect response, but it is a step in the right direction — and I plan to keep going.