



## ZENITH 2014

This is a special edition of ZENITH, especially for the graduating class of 2013/2014. Many of you have reflected on how useful you find the essays in ZENITH, thus this is the editorial team's one last publication for you before you embark on the A levels. This issue will be a no-frills truncated version of the usual publication, containing only essays, and the Brush Up section which you will find useful to tackle P1 questions with criticisms.

A big thank you to all the students who have contributed good essays, reviews, poems and other assorted pieces of work to ZENITH over the past two years. You have indeed demonstrated what good writing is, and your breadth of knowledge displayed also underscores the importance of a consistent reading habit.

All the best for the A levels!

You are most welcome to send feedback and suggestions in enhancing future issues of ZENITH.

### Editorial Team

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**"I forgot to make a back-up copy of my brain,  
so everything I learned last semester was lost."**



## ...in ZENITH

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## ZENITH Essay Selection

### Editor's advice to students:

While you may find the examples and points in these essays useful in answering other questions, please be judicious in using such information in a manner that is relevant to the POC of the question you are answering.

### Is there still a place for penmanship in the digital age? [2014MJJCJ2MYEQ8]

From the Declaration of Independence, to a hastily written love letter by Napoleon Bonaparte to his lover Josephine, penmanship has always played an integral role in making our mode of communication inimitable and unique. Whether it is the long, fluid lines of the cursive style or the elaborate, vigorous strokes of the Gothic manuscript, not only is the ability to write well cherished, but also the art of doing so beautifully. Yet, since the advent of the type-writer, followed by the word processor, ad infinitum, specialised modes of writing have increasingly lost their position as an important means of communication. Indeed, with the power to type comes the loss of an art – penmanship – which seems to be slowly embarking on a pernicious fall from its former glory. Today, at a time when beauty appears to have been forsaken, comes a hope –the appreciation of penmanship has seen a revival in recent years in the ways that connoisseurs of fountain pens, calligraphy, and writing in general have gathered together to develop new ways of sharing and enlivening their interest from its moribund state. Like them, I am also of the view that penmanship still holds an important place in the digital age.

Technophiles and even the general populace share the view that penmanship is outdated – a relic of the past that is useless in the face of efficient and modern technology. They argue that technology has given us the ability to express ourselves at an unprecedented speed, especially as

the time required to formulate and type out a paragraph is much less than if one were to write it out fully. Therefore, they argue, why bother when a much more efficient and powerful tool is at one's disposal? Indeed, I do concede that typing offers one much greater convenience and efficiency than writing. However, what technophiles fail to consider is that the act (and art) of writing, to physically allow ideas to take form on paper, is lost in the shift to typing. We are exchanging the right to express ourselves permanently for the possibly detrimental ability to erase – to take back what we did or wrote without consequences – especially in the ways that we need to carefully mull over as well as reflect on our own thoughts before penning something down on paper. The implications of such a trade-off have been damaging. A recent study by the Fountain Pen Network has found that there is an inverse correlation between poor penmanship and the ability to express oneself clearly. Certainly, as we change from actualizing our ideas and thoughts on paper and therefore experiencing them, to typing and being able to delete words, we lose our coherence of thought and precision in articulation. The powerful, riveting speeches of Abraham Lincoln has given way to the ambiguous, unclear whisper of George Bush Jr. The digital age, with its rapid fire spurts of information, threatens to worsen our ability to express ourselves. Thus, I feel that penmanship is still relevant as it promotes the necessary skills we need to put together and communicate clear, exact and organized thoughts and ideas especially across to others around us.

Supporters of digitalization would also go on to insinuate that the changing needs of modern society calls for further changes to our platforms of communication. Arguing that penmanship was only relevant in the past because it was the few modes of communication available, they derisively claim that it is not only old-fashioned to keep it alive today but also irrelevant to our current-day desires and needs. In the digital age, the constant deluge of information necessitates a rapid, impersonal and concise response, and penmanship is simply too bothersome and personal to be of use. Indeed, new



technology continues to embrace interconnectivity, and convenience like Google Docs, which allows one to type on the go and even collaborate with others who are all typing and contributing to a particular document at the same time. What then, is the need for penmanship in this hypersonic generation where speed is king? Be that as it may, I still feel that penmanship holds renewed power in the digital age. Due to the backlash of the digital age, which has taken all personal sentiments and eroded them for brevity and the ease of access, there is now rejuvenated interest in developing penmanship as a tool and as a skill; for while it may be considered to be 'inefficient', it is still a powerful and intimate means of communication. A personal letter, written by hand in a beautiful script, can convey layers of meaning and emotion far beyond the reach of static, constant letters on a screen. The unique licks of the letter 'L' as it glides on paper in the cursive script may define character; the occasional bolder and stronger emphasis may reveal powerful sentiments; and inconsistent, unsymmetrical paragraphing may actually unveil hidden anxieties; these are all intimate, personal, and even romantic aspects of penmanship which allow it to continue to be relevant amidst the unfeeling interaction of the ironically named Age of Interconnectivity. Thus, I concede that while digital technology grants us a much more accessible medium, penmanship still holds a place through its ability to capture human qualities and emotions.

There is also a certain beauty associated with penmanship that allows us to fill the void of uniformity and conformity created by modernity. In the rush and hurry of our current Age, we often overlook the simplicity and beauty of naturally written and designed things. Connoisseurs of penmanship have often found much pleasure in structuring words and phrases in marvellously artistic and individualized ways. Calligraphy is a perfect example of an art that continues to serve us well in the digital age. As humans, we are naturally drawn to all things beautiful, and recent advertisements by *Vogue* and *Paris*

*Baguette* featuring a man participating in calligraphy are testaments to its undying charm. Additionally, the cursive script adds a layer of prestige, eloquence and stature to a product especially when written (or drawn) by an expert in the field of penmanship. Indeed, not only is penmanship beautiful, but the very act of it is also alluring. It allows us to slow down and contemplate before endeavouring to put pen to paper. There is also a certain attraction in the pens associated with penmanship. To have to take time to maintain a dip pen or a fountain pen, to slow down our fast-paced lives to carefully clean and wash out the nib and refill it with ink, is a key appeal. Truly, it gives us the opportunity to actually take time out of our busy, hectic schedules to devotedly care for and protect something. For us to be able to do so liberates us from losing our humanity in our pursuit of efficiency. Many have sought and found relaxation in the beauty of penmanship – the annual World Pen Fair held in Mitsukoshi attracts thousands of enthusiasts, which illustrates how penmanship has and continues to be relevant to some. In an age where we fail to even pause and think, the beauty and eloquence of penmanship, together with the genuine care attributed to it, allows us a breather, and such is the continued relevance of penmanship and its place in the digital age.

Penmanship also carries with it a history that has lasted for as long as men and his desire to express himself have existed. The very act of putting pen to paper is creating history, for ink that stains is permanent. For what is writing, but the desire to set an idea in stone? Writing provides us with a reliable means not only of transmitting information, but also of recording and finally transmitting information. Thousands of years of history have been preserved and discovered through writing. The Dead Sea Scrolls are centuries old, but they can still be read and have provided us great insights on religion, culture, and the lives of people in the past. Even holy texts like the Quran and the Bible have survived for aeons through the simple act of emulating the original, authentic copy, and indeed, it is difficult to argue that in today's day and



age, whether the original copies of books and typewritten texts are able to survive that long. Perhaps, our everyday lives which are hindered by frequent computer crashes and lost unsaved documents point us to the time-tested medium of penmanship. Hence, penmanship still holds a place in the digital age as it is a time-tested and powerful means of storing information.

Lastly, it is important not to forget that the digital age comprises also of the elderly who may be technologically illiterate. In consideration of those who may choose not to accept the rapid changes of modernity, penmanship offers relevance in the form of communication and even in terms of lasting memories. Penmanship holds a certain nostalgia for the elderly, of a time long past, a memory cherished from their first fountain pen given to them by their parents and later handed down to their children, then their grandchildren. The ability to communicate with and cater to the elderly, as well as enabling them to be relevant to us is an important role of penmanship. In fact, certain fountain pens such as a *Montblanc* or a silver-plated *Parker* are treasured and highly valued items even in today's modern context. As such, in the age of digitalization, we must not forget our most cherished and respected seniors, for rejecting penmanship would not only be ostracizing the technology-illiterate, but also disregarding years of sentiment founded on pens and writing, which is considered nothing short of callousness.

Therefore, I feel that penmanship still holds a place, and will continue to hold a place in the digital age for it is an artefact of the past that is all at once beautiful, sentimental, and yet still relevant. Only when we lose our humanity and the qualities that it encompasses will penmanship be finally relinquished.

**Bryan Tan 13A101**



#### Review

*A fairly well-written essay with a strong voice and keen interest in the subject matter, which managed to raise relevant, salient points supporting the need for penmanship and*

*consistently addressed its benefits especially in today's digital age.*

## Is interdependence among nations really beneficial? [2014MJCJ2MYEQ12]

“I am not an Athenian, nor a Greek, but a citizen of the world,” proclaimed a Greek philosopher at the end of a gruesome war. The Hellenic world grew in might and stature as a result of mutual cooperation and assistance despite its fragmented nature. It established itself as a model civilisation in the ancient world, an exemplar for others to emulate. Yet, in this day and age where the political landscape is so characterised by interdependence between states, one questions the benefit of such a prevailing system. With the loss of individual autonomy and national sovereignty for the sake of the greater good of the international community and the shambolic economy resulting from overdependence, should states still cling to this paradigm? I still believe that it really is beneficial in spite of all its shortcomings. It enhances military power through multilateral alliances, brings about material wealth through provident economic unions and gives nations a louder voice in international dealings. Although extreme, unmanaged interdependence can be more harmful than beneficial, it is still a useful principle for nations to exist by.

Interdependence among nations, especially militarily, is truly beneficial in increasing the chances for countries to achieve their highest priority – existence. Multilateral alliances have been key in allowing states to aggrandise military power despite their own individual constraints, to meet the demands of self-defence. In pooling their resources together, countries are better equipped to fend off security threats and attacks by foreign expansionists. Bringing back the example of the Hellenic city-states, this point is clearly expressed in their resounding victory against the Persians in the Greco-Persian Wars of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. Divided, quarrelsome and puny, the independent nations of Greece were easy



pickings for the covetous Persian Empire. Yet, uniting their men, arms and wits through the formation of the Delian League, the tiny democratic allied states managed to repel the attack of one of the largest armies assembled in ancient history. Their mutual dependence, not individual effort, allowed them to achieve such a feat and avoid the existential threat. This is seen today, with nations still sharing intelligence and weaponry in functioning military alliances. The Five-Power Defence Arrangements (FPDA) is a military alliance binding Great Britain, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia and New Zealand. Formed in the 1970s, the alliance is meant for the more battle-hardened and experienced troops of Britain and Australia to provide expertise and assistance to the other members in the event of an attack. Thus, interdependence among nations, if viewed from a purely military dimension is indeed beneficial to states, giving them added muscle and a better fighting chance in a world built upon considerations of realpolitik.

Nationalists, on the other hand, may shun interdependence for military purposes as it leads to countries being embroiled in unnecessary conflicts they were not initially involved in, for the mere sake of assisting an ally. In most inter-state alliances, agreements are built upon a clause where an attack on one is an attack on all, making countries legally bound by treaty to assist allies in their disputes. Public opinion resents this, as it compromises a nation's sovereignty in forcing it to help others in potentially destructive wars that do not concern it in the first place. Peace in pre-war Europe was built on the Alliance System, in an attempt to deter aggression that had scourged the continent for centuries. Yet, as bilateral disputes arose, it implicated even far-off nations in a regional conflagration. World War I saw armed struggle between Austria and the Serbians involve the Russian Empire, Germany and later even Great Britain, as they joined in defence of their allies. This demonstrates how even a spark in the Balkans was able to create a general European war as a result of mutual alliances. Interdependence, therefore, can do more harm than good if the

countries unaffected by a rising threat, being forced to come to the aid of their confederate, do not stand to gain from the alliance but in fact, by being burdened with obligations to defend the coalition, become worse-off. However, if limits are imposed, such risks of interdependence may be mitigated. Such can include ensuring that only if the threat in question endangers all the confederate states should the spirit of the alliance be invoked. This was the case in the World War II – the US remained in isolation from a conflict that appeared to exclusively involve its European friends, until she was rudely awakened to the realities of her own danger by the attack on Pearl Harbour. Only then did she provide help to her dependent allies Britain and France. Hence, interdependence that is measured and limited can still increase a nation's defensive options without dragging it into its allies' squabbles.

Pragmatists may also decry the notion of economic interdependence that seemingly plagues the world today with its added risks and structural flaws. The portent saying "when America sneezes, the whole world catches a cold" is no child-like adage. It very realistically encapsulates the dangers of overt interdependence in the global economy. Today, countries are more vulnerable to changing conditions in overseas markets – a workers' strike in China raised prices of iPhones worldwide last year as output was affected. Unbridled currency speculation and the subsequent bursting of the property bubble in Thailand caused the region-wide Asian Financial Crisis in 1997. The reversal of one nation's free trade policies like low tariffs can mean the loss of markets for another nation's exports – as it was in the late 1970s, when American-imposed protectionist measures like restrictive import quotas and Voluntary Export Restraints hurt Japanese exports to the US. Thus, it really may outwardly seem as though economic interdependence is an unforeseen curse that stifles countries into the same yoke of vulnerability, and I concede thus. However, despite this, there is no question that aside from occasional episodic economic meltdowns that have borderless ripple effects, throughout



history, inter-state commerce has brought prosperity to many nations. Economic globalisation in the last few decades in particular, has linked countries through production, trade and consumption, moving capital and jobs to developing countries, and resultantly led to the acceleration of economic growth and the drastic reduction of poverty in these countries. As a case in point, China's phenomenal economic growth since 1978 has been nothing short of an economic miracle, its once paltry GDP growing at an annualised rate of 9%, surpassing US recently to become the world's largest economy. On a more global scale, the economic interdependence that ties numerous economies today, when combined with prudent national economic policies, has undoubtedly translated to global economic growth and the reduction of global poverty rates by half from 43% in 1990 to 21% in 2010. Such benefits are undeniably linked to economic interdependence and one should not miss the forest for the trees merely by focusing on the occasional recession.

Of course, economists sound the warning bells about uneven economic growth across nations, and how economic interdependence only benefits some nations, but not others. However, before we allow these economists to preach gloom and doom about the dangers of economic interdependence, we should perhaps take a look at history. Human history is littered with the gold circulated between every manner of human political organisation – between great kingdoms and maritime republics as well as from one humble mountain village to another. The modest merchant is witness to how economic cooperation has brought about enhanced material wealth, and that autarky is impractical as such a nation will be doomed to exhausting its own resources while consumer demand grows stagnant. The Hanseatic League is a prime example of historical economic interdependence – a collection of unremarkable market towns on the Baltic seaboard that, through the trading of furs, timber and herring dominated maritime trade in northern Europe. They enriched themselves by securing the passage of

these goods and through collective military power, defended their interests and those of their merchants. In recent history, the establishment of multinational institutions like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and World Trade Organisation is a sign of greater economic interdependence. They preserve the international economic order as a community of free-trading nations that benefit from one another. Acting as an authority against those pursuing economic exclusivism while providing financial help to nations opening up to the forces of global trade, these modern 'merchant guilds' symbolise the spirit of economic interdependence. Leading the reformation of the global economy after the Second World War under American auspices, they brought the world into a Golden Age of Capitalism. This was a period of free trade, high growth and unprecedented wealth that lasted three decades. Thus, economic interdependence should not always evoke images of unemployment, rising debt and other woes it may sometimes cause, as the colour and variety it adds to societies touched by an exchange of goods with far-off regions far outweigh its potential risks.

Another reason for my support of interdependence among nations is the advantages it brings to them on the international stage. 'Nations' – being a collective term to refer to any group of people that share a common culture – may not necessarily be states but components of wider political entities. One then wonders why they have chosen to remain in formal unions with other nations instead of acting independently. The fact is that nations have a greater voice if they collude as part of a regional organisation or – in extreme cases – amalgamate to form wider states. This gives them greater diplomatic influence in the form of added bargaining power at negotiating tables. For instance, the political cohesion of six Native American tribes of the north-eastern Atlantic seaboard into a united Iroquois Confederacy created the most formidable challenge to European colonisation of the Americas. Where superior political sophistication of the Europeans was able to undermine



squabbling native communities through a policy of divide-and-conquer elsewhere, the Iroquois, through their hold over vast swathes of territory and informal hegemony, were able to compel greater concessions from the Europeans. They played the British, French and Dutch against each other and survived the tide of colonialism longer than less cohesive tribes. In modern times, the European Union has rallied together countries including those that used to be part of the former USSR to vote on issues like human rights and animal welfare. By holding a seat as an observer in the UN, it gives a chance for lesser European states to have their agenda and interests heard on an international level. Therefore, interdependence is indeed beneficial as it gives smaller states – and indeed small nations – a chance to air their concerns by standing together as a larger and more imposing political entity, in the global arena.

In the rough and tumble of international affairs, might is right. No nation can stand alone without reaching out to its neighbours for assistance and receiving help in return. Few are the nations today that can afford the price of isolation, especially in so integrated a world. Thus, interdependence is imperative to ensure the long-term viability of all states.

**Muhammad Faris B Joraimi 13A301**

#### Review

*The writer certainly possesses a strong and engaging personal voice. This is coupled with valid points supported by an astonishing range of examples, all of which make this essay an excellent read. Keep it up!*

## **How far, in your society, should unpopular views be open to discussion? [2013 A**

**levels Q12]**

**S**ingaporeans, as with the people in many other societies, have a routine of going with the general consensus and doing very little or nothing to

acknowledge or appreciate unpopular views, unless of course the issue is something of personal concern to them. After all, as pragmatists may question, what are the benefits of considering unpopular views, given their lack of support from the masses? Also, how will acknowledging, what more discussing, these unpopular views help Singapore's society to grow and mature? Upon considering these questions, I nevertheless believe that it would be highly beneficial for my society, Singapore, if unpopular views are open to discussion.

The political establishment here takes the view that in a multicultural, multiracial society such as Singapore which has faced violence and bloodshed due to racial distrust and resentment in the past, it would be more beneficial to have unpopular views closed to discussion and censored to prevent conflict from occurring. We see this present particularly for racial and religious insults and comments. The Media Development Authority (MDA) would first block the offending page and locate and charge the culprit responsible for the comments. An unfortunate example is Amy Cheong, a former NTUC membership assistant director, who in 2012 commented about the noise generated by Malay weddings in the void decks and said that they should just save up and get a "real" wedding at a hotel. In less than 24 hours, her post was removed, she was given a stern warning by the police and she was fired from her job (which was vacant two hours later for job applications). Indeed, such censoring of views may be seen as justified as it upholds the overall peace of the society. Nevertheless, upon deeper examination, is not such a form of treatment for unpopular views a superficial and temporary solution? In not questioning why such views arise or the rationale of such an argument, it leaves the root of the problem untouched. This would, on the surface, give an impression of a cohesive and united society, but there may be hatred and resentment hidden underneath which may cause many more issues to surface or even escalate further down the road. Therefore I believe that unpopular views, if kept closed to discussion, would only delay the





issue and not solve it; opening it up, on the other hand, brings benefits, of which will be outlined further in the following paragraphs.

The first reason why unpopular views should be, to a large extent, open to discussion is that it reinforces the importance placed on freedom of expression by Singapore's society. Freedom of expression is considered by the United Nations to be one of the few inalienable human rights granted to all human beings in all societies, and Singapore is no exception. To facilitate freedom of expression in our society, all views, not just the popular ones should be brought up for discussion. This would help bring localized issues up to the national level for discussion, and through this, help all aspects of our society feel more included. A prime example of this would be the issue of foreign worker treatment in Singapore. Two years back, the issue of treatment of foreign workers never came across the public's consciousness, and when some individuals and organisations tried to surface it, they were ignored and such an unpopular issue was closed to discussion. Only after a strike initiated by Chinese bus drivers and subsequently the unforgettable riot involving the Indian workers in Little India, was such an issue brought to the public's attention. Upon doing so, many organisations became more aware of this issue and regulations were reformed to help improve the living conditions of foreign workers. As such, it opened the unpopular view of the poor treatment of foreign workers up for discussion. This has shown that when unpopular views are brought up for discussion, it may invoke change that would improve the more neglected aspects of Singapore's society, making it a better society. For this reason, I believe that unpopular views should be open to discussion.

Furthermore, as a first-world nation who declares herself to be a democracy, Singapore should uphold the principles of democracy and not restrict the discussion of unpopular views. Since Singapore is a democratic society, and pluralism is a key component of any democratic nation, it raises the pertinent issue of how pluralism is

to be upheld if unpopular views are not up for debate. In principle, through pluralism, all views of the society would be brought up and thus, the nation would be able to work together to come up with a solution that encompasses and takes into consideration everyone's opinions. This would allow the governing body to become legitimate as now the more unpopular aspects of society become visible and accounted for and the people would no longer feel oppressed and excluded from society. While I admit that it is impossible to consider everyone's views in our society, a small step that we can take towards pluralism is to not close off unpopular views from discussion. This would help the nation to be more inclusive and the government to earn real political legitimacy; therefore I feel that unpopular views should largely be open for discussion.

Lastly, I feel that unpopular views should be open for discussion as when we open up these unpopular views for discussion, it truly helps our society to grow and mature. When unpopular views are brought up for discussion, it is an indication that these views are not only acknowledged but also respected. It lets everyone know that there is an issue and people can no longer avoid it and run. It drives people to think and educate themselves on the matter. Overtime, people would grow more accepting of the view and understand the rationale behind such views. In fact, surfacing unpopular views for discussion would be unavoidable as Singapore's society would naturally evolve to include people with unpopular views. An example of this starting to occur is Singapore's attitude toward LGBT rights, through the use of the Speakers Corner at Hong Lim Park, to host the Pink Dot campaign. Through this event, it has raised public awareness on the subject and made more people more tolerant and understanding towards such opinions. Surveys of Singaporeans have shown that over the past 5 years, the number of people accepting of a gay lifestyle has grown from 30% to 50%. It can even be suggested that in the coming years, Singapore's society would reach a tipping point, whereby something must be done to acknowledge this view on the national



stage. Through this, Singapore's society would grow to become a more inclusive and mature society, making Singapore a better place to live in. Therefore I believe to a large extent, unpopular views should be open for discussion.

All in all, I feel that Singapore's society should allow unpopular views to be open for discussion as it would help our nation to grow and mature, and further enforce our democratic system of governance. While I do concede that some views may cause conflict in the society, I strongly believe that Singapore is more than able to handle them, and through it, grow.

**Benjamin Ng 13S102**



#### Review

*Although some points overlapped across paragraphs, the essay brings up several interesting and mature arguments which have been insightfully supported by the use of appropriate examples.*

### **Consider the view that mathematics possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty. [2012 A levels Q7]**

**M**athematics is not something alien to us. Rather, it is something that is always around us and something that we use daily, whether we know it or not, from buying food at a restaurant, to the circuits that reside in the recesses of our computers. While there is no doubt that mathematics is highly pervasive and useful, we fail to ask the more philosophical question as we go about our daily lives: Is mathematics beautiful? Is mathematics truthful? To both questions, I would argue that not only does mathematics possess truth, it possesses a beauty supreme to all others.

First and foremost, the very nature of mathematics itself causes it to be truthful, as the well-defined rules and logic of mathematics result in very little ambiguity and room for debate. Three plus eight will

always yield a value of eleven in our conventional decimal system, but in the case of the less often used octal and binary systems of counting, the yielded answers of thirteen and 1011 respectively are still equal to what we know in our minds as "eleven". In contrast, in other disciplines such as literature or philosophy, or even in the more theoretical portions of physics and chemistry, arguments for every possible opinion can always be made, resulting in a myriad of conflicting answers. What message did Shakespeare want to convey when he drafted *A Midsummer's Night Dream*? Do we have freedom, or are we just living our lives in an endless unchanging cycle according to Nietzsche's theory of eternal recurrence? The answers to those questions can be debated for as long as one desires, but mathematics possesses an absolute truth in the fact that a problem, a question, always has a set of well-defined solutions.

Those opposed to my point of view would no doubt argue that mathematics does not always possess truth as it has been frequently exploited by organisations and individuals for their own selfish purposes. Banks frequently hide behind a veil of innocently small numbers, concealing the fact that a compounded interest on a loan may become larger than a loan itself. Bernie Madoff's Ponzi scheme involved the lure of great exponential returns, while he himself profited immensely by using the money of new investors to pay off his pre-existing ones. While I do admit that mathematics can indeed be used for untruthful purposes, I would refute any claims that mathematics itself is inherently untruthful. In these cases, mathematics was simply a tool, while the actual deception laid in the fact that people failed to read the small print or were lied to outright. Hence, such untruths were more a result of human activity and influence than the fault of mathematics itself.

I am also of the stand that mathematics possesses a beauty supreme to all others as it has a certain elegance in the way that its principles, methods and results come together to form an aesthetic whole. Neatness lies in the way that if vectors are able to form a proper



geometrical shape from head to tail, their resultant will come to nothing. Finesse lies in how a simple equation like the Euler's identity,  $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$ , can succinctly capture all five fundamental mathematical constants while reflecting numerous other mathematical principles at the same time. Hence, I argue that mathematics possesses supreme beauty in the way that the questions posed by it and the answers given by it form a complete and refined whole.

Another reason why I feel mathematics possesses true beauty is the fact that Nature itself follows a mathematical pattern. The Fibonacci sequence, generated by adding the two previous terms to form the next, is simplistic and instinctive enough to derive. Does it come as a surprise, then, that the growth of branches on trees and leaves on stems adhere to this pattern? Even the rose, too, a symbol of love and beauty, grows its petals according to this simple yet elegant pattern. Humans are not exempt either from having an unconscious preference for this pattern. Scientists have found that faces conforming to specific proportions following the Golden Ratio (which, coincidentally, is derived from the Fibonacci Sequence), were thought to be more attractive than other faces. Accordingly, some icons who exhibit these features are celebrities admired for their looks, such as Marilyn Monroe and Brad Pitt. This only reinforces the fact that the aesthetics we admire in nature and even in our fellow human beings follow some mathematical rule or other, and it is this elusive form of patterned order that makes it obvious that mathematics possesses supreme beauty.

Those opposed to my views on mathematical beauty may argue that there is no beauty to be found in mathematics as it is highly technical in nature, requiring complex and specialised knowledge of the subject. On the surface, it is true that some aspects of mathematics, such as Russell and Whitehead's proof that one plus one equates to two, may look like a hellish mishmash of symbols to the untrained eye. However, I argue that the perceived lack of beauty is due to the majority's limited

interpretation of mathematics. The layman's understanding is usually restricted to what they have been exposed to in school and what practical uses mathematics has for the most part, such as in finance and economics. In such a coldly practical context, mathematics seems to possess no beauty. However, in this case, we fail to realise that mathematics encompasses a much larger domain, including the simple yet hidden aspects of mathematics in nature that all can appreciate, to the complex, logical proofs that are valued by numeracy connoisseurs. The practical elements of mathematics are but a tiny slice of what it has to offer and what the layman fails to know or understand of its ability to inspire beauty, should not simply be dismissed as absent.

Mathematics has been serving mankind for many long years since its inception centuries ago. With this, it is easy to forget the beauty of mathematics as it has been relegated to merely just another of mankind's problem-solving tools. However, it does not take a cerebral mind or an esoteric taste to appreciate the beauty of mathematics. Think about it – what could be more beautiful than a machine that sits quietly, that runs like clockwork throughout the ages, which never fails to provide a correct answer? Perhaps, this quiet efficiency is the most beautiful of all the other traits of mathematics.

**Wong Jin Jye 13S212**

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#### Review

*This is an eloquent and knowledgeable essay, whose strength lies in the simplicity and clarity with which it delivers its arguments.*

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## **Consider the appeal and value of superheroes today. [MJC2014JC1PEQ10]**

**Y**ear after year, superhero-themed films have dominated the movie screens, with at least two to three being released each year, and even more being slated for release in the subsequent



years. Superheroes have long piqued our interests and stirred our imaginations, dating back to the World War II period where stories of heroism and personal sacrifice were oft told and repeated by subsequent generations, and their admirers have grown steadily – even booming in recent years. The appeal of superheroes is clearly very strong, as their extraordinary traits and ventures offer us an escape from reality; but their human traits simultaneously allow us to identify with and relate to them. While their value might be debated, I would argue that superheroes do in fact have value, certainly in the monetary sense and perhaps, more importantly, in the moral sense as well.

Superheroes have a strong appeal due to their remarkable, sometimes other-worldly and fantastical traits and exploits, which we as mundanely ordinary humans are often drawn to. These make-believe worlds of superheroes liberate us from our supposedly dull, prosaic lives, stimulating our imagination by helping us see the extraordinary in the ordinary. Science and technology, seen as incredibly dry and boring topics to some, are made exciting in the tales of superheroes. The creation of the metallic element 'adamantium' in the Wolverine comics which was surgically injected into his bones to give him super strength, metallic retractable claws and incredibly rapid healing abilities which thus repeatedly prevent his death is an example of 'science' in superhero tales. In the X-Men comics, the machine Cerebro is able to detect and glimpse into the minds of humans and mutants all across the globe, even being able to pinpoint their exact location, which is an advancement in technology that we do not have in real life, but the prospects of which are terribly exciting. Science and technology in superhero stories have generally been used in innovative and much more advanced ways, giving powers to ordinary humans or causing intense conflict when misused by the foes of superheroes. Thus, there is little doubt to the appeal superheroes have as their world enthrals us and stimulates our imaginations.

Apart from the extraordinary traits that superheroes have, what may appeal to us more on a subconscious level would be their human traits. The superheroes we see in comics or in movies stumble too, and have to face completely human struggles as well – Kurt Wagner, otherwise known as the Nightcrawler, faces discrimination and struggles for acceptance due to his physical appearance of blue skin, yellow eyes, pointed ears and a prehensile tail that renders him devil-like in appearance. The fantastic Spiderman, when not in his signature red and blue suit, is the average Peter Parker, who struggles with romance problems as seen from his awkward behaviour around the women he has feelings for. Steve Rogers – before undergoing the Super-Soldier Serum as a part of Operation: Rebirth to become the Captain America we all know – was greatly disheartened by his inability to serve in the army and was often picked on both verbally and physically because of his frail physique. These struggles that superheroes face are experienced by the average human as well, thus making them all so relatable to us despite their sometimes other-worldly nature. Indeed, we are able to identify with them and empathise with their struggles, therein lays their appeal to the common man.

Additionally, the value of superheroes, while sometimes debated, can clearly be seen in the monetary sense. Through the popular screen adaptations of superhero comics, such as Dark Horse Comics' Hellboy and DC Comics' Green Lantern, there is a great potential for revenue to be created for the movie industry. Just looking at Singapore alone, when The Avengers was released back in 2012, it was the top grossing film in Singapore while The Dark Knight Rises, one third of Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy, and The Amazing Spider-Man followed in the second and third positions respectively. Worldwide, the X-Men franchise, which has a total of seven films to date, has grossed over US\$3 billion in total and three more films are slated for release in 2016 and 2017. Even some of the more renowned actors who play and reprise the title roles in many of these films could stand to earn a lot of money, especially Hugh Jackman in the



character of Wolverine and Robert Downey Junior in his part as Iron Man. In fact, many of them have been commended by critics and fans alike for their uncanny ability to bring such comic book superheroes to life particularly on the silver screen. Additionally, the writers and artists behind superhero comics can experience a surge in interest and sales of their original creations as well – perhaps, earning even more so today than they did before as the movies that adapt such comic book characters and storylines increase the superhero aficionado base, leading to more people being interested in superheroes and purchasing the comic books. Also, the monetary value of superheroes does not just lie in how much revenue it brings in, but can also be seen in how much money is spent on them. Fans are more than willing to spend a lot on superhero-related merchandise just to add to their collection such as illustration books, DVDs, figurines, props and costumes for cosplay, just to name a few. Hence, the monetary value of superheroes is demonstrated by the significant amount of money earned from and spent on superheroes.

However, since these superheroes exist in a world with powers like enhanced abilities and with villains that could very well destroy humanity as we know it, realists would argue that they are thus of little or no value to us due to their far-fetched nature, which makes them not very applicable to our lives. While I would have to concede to such an argument since the abilities and technology in superhero worlds are indeed not seen now and perhaps not even in the near future, to view superheroes as such would be too dismissive. Beyond the fantastic and “unrealistic” nature of superheroes, their stories often convey important messages and impart moral values. The humans versus mutants analogy in X-Men addresses discrimination – while mutants may be ‘far-fetched’ on the surface, the message behind such an analogy is the discrimination against different races. Captain America teaches us to stay true to our principles and values as even before he was chosen to undergo the Super-Soldier Serum as a part of Operation: Rebirth, he was initially chosen to be a part

of it because he had displayed his true courage and selflessness by throwing himself over a grenade to protect his fellow soldiers from the shrapnel if it had exploded. Even the oft-quoted piece of advice, “With great power comes great responsibility”, while originally by Voltaire, is respected and popularised through its use in the Spider-Man comics. Other superheroes (not necessarily from comics) such as The Incredibles demonstrate values like having strong family ties and teamwork. The world of superheroes also carries the message of the impacts of victimisation – indeed, a number of superheroes face villains who turn to evil simply because they have been unfairly treated and deliberately victimised. In coming to terms with their decision not to use their powers for good but instead for evil, The Brotherhood of Evil Mutants in X-Men, for instance, rationalise their misdeeds by arguing that their powers are used to defend themselves and others like them against persecution and discrimination. While it may be uncommon in real life that victims become evil villains capable of mass destruction, extreme examples of perhaps gratuitously violent ‘freedom fighters’ in the Middle Eastern region could shed light on the similar idea that victimisation breeds further violence. Thus, superheroes do have value as they impart moral values and important messages to both their readers and viewers, and to boot, in a much more interesting and therefore impactful manner.

The adventures of Wonder Woman, Batman, the Avengers, the X-Men or – even more recently popular – the Guardians of the Galaxy may be incredible and otherworldly, but they do appeal to many people, being both fantastical yet simultaneously relatable. Beyond the monetary value, superheroes and their stories have an important moral value as well, perhaps even making them more important since their strong appeal gives them a larger viewer base to impart these values upon. Whatever the narrative behind the next superhero series, one can be sure that many will find it both appealing and valuable.

***Aliah Aman Aljunied 13A301***

**Review**

The range of examples is impressive, ranging from comic book superheroes to even Walt Disney films. Also, the development of each paragraph was thoughtfully done with careful attention paid to addressing both 'appeal' and 'value' of superheroes. Well done!

## **'Books are always more powerful than their screen adaptations.' What is your view? [MJC2014JC1PEQ1]**

The Maze Runner by James Dashner was adapted into a motion picture and recently opened in cinemas in Singapore. Movie critics were quick to bemoan that it was yet another dystopian film in the same vein as The Hunger Games and Divergent, screen adaptations which are inferior to the original book counterparts. Indeed, I believe that books, more often than not, are more powerful than their screen adaptations, be it television shows or movies, albeit with some exceptions.

One of the most pertinent reasons as to why books are often more powerful than their screen adaptations is their ability to invoke stronger and richer imaginations than films or dramas ever will. Quite simply, books rely upon the intricacy of wordplay in order to immerse the reader, drawing him into the novel's universe. Every scene that unfolds as we read is pieced together seamlessly in our very minds and each of us has subtle differences in our versions of the story. Screen adaptations can hence be said to be merely one interpretation of the said story. The stunning visuals we take in on the screen, however, leave no room for imagination, for we as humans cannot naturally alter how we see things or undo what we see. Hence, it can be said that invoking more vibrant and vivid imaginations for the story within the confines of the narrative is a strength that screen adaptations cannot compete with. It is not without basis either. In a rather grim illustration, criminologists ascertain that reading works depicting violence rather

than watching shows of this genre has a stronger impact on the mind and more likely to influence readers to turn to criminal ways. The power of imagination is strong and books harness this far more effectively than their screen adaptations.

Another reason as to why books are usually more powerful than screen adaptations is that books leave readers wanting more. The author can certainly take credit for it. The narrative of a book is often deep and engaging and leaves readers eager for the next book. Screen adaptations normally lack that surge of anticipation books have. They are based upon completed novels and the franchise is often completed before the screen adaptation airs. To illustrate, *Mockingjay*, the last book of the *Hunger Games* trilogy, was released in 2012 and the movie adaptation is set to be released in the upcoming holiday season. People may be glad that the final movie is finished but the excitement is very much muted because the story everyone wishes to know was unveiled in the book two years prior. Screen adaptations thus fail miserably at replicating the cliff-hangers their source materials masterfully crafted. Movie reviewers will point out that the conclusion of the screen adaptation of *Catching Fire*, the second book of the trilogy, is rather anticlimactic compared to the book itself as the essence of it is not fully captured in the film. Hence, I believe that books are usually more powerful than their screen adaptations.

In addition to the above points, books undeniably provide a more accurate and integrated story as desired by the author, thereby creating a story that readers easily understand. Screen adaptations, as the name implies, are adaptations of the original source material and there is a high possibility, almost a certainty that the story is altered to suit the director's needs, resulting in discord between the original narrative and later adaptations. As a result, screen adaptations provide a different portrayal of characters, not just physically but also characteristically. This is can be seen in many movies, one of which being *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*. The adaptation has so many



differences that the story feels less solid and the characterisation not as well-written as it should be. In fact, the author, Rick Riordan himself, disapproves of the misappropriate handling of his source materials and has not watched any of the adaptations for his books. Even scenes that were unnecessary in books are added to films and dramas either as 'fan service' or for commercial purposes through product placement. They are often out of place in the context of the story and only serve to damage the otherwise robust narrative. *The Game of Thrones* is a perfect example which critics have harshly singled out for containing many nude scenes which are completely extraneous and non-existent in the original *A Song of Ice and Fire* series. Such questionable additions harm the portrayal of characters and affect the flow of the story. Hence, I believe that books are more powerful, in terms of being true to the story, than their screen adaptations.

Despite the strengths that books have over their screen adaptations, it would be unwise to presume that books are always more powerful though. It is crucial to note that at times, especially in terms of reach, screen adaptations can be more powerful than books because they are able to garner a lot more publicity than books will. Film adaptations and their trailers generate a lot of attention and the casting of famous stars creates even more buzz. I would thus concede that this is indeed one area in which screen adaptations are more powerful than books. In today's world of social media and the Internet, movie trailers are widely found and shared across the world while books are struggling to maintain their place in the hearts of readers in today's fast-paced society. It is undeniable that book sales tend to be a lot higher during the duration of movie screening, a trend captured with JK Rowling's *Harry Potter* franchise. The proliferation of the Internet also makes videos more appealing than a wall of text. People are more inclined to watch rather than read while on the go. The use of social media in promotion of screen adaptations is a successful one and this is shown in the adaptation of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. The movie's publicity was almost entirely done through social media and the movie was ranked first in its

opening weekend. Such successful publicity efforts are rarely heard of for books and that is why I concede that in this field, screen adaptations are more powerful than books.

Screen adaptations will only become even more common as books become more exciting and interesting for directors to adapt. *The Maze Runner* is only the beginning, as more novelists write and dream about their works becoming motion pictures. Ultimately, we must remember that it is the author that makes this a reality and the drawing power of a book depends on the author. Similarly, a good director or even marquee actors can add to the power of screen adaptations. There is clear subjectivity in this area. Personally, I have enjoyed both books and their screen adaptations, and often find that they complement each other rather well. Therefore, it would only be sensible to conclude that books, though powerful, are not always more powerful than their screen adaptations.

**James Feng 13S305**

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#### Review

*Although the author chose to concede an OV, the clear signposting from the start of the essay made the essay coherent and easy to follow. The sound arguments are also well-supported with a wide range of apt examples, clearly showing the writer's passion for books.*

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### **'Women will never enjoy the same rights as men.'** **Do you agree? [2006 A levels Q6]**

**W**orld War II, although a bloody reminder of humanity's capacity for violence, was also the spark of a more subdued and important revolution for mankind: a proliferation of women's rights. From the American housewives who were allowed to vote, to the creation of an all-women air brigade in the Soviet Union, World War II was an important catalyst for women's rights that



has evolved to what we know and appreciate today. Hence, given the great progress in women's emancipation from the past to the present, I do believe that women will eventually enjoy the same rights as men.

Firstly, I believe that women will enjoy the same rights as men as both men and women have different political and social perceptions of women's rights and roles today. With the many women's rights movements that spawned over the 1960s to 2000s, such as the famous birth control and reproductive rights movement of 1968 to the Feminist movement now, both men and women have now come to realise that women are not the lesser being in the human race, but are of equal standing as men. Thus, misogynistic views that portray women as mere 'baby factories' or 'lesser creatures', that were once tolerated, or even celebrated by the public, are now highly scrutinised and condemned by both men and women alike. In addition, men's infamy for being male chauvinists was also debunked when both genders rose together against sexist bigotry. Hence, different political and social perceptions today assure that both men and women can sympathise with one another's difficulties and successes in life, and thus any sexist attacks on women can no longer distort men's view of women anymore. It is hence no wonder that a recent incident involving a male politician heckling a fellow female politician while she addressed the Tokyo Metropolitan Assembly drew much protest from the Japanese, female and male alike. The heckler, Tokyo Assemblyman Akihiro Suzuki, eventually apologised for his inappropriate behaviour but nevertheless had raw eggs pelted at his office and his Facebook page flooded with harsh criticism of his shameful conduct. This illustration highlights the sea change in the Japanese's perception of women. Thus I do believe that women will enjoy the same rights as men due to the reason that a paradigm shift has already begun and is gaining momentum.

Secondly, I believe that women will enjoy the same rights as men as both genders have access to education today. After

World War II, education became more widespread and in-depth to cater to growing public needs for skilled and highly-educated labour. Hence, women are now more educated than before, which empowers them to stand up for the rights they deserve. A great example is Malala Yousafzai, a Palestinian activist who was schooled by her father. This led her to fight against the Taliban's oppression of girls' right to education by blogging for BBC and going on the television. Although she almost lost her life fighting for her cause when she was just 15, this backfired for the Taliban as she rose in international fame, and is now a champion for women rights around the world, while showing just how vile the Taliban in Pakistan truly is. To boot, she was recently awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her fight for girls' rights to education. Therefore, with education, women now know how to wield the tools they need to ignite change for themselves and other women alike. In addition, this gives women social mobility, allowing them to fight poverty, caste or any other social markers that inhibit their freedom to fight for change. Hence, with better education for women, I do believe that they will eventually enjoy the same rights as men.

Finally, I believe that women will eventually enjoy the same rights as men as many women around the world are today given political suffrage. As social and political perceptions change from before, most countries give women suffrage as a sign of political maturity and equality for both sexes. Thus, as women are finally able to vote now, they are able to have their voices heard through their vote for their favourite politicians. Likewise, politicians must also take into account female voters' needs and concerns, such as employment and social equality, in order to earn their votes during the elections, since they now technically make up half of the votes. Hence, politicians voted into legislation nowadays are more involved in women's rights than ever before, as a way to reel in more female supporters. These elected politicians will then actively address the women's rights issues of his or her voters tabling new policies, speaking on behalf of women in national debates and voting on





policies, thus aptly representing their female voters' concerns. For example, Hillary Clinton, the former Secretary of State of the United States, has always pushed for equality for women both in America and internationally. One can never forget her scathing remarks about China's abuse of woman in the 1995's World Conference on Women in Beijing, or the criticisms on Taliban's abuse of women in Afghanistan in the 1990s. All these built her reputation as a champion of women rights in America. Hence, it came as no surprise that her political support is strong in the USA, especially amongst the female voters who are currently rallying for her to run for the presidential campaign in 2016. This thus shows that political suffrage empowers women to vote for who best represents them, who in turn address unfair policies and laws against women, allowing women to eventually enjoy the same rights as men.

Detractors of my view may argue that while most women do enjoy similar rights as men, job equality is still greatly lacking for many countries. For example, Korean Chaebols or business conglomerates rarely have any women taking on executive positions and even then their pay is still noticeably lesser than their male counterparts. Although this is true now, I do believe that this would not be the case for the future. One must understand that the female rights movement is a rather novel idea that has not run its full course. Hence, we have much room for improvement to reach perfect equality. A great example is none other than Japan, where Prime Minister Shinzo Abe recently said that women are an irreplaceable asset in Japan's road to economic recovery and that the "glass ceiling in Japan shall be broken". This is in stark contrast to the infamous male-driven society Japan is known for. Hence, although most societies have work to do in this regard, most of them have and will put in hard work to bridge female and male income gaps and job opportunities, which in turn shows that in time to come, women will eventually enjoy the same job rights as men.

Some pessimists also argue that women in certain developing countries are still deeply oppressed by patriarchal societies,

showing that women will never enjoy the same rights as men. For example, places such as India still suffer from a high incidence of sexual crimes committed against women, such as the infamous case where a woman was brutally gang-raped on a bus in 2012 in New Delhi and eventually died from her wounds. Another notable example is Saudi Arabia, where women are still campaigning for a seemingly basic right – the right to legally drive. Although this is true today, I still believe that all women will eventually enjoy the same rights as men. This is due to the widespread coverage and condemnation of such crimes internationally, such as the rape case in New Delhi stated above. This forces the governments of these countries to keep a closer eye on its people and enforce the law more strictly, so as to keep its dignity on a global stage. The silver lining for the 2012 Delhi rape case was the aftermath surrounding it, where the Indian government scrambled to catch and prosecute the guilty, while new laws protecting women were pushed out swiftly, all amidst the watching eyes of both the national and international press. Thus, with this pressure to treat women fairly by other countries, I believe that even patriarchal societies will one day succumb and give women the equal rights they deserve. Hence, I believe that women will eventually enjoy the same rights as men.

It has been sixty-seven years since the Paris treaty was signed by the Allied nations in 1947, and women have already come so far to forge a better and brighter future for themselves in the form of equal job opportunities, fair courts and social mobility. All these are the triumphs of women rights, all done in so little time, which gives me hope that in the next sixty-seven years, women rights will surely become equal to men's.

**Goh Ting Qi 14S111**

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#### Review

*Excellent and current examples beef up soundly-reasoned arguments. The strong personal voice is used to good advantage to add a sense of personal conviction to the essay.*



## How far is your country prepared for future crises?

[2006 A levels Q6]

Ranked as the second safest country in the world, Singapore experiences a low crime rate, little to no occurrences of natural disasters and has been enjoying rapid development. The lives of Singaporeans have been peaceful with few crises for the past few decades. However, can the same be said for the future? Some believe that Singapore would not be able to shelter its citizens indefinitely in the face of external pressures such as terrorism and global conflicts, as well as internal issues such as social stability. Despite such concerns, I feel that Singapore has largely implemented relevant measures and policies that anticipate future crises, and is thus very well prepared to deal with whatever problems that may occur.

First and foremost, Singapore has prepared its citizens well by ensuring that they are aware of what to do in a crisis. This will allow the people to respond calmly and rationally during times of disasters, while coordinating their actions with government efforts to deal with the situation. This is further supported by a robust crisis management plan that the country has for most types of crises. One example is the network of sirens that the Singapore Civil Defence Force has installed around the island that constitutes Singapore's public warning system. The public is educated to recognise various public warning signals and what to do when they are sounded, such as the "important message signal" made of pulsating blasts and the "alarm signal" made of wailing blasts. In schools, fire drills are conducted regularly to ensure that students know how to react in the event of a fire, mobilising them to leave the premises in a quick but orderly fashion to a safe zone. The same evacuation procedures that students are well-versed in can also be adapted to deal with various other scenarios like a terrorist attack or a bomb scare. Given the level of

preparedness of its people, Singapore is definitely ready to handle future crises.

Additionally, Singapore is a technologically advanced country, constantly pursuing and adopting the latest innovations in technology. This enables us to overcome our limitations and better prepare ourselves against external threats that we may face. One such aspect would be in the field of military defence. Singapore has been tapping into various forms of technology to create superior weapons that can compensate for our small defence force. The most prominent of these include the Advanced Combat Man System (ACMS) which serves to provide soldiers with enhanced survivability and lethality by equipping them with navigation systems, tracking systems and head mounted display. There are also other forms of technology such as the Formidable-Class stealth frigate which is a warship and SSPH 1 Primus which is a self-propelled howitzer. This has led to the reference of our army as the "3<sup>rd</sup> Generation Fighting Force", with an emphasis on being an advanced network force. This focus on technology has also been extended to other critical security areas, with CCTVs installed in many sensitive locations around Singapore to monitor for terrorist or other disruptive activities, while our immigration checkpoints boast thermal scanning abilities and biometric identification systems to actively lookout for potential threats entering our country. Through continued investment in modern technologies, we would indeed be able to anticipate, detect, and neutralize potential threats quickly and effectively, leading most to believe that Singapore is indeed prepared for future crises.

Moreover, Singapore is also developing various ways to be self-reliant and free its dependence on other countries for resources. In times of crises, Singapore would be vulnerable to potential shortages in supplies such as food and water that it imports from other countries. To avoid being held hostage to such situations, Singapore is coming up with creative solutions to sustain itself. One such example would be vertical farming in



Singapore. Company Sky Greens has developed a way to grow crops vertically at protected outdoor green houses. Known as the A-Go-Gro vertical systems, these methods of farming can produce significantly higher yields than traditional farming all year round and could potentially account for up to 50% of the vegetables we consume in the future. Another example of self-sustainability is NEWater. With Singapore's water contract with Malaysia ending by 2060, NEWater is aimed to account for 55% of the water we consume in the future. As of now, NEWater is responsible for 30% of the water we use. Given the continuous drive towards self-sufficiency, one cannot deny that Singapore is able to deal with potential crises.

Some critics may argue that in recent years, there have been several unexpected happenings in Singapore that it was evidently not prepared for. Sensitive issues such as religious and racial tensions remain a bugbear that Singapore is unable to fully resolve and remain potential threats to its otherwise peaceful society. One such example would be the riot at Little India by Indian foreign workers which occurred spontaneously. The response by the police was criticised for being ill-prepared for handling such an unprecedented event. Yet, even though it is definitely true that there will be unexpected things Singapore may not have anticipated, it would be too hasty to give us a failing grade on our level of preparedness for crises. The nation has still shown the ability to learn quickly, adapt and improve on how it deals with any crisis. Despite facing no civil unrest for more than 40 years, Singapore's police were able to quell the riot without any fatalities, while being grossly outnumbered by an inebriated crowd. While they could have managed the situation better on hindsight, the fact of the matter is that they were dealing with a new crisis for the first time, and were able to defuse it in a relatively effective manner with no casualties suffered. Moreover, the various government agencies learnt tremendously from this incident, implementing a slew of measures to prevent such incidences from repeating itself. Such examples include introducing laws that prevent public

consumption of alcohol on weekends and public holidays, deploying additional police officers to patrol the area and installing more police cameras in the vicinity. A Council of Inquiry was also set up to further explore other possible learning points. Singapore's adaptability, responsiveness and eagerness to learn from its encounters show that Singapore is always ready to address any possible crises that are on the horizon.

Other detractors may argue that Singapore's level of preparedness against crises might be undermined by a new generation of leaders that do not have the best interests of the people at heart. They cite the recent spate of corruption as an indication that the government is being infiltrated by self-serving individuals that care little for the country's welfare and more for their personal profits. Examples include Edwin Yeo, Head of Field Research and Technical Support for the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau (CPIB) who stole up to \$1.7 million government funds, and Peter Lim, Chief of the Singapore Civil Defence Force (CDF) who gave IT-related government tenders to certain companies in exchange for sexual favours. However, I would argue that there are bound to be black sheep in any organisation. While we cannot completely weed out such individuals, it does not suggest that the organisation as a whole is rotten. More importantly, we should recognise Singapore has little tolerance for such individuals, dealing with them swiftly and harshly. Both Edwin Yeo and Peter Lim were promptly removed from their posts and put behind bars, while the government has further reviewed and tightened its anti-corruption policies. Today, Singapore is ranked the 5<sup>th</sup> least corrupt country in the Global Corruption Survey, indicating the high level of quality and integrity in its leaders. As such, Singapore is most assuredly under the good leadership of capable leaders able to meet the challenges of the future.

To conclude, Singapore is a country which is definitely prepared for future crises. However it should also be worth noting that despite being well prepared, Singapore is not complacent and is always expecting the unexpected. Always aware



that a war can be sparked at any instant and an economy can fail at any moment, she is always forward-looking and preparing herself for the worst. As athlete Jackie Joyner-Kersey said, it is better to look ahead and prepare, than to look back and regret.

**Tay Li Si 14S302**

### Review

*Although some of the views presented here on Singapore could have been better hedged in order to sound less extreme, the points are nevertheless valid and supported with relevant examples.*

## Is stress really harmful?

(MJCJ2MBT13Q8)

Often cited as the root cause of unhappiness and ill health in workers and students, stress is seen as overwhelmingly harmful and undesirable. People undertake tasks they deem as stressful because they have no other choice, hence the adjective 'stressed' to describe someone is often conveyed with sympathy in regards to the subject's 'sacrifice' in bearing the burden of stress. However, is stress really as harmful as we are conditioned to think? Looking past the heavily verbalized emotional and physical damage stress allegedly causes in people, as well as the view that stress is an indication of not coping well, one will find that stress is not as fearsome as so many of us make it out to be.

Firstly, one should not solely pay attention to the negative impacts of stress on one's well-being, such as headaches and insomnia, because stress is essential for a healthy overall psyche too. Stress is a primal mechanism that we often claim is forced upon us, but in actuality comes almost from within. Stress serves as a form of motivation for a person, an emphasis on the importance of getting a particular task done. To be stressed about something is to place great importance on succeeding at it, and this inevitably comes with worrying that one will not. This can be seen in all students – when a student says he is

stressed about doing well for an examination, he believes it is important to do so and worries about it. The want to accomplish causes one to fear not accomplishing anything; but this fear is separate from stress. Stress instead provides a driving force, a purpose and a goal, without which one will feel less motivated to complete tasks.

Secondly, that stress causes tension and an accumulation of fatigue is not entirely negative. Like any other obstacle one faces in being healthy and happy, 'what does not kill you makes you strong', as philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche famously said. City dwellers who plan to live out their education and careers in the city learn to cope with stress by getting used to and even learning to manipulate it to their advantage. There is doubtlessly a limit to the amount of stress one can take before succumbing to the Pandora's Box of self-doubt and desperation stress is apt to open, but as with all other limits, why not push them further? To avoid stress because it could be harmful is to avoid living because it could be painful. By accepting and constantly battling the side effects of stress, one will always be surprised to find out that one is sturdier than initially believed. As quoted from motivational speaker, Nick Vujicic, who was born without limbs, 'The human spirit can handle much worse than we realize.' And indeed we can. Human history is littered with the illustrious acts of heroes who won the battle of mind over body. From the fearless Joan of Arc who routed the English army to Mahatma Gandhi who led British-ruled India to independence, these heroes survived tremendously challenging and stressful circumstances. For the rest of us, who may be students preparing for examinations, working mothers juggling career and home or the sole breadwinner of a family, we too are everyday heroes who have shown that the stress of daily life that assails us cannot really break us.

Thirdly, stress is one's protection against the unpredictable in life. It prepares one for adversaries, conditioning one to be ready to face them at any moment. Stress prompts urgency and efficiency in doing things, and admittedly causes one to think



of the worst possible scenario sometimes. However, that is far from harmful, because now that the mind has considered a possible source of danger, it is now more able to adapt to deal with it. To draw an analogy, at the microscopic level, stress to one's immune system wreaks havoc – cells die, defensive mechanisms are forced to work at full efficiency to eliminate the threat invading the body. However, in the aftermath of the destruction and strain on one's body, the immune system becomes faster at identifying and repelling foreign substances thereafter. When a person is stressed, he or she is aware and alert, and therefore able to react faster to a perceived threat. Conversely, the lack of stress from being unaware of a threat renders the person ill-prepared for the catastrophe that follows. Ignorance is not always bliss, and stress, in this case, brings greater eventual safety.

That being said, the aforementioned limit of stress one can take is a very dangerous one to test, and the toll from pushing oneself too far can be frighteningly large for one to bear at times. It is all too easy to be consumed by stress, as it is a subconscious state of mind. When one ponders a minute too long about the grim possibility of failure or the difficulty of one's current mission, the uncertainty and self-doubt that were meant to push one closer to their goal blocks it out instead. Stress, like all other challenges in life, will bring sweet rewards to those who conquer but severe harms to those who falter. Well-loved Oscar-winning actor, Robin Williams, recently committed suicide, shocking friends and fans alike around the world. Globally, 800 000 people, or one person every 40 seconds, commit suicide every year, according to the World Health

Organisation. Stress indeed is no child's play, especially for those pushed to the limits of sanity. Yet, this is not an unrecognized problem. Many countries around the world, albeit in more developed countries with the necessary medical resources, place much emphasis on treating mental problems such as anxiety, depression and schizophrenia, putting in place support networks and counselling helplines to prevent one from tipping over the edge. For those who felt that an escape from this world was the only way out of misery, alas, if only these souls had the strength to open their eyes to the sources of help available to them.

For most of us in the human race though, feeling stressed is a normal sensation, which most of us learn to live with over time given the inevitability of stressors in each and every one of our lives. However, viewing stress as necessarily harmful, and trying to avoid it all the time, does no one any favours. Stress is not really as harmful as it seems and viewing it from a positive light may strengthen us instead. As Winston Churchill said, 'a pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.'

**Chung Min Qi 14S111**



**Review**

*The writer displays good control over language and a personal voice suited to the writing of philosophical essays. The varied use of quotations and real examples lend credibility to the otherwise abstract arguments.*



## ZENITH Brush Up!

### Ways to Refute/Rebut Criticism

Ever came across questions with extreme propositions containing **insults, criticism** or **harsh judgements**?

Some examples of such questions are:

- A. 'Unprepared for the modern world.' How true is this of the young people in your society?  
(DHSJ2PE11Q7)
- B. 'Contemporary music has no artistic value.' Is this a fair comment? [2008 A levels Q10]
- C. 'Statistics measure everything but prove nothing.' Discuss. [2003 A levels Q10]

- ✓ *Such questions usually invite disagreement with the proposition, and therefore a defence of the subject that has been insulted, criticized or unfairly judged.*
- ✓ *An OV/R approach is highly useful as the writer would have to consider why the subject is being criticized [OV], before rebutting these criticisms [R] one by one.*



**Here are some useful tips for how you can brainstorm rebuttals to defend a subject against criticism, insults and harsh judgements!**

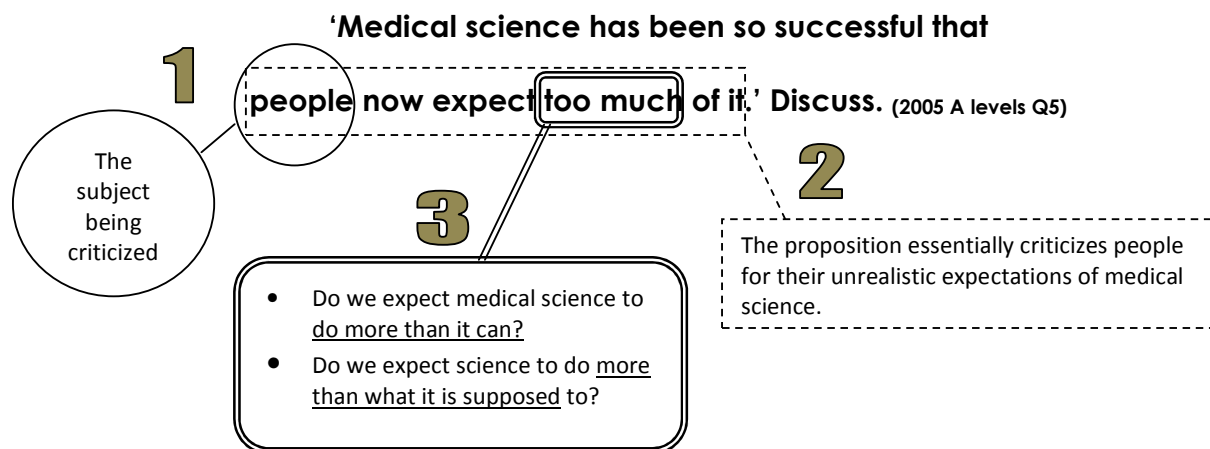
1. The criticism, insult or harsh judgement is **untrue**:
  - ☐ not always true / not true throughout all time (in history)
  - ☐ not true for all people
  - ☐ not true for all situations
  - ☐ assumptions made are wrong
  - ☐ that was just an isolated example
  - ☐ the definition is too narrow
  - ☐ other factors have been ignored or forgotten
2. The criticism, insult or harsh judgement is **unfair**:
  - ☐ We have no other option / this is what we do / even if this is bad, there is nothing we can do about it /
  - ☐ There is no basis of comparison (comparing gorillas to apples) / don't judge me by an unfair set of criteria that shouldn't apply to me since I am different.
3. **Something is already being done about the situation**, so the criticism is excessively harsh.
4. The criticism is akin to the **pot calling the kettle black**.
  - ☐ Don't judge me harshly when you are no better
  - ☐ I'm not the only one guilty of this; there are many others/almost everyone is guilty of this too.
  - ☐ My \_\_\_\_ is still better than any other alternative out there
5. Even if the criticism has some validity to it, **so what?**
  - ☐ There aren't any real detriments or impacts, so why stop?
  - ☐ The impacts are not all that detrimental and/or can be reversed.
  - ☐ There could even be resultant benefits (which may outweigh the detriments).



***Do apply the above tips wisely though.***

- ✓ Not all questions with absolute propositions are questions with criticisms/insults/judgments.
- ✓ Not all 5 points above can be applied to all questions with criticisms; only some criteria are used for certain questions.
- ✓ Point 1 is the strongest way of rebutting a criticism and should always been applied.

**Let's try this out!**



**Using the tips on the previous page, try brainstorming rebuttals to the criticism of people's unrealistic expectations of medical science:**

**Tip 1: The criticism is UNTRUE**

- It is not entirely true that everyone looks to medical science for miracles. Many of us are in full knowledge of the limits of medical science in reality.

**Tip 2: The criticism is UNFAIR**

- Medical science is meant to bring cures – it's expected for us to expect much of medical science. What else would we expect to cure us or prolong our lives or resolve our medical woes?

**Tip 5: So What?**

- There are hardly any detriments from expecting so much out of medical science.
- In fact, the resultant benefit of expecting so much from medical science is what drives it forward, always finding new discoveries and cures.

Here are some further questions with insults, criticisms and harsh judgements. Try using the 5 tips above to mount a defence to them!

1. 'The family has suffered at the expense of career in Singaporean society.' Is this a fair comment? (2003 Q12)
2. 'Too much attention is given to criminals; not enough to their victims.' Is this true? (2005 Q11)
3. 'Entrepreneurship is just another name for personal greed.' How far do you agree with this statement? (2006 Q9)
4. 'Mass production inevitably means a loss of craftsmanship and quality.' Is this true in your society? (2007 Q5)
5. Discuss the view that too much faith is placed in statistics. (2008 Q9)
6. 'Science is unreliable, being based as much on theory as on fact.' Is this a fair comment? (2011 Q12)
7. 'Unlike the Arts, such as writing or music, Mathematics lacks the capacity for creativity.' How far do you agree with this statement? (2013 – Q2)
8. Discuss the view that the young in your society are apathetic. (DHSYr6PE12Q11)



## ZENITH Notices

### Call for Contributions 2015

The ZENITH series is always looking out for interested writers to contribute their writing and reflections on issues and topics of relevance. The editorial team is calling for contributions for 2015:

#### Meridians Write

Both seniors and freshmen are welcome to submit entries on topics of current relevance, issues that interest you or even creative pieces of work, such as book reviews, poems, short stories or even cartoons or other illustrations relevant to GP or Literature. You may also select from your best pieces of writing from the work you engage in, both in and out of class. You can submit your writing through your GP tutors or directly to the editor.

Please submit all completed works to the Editor *any time* throughout the year. (NB: ZENITH is published in semester I & II yearly.)

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