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2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2　　　　　**Ivan Toh Sheng Wei | 1A01A**

Should a government always listen to its people?

Can governments claim to be by the people, of the people and for the people if they do not listen to the voices of the people? In an age of populist governments rising to power by tapping on the grievances of the silent majority, it would seem that governments should always listen to their people so that the government can fulfil its duty of serving the people's needs better and implement policies more effectively with the people's support. However, the more complex and nuanced reality is that governments should take the people's views into consideration but not always follow the popular opinion in policy-making since the masses might suffer from information asymmetry, might only consider their own short-term benefit, and neglect the most vulnerable actors or elements of our society. Thus, in order to fulfil the objectives of any good government, which would be to improve the lives of people and stay in power, governments should not always listen to their people but consider the advice of technocratic experts or abide by higher principles enshrined in the constitution.

Firstly, it could be argued that governments should always listen to the people as acting on the needs of the people would allow governments to effectively serve the people and improve their living standards, since it is likely that the masses would know their own needs and solutions the best. Most governments around the world are democratically elected into power, which means that citizens have given them their mandate and trust. These elected representatives are thus expected to live up to the expectations placed on them by listening keenly to the feedback of citizens, and implementing legislation that will address the needs of the citizens. Even for authoritarian governments or non-elected components of the government such as the civil service or the judiciary, the onus is still on the government to adequately meet the needs and demands of the citizens since they have placed their trust in the system. Furthermore, the masses would be most in touch with their own daily concerns since they are informed by their own lived daily experiences, in contrast to bureaucrats in ivory towers

trying to second guess what citizens want. Hence, governments should listen to the feedback and votes of citizens to decide what legislation to implement and how it should be implemented. A salient example of the government listening to its people in order to accurately reflect the desires of the masses would be Prime Minister Mahathir of Malaysia and his newly elected Pakatan Harapan government, who decided to abolish Malaysia's 6% Goods and Services Tax (GST) and opened an investigation into Malaysia's sovereign wealth fund 1MDB, since these were the demands of the majority of Malaysians, who felt that current GST levels and government corruption were severely hampering their ability to maintain their purchasing power and Malaysia's long-term economic development. In contrast, the Barisan National government of Malaysia was voted out because they were stubborn and out of touch on issues such as GST and their refusal to clamp down on corruption. Thus, governments should always listen to the people to accurately meet the people's needs and improve the people's standard of living.

Secondly, governments should always listen to their people to ensure smooth implementation of policies with the support of the masses. Even the best ideas will not be able to be successfully implemented in society through government policies if there is no buy-in and popular support from various stakeholders in society. Governments that want to consolidate power and implement policies decisively and effectively should listen to the people and implement widely accepted policies so as to avoid public backlash and resistance. Gaining the support of the masses would mean that policies will be well received by the cooperative majority, leading to increased popularity and a stronger hold on power for the government. For instance, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has waged an all-out war on drugs and has implicitly granted police extra judicial authority to execute drug pushers, leading to widespread approval for the current administration domestically and increased tip offs on drug dealers, as his controversial policy is in line with the popular opinion that the spread of drugs is a menace to the Philippines. Evidently, governments should always listen to the people to ensure the feasibility and effectiveness of any government policy.

However, while the above arguments make a compelling case for why governments should listen to people, governments should not always listen to the people since the masses may suffer from a lack of information, resulting in a not well-informed population pushing for policies that are actually detrimental for the masses. Governments often have more information on more issues than the masses since they can hire researchers to conduct in-depth studies on certain

social trends or use advanced and expensive modelling technology to predict the economic and social impact of a policy. Governments also have access to a wide database of records and expert specialists in vital sectors such as healthcare and defence to help inform their decisions. This asymmetry of information means that governments may be able to recognise external third party benefits to society in implementing policies, or potential negative consequences, which the average voter might not consider since the voter is most likely seeking to maximise his or her own short-term benefit. Hence, governments need to intervene for the greater societal good or to safeguard certain positive outcomes which are unknowingly being erased. One example would be the Clean Air Act in the United States, which was passed in 1990, forcing factories to cut their emissions of pollutants such as Sulphur Dioxide by up to half though the environmental reforms were perceived to be harming industry and thus unpopular at the time. A 2011 Environmental Protection Agency study on the effects of the Clean Air Act validated such a move as the Clean Air Act led to the US producing 1.5 million tons less of air pollution, which resulted in better health and avoided more than 160 thousand premature deaths due to air pollution, as well as less structural damage to the environment. These benefits to public health and safety have already paid for themselves by outweighing the cost of factories switching to cleaner production methods by a ratio of 30:1. Thus governments should not always listen to the people as governments may need to make unpopular but more informed decisions that benefit the masses.

Furthermore, governments should not always listen to the people but consider the views of experts since the majority may push for decisions that benefit themselves in the short-term but end up harming themselves in the long run. Citizens might not always be able to consider the long-term ramifications of a decision since imagining the future seems rather abstract and distant. Rather, they may prefer to pursue instant gratification as these benefits are immediately tangible, as evidenced by how a 2017 survey of American saving habits by Bankrate found that 60% of Americans do not have enough funds to cover a $500 emergency. However, governmental experts are specifically trained to consider the downstream effect of a policy and how it would impact the lives of future generations as the government's duty of care extends to being responsible for future generations. Hence governments are willing to make trade-offs on behalf of society that may appear to hurt society in the short run but benefit them eventually. One such decision was when the Victoria State government in Australia banned attractive packaging for cigarettes in 2012, which led to an initial

decrease in revenue for the tobacco industry and tobacco tax, but eventually led to a 7% reduction in the number of smokers in Victoria. The long-term benefits to smokers and their families, now that there was less second hand smoke, would also ease the burden on the state's healthcare system and would benefit the state in the long term. Thus governments should not always listen to the people if it means that governments make unpopular decisions that appear to be harmful in the short-term but benefit the masses in the long-term.

Lastly, governments should not always listen to the people if they advocate for decisions that harm the minority and violate the principle of equality. It is vital that governments ensure equal protection and rights for all human beings, regardless of race, gender or religion, since everyone deserves to be treated with a fundamental level of dignity and respect, which is a core foundation of our democratic system. The shifting nature of a societal majority over time also means that all citizens wish to be duly heard and respected by the government even if they are no longer part of the majority. Unfortunately in most societies, the majority tends to drown out the voices of the minority due to the majority wielding control over media outlets and public institutions as a result of their advantage of sheer numbers. Governments must thus be cautious in ensuring that they do not neglect the views of the minority, because acting on the views of the people may end up being only the views of the majority. Consequently, governments must strive towards upholding equality even if it is not what the people are demanding. For instance in the United States, the Lyndon B. Johnson Administration pushed through with the 1964 Civil Rights Act to ensure equal housing, education and rights for African Americans despite the fact that the civil rights movement never gained approval from the majority of citizens in the 1960s, because it would be despicable for entire segments of society to be treated as less than equal. Similarly, Chancellor Angela Merkel pushed for Germany to accept 1 million refugees in 2015, fulfilling the duty of a developed nation to care for the most downtrodden in the world, even though it would cost her party a sizeable number of seats in the 2017 election. Thus governments should not always listen to the people if listening to the people results in violating fundamental human rights and equality.

In conclusion, governments should not always listen to the people, but consider the views of the people in conjunction with the views of experts and minorities in order to correct for a lack of perfect information and power asymmetries present in society that would disadvantage the minority. Ideally, governments

should work towards a consultative, technocratic government such as the Swiss government, where frequent referendums on national issues such as whether a universal basic income should be adopted, but citizens are still receptive to the advice of government specialists and experts to reject policies that may harm their own interests in the long run. A mix of government foresight and people's power is required to make equitable, sustainable policies that benefit everyone so that governments can truly be of the people, by the people and for the people.

Comments:

Thoughtful, insightful, and balanced response, with a range of apt illustrations providing effective support. You unpack the question clearly and intelligently from the start, smoothing the path for your arguments, which were sharp too. Excellent linguistic ability - clear, succinct, and well organised. Missing "links" at the end of paragraphs though but this can be easily remedied for future essays.

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2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2　　　　　　　　　**Soh Ying Qi | 18A01C**
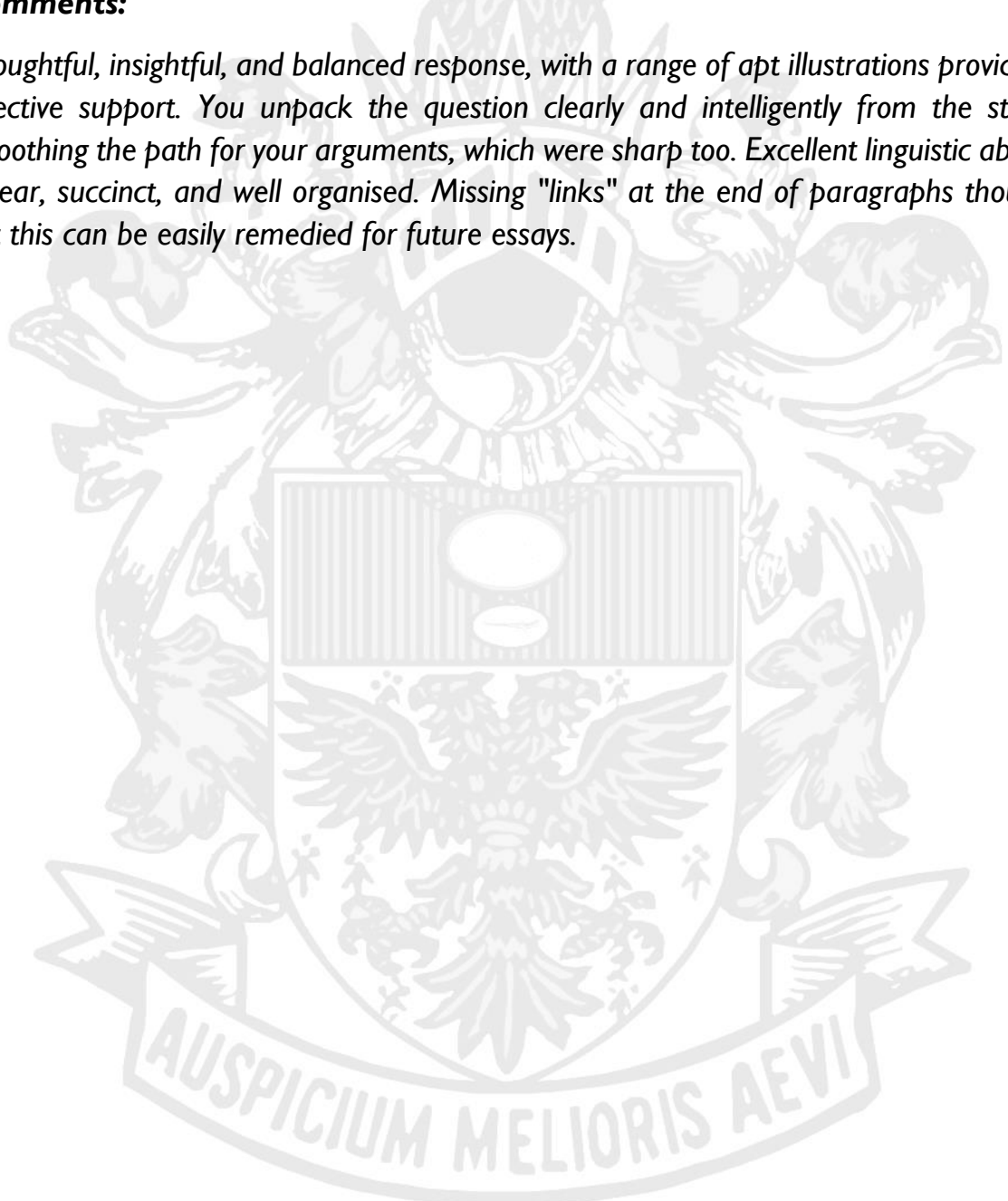
Should a government always listen to its people?

In many of our conceptions of a "perfect world", one feature remains constant: free and fair democracy, where every citizen has an equal share in the running of a country. When we speak of tomorrow, we imagine a world without the political problems of today, a world where fascist and authoritarian regimes are nothing but memory, and the voice of the average person can be heard. Yet for all our vision, the fact remains that few countries today possess a system we would term "true" democracy—for even Nordic countries, the favourite refrain of citizens of "flawed" democracies, face their own problems in governance. Should a government—whether democratic, authoritarian or otherwise—always listen to its people? Many of us would instinctively respond in the affirmative, for is it not the role of a government to serve its people and to accomplish this by understanding its people's points of view? However, given the context of an increasingly dynamic world in which it seems that nothing is ever certain, I would argue that while the dream of having the populace determine the direction society should take is indeed appealing—for reasons such as checks and balances and fair representation—it is ultimately an idealistic vision that may not apply itself neatly to many contemporary societies. Instead, considering the risks involved in allowing a government to submit wholly to popular sentiment—namely, the lack of necessary regulation needed to ensure the smooth running of society—it is perhaps wiser to take a more realistic view of today's governments and conclude that, in the end, a government should be able to exercise some discretion in its executive and legislative decisions.

Proponents of entirely free and fair democracy often point out that allowing more input on issues of governance from the general population can serve as a much-needed check on the power of a government. Given power over fellow citizens, the argument goes, politicians—even the most responsible ones—are perennially at risk of succumbing to the flaws inherent in human nature, such as selfishness and greed, and abuse of power. It is true that rulers of a country can rarely be fully trusted: even in the most functional of democracies, the image presented by some elected officials is often a façade, masking the more distasteful elements of their character. Given this caveat, some would argue that it is vital for the voice of the people to play a role in ensuring that governments do not

succumb to the pursuit of self-interest, instead focusing on bettering the lives of the people they serve. In a May 2018 op-ed in the pages of The New York Times, writer Charles M. Blow argued that Americans who wanted gun control in the wake of the 2018 school shooting in Santa Fe "must become single-issue voters on gun control", in order to achieve real progress by state and federal governments on the—quite literally—life-and-death issue. Why the drastic measure of voting based on one issue, and one issue alone? Chalk it up to the currently Republican-controlled Senate and House of Representatives. As comedian John Oliver pointed out in a 2017 segment on TV show Last Week Tonight, several prominent Republican politicians accepted funding from gun rights lobby group the National Rifle Association (NRA), explaining the party's lack of action on the issue. The latter comes amidst several nationwide polls stating that as many as 80% of Americans support universal background checks for all buyers of guns. In this and many other contexts, it is therefore evident that governments cannot always be relied on to do what is obviously best for their populace (as defined by the people themselves), least of all passing basic legislative measures. In this way, the argument that governments should consider the opinions of their citizens when making decisions of governance begins to hold water.

Secondly, taking the views of its people into account can help a government improve on existing policies and methods of governance. Every society encompasses some form of demographic diversity, be it religious, ethnic or otherwise. It would then stand to reason that not all well-intentioned government policies will be equally beneficial (or even applicable) to all groups in society. Obtaining feedback and alternative views on ways to tackle social issues would enhance the ability of a government to plan and implement schemes that best serve their intended purposes, being of even greater service to those they were designed to help. For example, Singapore's Ministry of Environment and Water Resources (MEWR) recently conducted a survey of visitors to neighbourhood parks like the Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park, collecting data on how often residents visited the parks and how existing facilities could be improved. The Ministry of Education (MOE) also conducts regular focus group discussions with current students to gain insights into the suitability of certain curricula, among other things. Despite the relatively limited impact of one person's views taken in isolation, larger-scale surveys such as these often have implications for how governments can conduct or fine-tune policies to better serve their people. The importance of obtaining opinions from the so-called "common folk" becomes all the more evident when one considers that political officials are often accused of being removed from the reality of citizens living on the ground—the experience of being in power undoubtedly brings with it some insularity from

ordinary citizens' day-to-day lives, which in some cases can be so extreme as to warrant the accusation of living in an ivory tower. Besides providing fresh and varied perspectives, the voice of the people can fulfil a more pragmatic function in helping leaders make better and more effective policies.

However, the word "always" carries with it a loaded set of implications. Surely there must be some instances that justify state decision-making without consulting citizens—governance, as with many other things, is rarely so black-and-white or absolute. If one asserts that politicians cannot always be trusted to do the right thing for their people, then there is certainly also some doubt that people always make the best decisions. On the surface, it is difficult to justify forcing a government to cede control of its approach to governance to its people: average citizens are not all equally equipped to make sound decisions. Often, people are also susceptible to poor decision-making and might even require some degree of paternalism from the government, in order to preserve social welfare. (Granted, the definition of "good" and "bad" decisions is often subjective, and determining social benefit may not be as clear-cut as many of us would suggest.) Examples range from a rural district in Estonia that voted to adopt a cannabis leaf as the symbol in its new flag to issues with more serious legal implications, like Singapore's recent ban on 53 piracy websites. Despite being one of the richest countries in the world with a GDP per capita of almost US$90,000, Singapore charted in the top 10 offending countries when it came to online piracy. Given the choice, and the voice, its citizens would most likely have generated a mound of backlash before the decision was ever made—yet for the good of content creators both local and overseas, and to curb illegal activity that was fast becoming rampant, the ban on piracy sites by the Singapore government arguably would create more social benefits than a decision born of a popular vote would. While we often cite the perceived clash between democratic values and paternalistic measures, it is apparent that both can—and do—share a commitment to the common good of society.

Finally, removing the need for a government to constantly seek its people's opinions on various issues enhances its efficiency in solving problems, which often has positive effects on citizens' standard of living. Assuming that trust in government is not misplaced, government policies without popular input may lead to desirable outcomes in the long run. It is no coincidence that the high levels of economic growth and development enjoyed by the newly-independent Southeast Asian states or the East Asian states of South Korea and Taiwan in the 1950-1990s ran concurrently with long periods of authoritarian regimes. Eliminating the popular vote in issues of national importance arguably generated

the political stability needed urgently by many states to implement policies for industrialisation and other economic goals. This feat could likely not have been accomplished if these states' respective governments had stopped at every juncture to solicit the views of the people on moving forward. In this way, they were able to achieve the immediately pertinent goal of economic development, without the need to constantly seek public opinion on governance.

In sum, while we may trumpet the abstract notion of "free and fair democracy" as the vital element in an ideal world, this vision is exactly merely that: an ideal. In working towards social progress through fair representation of the views of various groups in society, we cannot lose sight of the reality that unanimous public approval or even productive national discussion is often simply unattainable. Given the diversity of viewpoints in a society—and even within different groups—it is often difficult to chart a course for society that everyone can agree on. The inherent conflict between the (not always reliable) will of the people and the responsibilities of a government presents itself always. For if governments must "always" listen to their people, what then is the point of being a leader at all?

Comments:

A thoughtful response, with balanced and well-explained examples in most parts of the essay. A few areas for improvement: essay could have been more explicit in stating main arguments, and a wider range of global examples could have been provided. Language-wise, assured control of discourse markers. Good use of felicitous expressions; strong personal voice.

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2   **Caleb Leow Yong Quan | 18A01A**

'Poverty is the result of personal failure.' To what extent is this true of your society?

In the social documentary "Don't Call us Poor", which was recently aired on Channel News Asia, Singaporean viewers were given an insider's perspective into poverty in Singapore. Rather than following the usual meritocratic narrative where poverty is equated with personal failure, laziness, or the result of poor financial decisions, the poor in Singapore were cast as an incredibly heterogeneous group, each facing a series of complex problems arising from other factors like their family background, ethnicity, or the lack of negotiating power in the workplace. All of these point to the fact that while some instances of poverty are the result of personal failure, poverty is fundamentally a structural issue, and cannot be understood without examining the interaction between government policies, identity markers, and the self-perpetuating nature of poverty.

First, let us examine why it is a common belief among Singaporeans that poverty is a result of personal failure. Poverty is often only portrayed as the consequence of poor financial choices and a lack of positive traits such as hard work or the ability to delay gratification. This narrative arises due to the meritocratic nature of Singapore, where supposedly the system is fair and where equality is codified in our laws, thus with an equal starting point those who succeed in life do so by their own merit while those who do not are depicted as lazy and incompetent. Fundamentally, this narrative continues to exist because the majority of middle-class Singaporeans who are relatively affluent and who lead comfortable lives want to believe that they, in some way or another, deserve their wealth, and as a result systemic biases which may have helped them get towards their position in life are often wilfully neglected. In an ideal and fair meritocratic system, poverty would only be viewed as the result of personal failure.

Furthermore, there are few easily discernible indications of structural inequality in Singapore, at least for what falls under the purview of the government. Equality is codified in our laws; for example, a child's ethnicity, religion, or gender cannot be a factor that prevents them from accessing certain educational opportunities. Furthermore, other laws have been put in place to ensure that perpetuators of workplace inequality are punished, for example the Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP) which seeks to ensure that employers carry out fair employment practices. If the education system and workplace are really completely fair grounds for competition, then poverty can only be attributed to personal failings.

Even those who acknowledge that poverty is a vicious cycle may still believe that the self-perpetuating nature of deprivation stems from personal failings. For example, in sociologist Teo You Yenn's recently published "This is What Inequality Looks Like", she points out that many Singaporeans believe that the poor remain poor because they choose to do so, and do not want to adopt the values and traits necessary to break out of the poverty cycle. She mentions that while visiting the poor during the process of her research, many other Singaporeans she was with were quick to point out that many supposedly "poor" households had extravagantly large flat screen televisions. This made the other observers conclude that the poor were unable to invest in what would bring them greater returns in the long run, prioritising instead instant gratification such as spending huge sums of money on entertainment. According to this same theory that posits that the poor have a "deficit" in values, some may also believe that poverty spills over from generation to generation because parents pass on the same traits of profligacy and laziness to their children, meaning poverty always originates from an individual level, for example from one's failure as a parent.

Finally, the most insidious narrative about meritocracy and poverty in Singapore is that the system is fair simply because a small percentage of the poor have managed to break out of poverty, the idea being that this same trajectory can be replicated by anyone if that individual puts in enough hard work. During the Prime Minister's National Day Rally speech every year, PM Lee never fails to mention inspiring stories of those who, despite being disadvantaged due to their

age or family background, through sheer grit have risen above their circumstances to attain success in life. These individuals are worthy of our admiration, but they are not representative of most of the poor in Singapore and their stories should not overshadow the other forces which produce poverty. Why then does the government keep propagating such a flawed narrative of meritocracy where poverty is solely seen as the result of personal failure? First, as previously mentioned, it makes the society that the PAP has engineered seem like a fair and justifiable one. Yet, another reason we must consider is that our individual narratives as citizens are inextricably linked to national narratives. The story of Singapore being transformed from a fishing village to a bustling metropolitan city is based on the idea that the government through careful planning and relentless hard work, brought our country from rags to riches. In the same vein, in our own personal capacities, it seems that the same values of hard work and competence are the only way for us to lay claims to our justified personal successes.

Now, we will consider the flaws in this meritocratic narrative by looking at the other forces which produce poverty. We can ask three questions: The Singaporean system may seem officially fair, but what systemic biases are hidden from our sight? Are the "poor" a homogeneous group or are the experiences of each individual also shaped by other identity markers? Is the fact that choices made by the poor are characterised as "failure" problematic in itself since it reveals that our society unfairly values some traits more than others?

First, poverty is not always the result of personal failure because poverty is fundamentally structural. The fact is that the comfortable lives that most Singaporeans lead are premised upon a darker reality in Singapore - one in which construction workers strenuously toil day and night and domestic helpers stand in for the very Singaporean women who work outside of home because they can enjoy better forms of employment. It is a bleak truth we must accept that behind the façade of a shining city upon a hill, Singapore is highly dependent on a subservient and poor working force. The only reason why these "poor" sectors are hardly inscribed in our national consciousness is that the government systematically excludes the poor from the public sphere, for example through constructing dormitories for construction workers which are geographically

separate from most Singaporeans, or denying these populations the necessary platforms for their struggles and concerns to be heard.

Additionally, poverty is not always a result of personal failure but a complex intersection of various identity markers and prescribed social roles. While the TAFEP may seek to reduce workplace discrimination, it cannot entirely eliminate it as employers may still choose to informally discriminate based on race, religion, or sex, yet victims for fear of losing their jobs often do not seek legal recourse. Social roles also play a huge role in perpetuating poverty. In Teo's aforementioned collection of essays, she describes the struggles of lower-class working mothers who must balance their work and parenthood, making it difficult for them to devote their time to either as demanding menial but low-paying jobs in which they often have little negotiating power with their superiors simply do not leave them with the sufficient money or time to spend on their children's education. The larger point I am trying to make is that poverty and inequality often take place on an informal level even if the necessary institutions and programmes have been put in place to help the poor break out of poverty, as for various personal reasons the poor may not necessarily be able to benefit from them. The government cannot interfere in every case of racism or sexism at work, and has to accept that parenting is primarily conducted in the context of the family, areas which are largely out of the government's reach. The fact that every person has a unique set of identity markers and social roles means that the roots of poverty for each individual are complex; this is a cultural factor the government can never fully eliminate because there is no singular panacea to deal with different experiences of poverty.

Finally, poverty is not always a result of "personal failure" because the concept of "failure" itself is subjective and perhaps signals the way in which society unfairly remunerates certain values or traits over others. Ultimately, Singapore still seems to glorify quantifiable markers of success like the PISA test scores of Singaporean students or the productivity of Singaporean workers. What about other values which may be more salient among the poor? Teo points out, for example, that the poor community she observed tended to be more generous in helping one another, and kids as young as six could take care of siblings, demonstrating a sense of responsibility we would perhaps be less likely to find

among middle-class Singaporean children. Are these values signs of personal failure? Far from it, these values point to the very narrow definition of "success" in Singapore and how certain traits are better remunerated than others.

In conclusion, the claim that poverty is always the result of personal failure is an extremely reductive view of the issue. Granted, poverty is sometimes the result of sloth, profligacy or poor personal choices, just as how affluence can also be the result of an individual's hard work and frugality. However, to assert that every single Singaporean is somehow proportionally rewarded or punished for personal successes and failures is to place too much autonomy in the hands of each individual in determining their position in life. We must always remember that the autonomy of each individual is always circumscribed by larger social and political forces, especially when it comes to socioeconomic status which is a complex product of many factors beyond an individual's control. I argue thus that poverty is fundamentally a structural issue, which is in turn sharpened by cultural factors. In an ideal and just world, poverty would only be a result of personal failure, but looking past this flawed but deeply engrained narrative of meritocracy, the government must enact more inclusive policies and employers must be more sensitive to the struggles of the poor while we as a society must constantly question our definitions of "success" and "failure".

Comments:

A long response but a thoroughly captivating read! You cover quite a range of pertinent issues with considerable insight + balance (+sensitivity - though your claims do get more extreme in the last quarter or so), and with admirable depth of discussion in the majority of assertions. Only the "TAFEP/Working issues" point was shaky in relevance. Very well done!

A smooth read throughout showing superb organisation of ideas. Vocabulary and sentence structure also show range/variation, and a strong voice with considerable conviction came through.

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2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test   **Jonah Tan Sheen | 18A01A**

'Poverty is the result of personal failure.'
To what extent is this true of your society?

Singapore is the most expensive city in the world. Measured in terms of per capita GDP, its citizens enjoy wealth more than double that of an average American citizen, and rank amongst the coveted Scandinavian countries. The city is a metropolis, with clusters of high-rise buildings overlooking the horizon. A dispassionate observer might then ask: "Where are the poor?" Or more accurately, "Why are there still poor people in a country that has prided itself on an 'iron will', as Mr Lee Kuan Yew put it, to lift itself out of third world status independently in fifty years? While some might argue that in Singapore – a country built on meritocracy – comprises only people who are poor because of sloth and neglect, I instead argue that while poverty may be a result of personal failure, it is never the sole factor behind it due to a host of environmental and structural obstacles.

Proponents of Singapore's system of meritocracy might argue vigorously that especially in Singapore, poverty must be a result of failure as the system has provided equality of opportunity for every citizen. It is indeed undeniable that the government has attempted to level the playing field via education to ensure that personal merit and effort are the main determinants of academic success, which then drastically increases the odds of landing a well-paying job regardless of background. Unlike other countries like the United States, where fees for exams like the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) are a real inhibitor to the number of times and range of subjects that poor students can take to improve their scores, education in Singapore is highly standardised and subsidised. In fact, education is compulsory until Primary 6, with families that are unable to pay being heavily or even completely subsidised by the government. Beyond simply a general levelling of the playing field, the government also makes deliberate effort to uplift the finances of poor families and reward hardworking but poor

students for commendable academic performance above and beyond the assistance offered to the general populace. For example, annual bursaries are made eligible for families earning below $2000 a month, strongly incentivising the poor to put in effort while reducing financial barriers to those who face it the most. In view of the above, it thus seems self-evident that those who still end up poor must have their sorry state solely attributed to their lack of effort because of their poverty in spite of general and targeted assistance.

In reality, however, meritocracy has very real imperfections with equally real implications: if the fundamental argument is that meritocracy removes all variables and impediments to success except for agency, then the failure of meritocracy will mean that other factors beyond agency can impact a person's financial situation, lessening the degree of personal responsibility for a state of poverty. While meritocracy at its initial stages might have worked where income differentials were largely non-existent in the 1960s, the initial success of meritocracy in fostering different outcomes ironically led to its increasing failure across generations as each generation of successful individuals naturally pass on their material and non-material advantages to subsequent generations, who then work to utilise their inherited wealth to further increase their chances for success, and so on. The eventual result is an acute and chronic situation of income and wealth inequality, shaping the original system of "meritocracy" into one of "parentocracy", as coined by sociologist Teo Yeo Yenn. Children of poor parents then find themselves unable to afford perks like tuition, or even spare cash for assessment books, or money for adequate nutrition – all of which directly disadvantage them vis-à-vis their richer peers. When opportunities are no longer equal, merit-based rewards and assistance then fundamentally lose their importance for what use is rewarding poor students in the top 25% of their cohort with a cash prize when there is no one to receive it because they lack the means to focus on schoolwork? Across generations, then, it can be argued that in reality, poverty becomes less and less of a personal failure as the institutionalisation of their disadvantages stacks heavier and heavier cards against them.

Beyond institutional barriers to a life beyond poverty, however, environmental barriers play a significant role in predisposing people in certain environments to

make markedly worse choices, thereby entrenching their state of poverty. This phenomenon is made especially clear in Singapore, where the abovementioned institutionalisation of poverty has led to the creation of both physical and mental barriers faced by the poor. While the government consistently prides itself on its efforts in ensuring a strict quota of occupants of certain races in HDB flats to ensure diversity, no such "social mixing" scheme has been implemented across class lines. In fact, where families are the most poor, they do not even inhabit regular HDB blocks with the possibility of mingling with others of different backgrounds and wealth, but are instead segregated into cheaper but usually isolated rental flats, usually in separate neighbourhoods altogether. This is significant because one's living environment drastically shapes the trajectory one can take in life, especially in the formative years. Where parents work long hours and are constantly absent out of necessity, a child at home can have no adult to turn to as he might be able to do in a different neighbourhood where some might have the luxury of staying at home because families in his proximity experience from the same problem. It is then easy to extrapolate how this initial parental neglect can lead him to surround himself with poor company that might incline him towards damaging life choices like the use of drugs, simply because there is no one who might advise him to the contrary. The existence and subsequent reinforcement of poor living conditions has severe consequences on a child's physical and mental health. In the book "Utopia for Realists", the historian Rutger Bregman outlines findings from a study that suggests that being in an environment of neglect and high stress borne out of the need to fulfil basic requirements like adequate food and psychological support can breed "tunnel vision" in decision making and leave the individual in a state where his IQ is reduced by 14 points, the equivalent of attempting cognitive activity on 24 hours of no sleep. As long as the government continues to physically segregate and entrench the living conditions of the poor, no amount of academic assistance to lead them out of poverty will be effective so long as environmental intervention is lacking.

Despite the presence of real structural and environmental barriers, however, it is not the case that those in poverty are removed from responsibility and the need to exercise agency. Social mobility is still alive and well in Singapore; the same tide that can push one back can push one forward as well, provided one can tide out the changing currents. Recently published statistics by Education Minister Ong Ye Kung showed that among those in the bottom quintile of wealth,

20% moved to the top quintile over a span of thirty years. Just as success can be a result of personal effort, then, so too can personal failure contribute to poverty. Yet we must acknowledge that barriers besides those borne out of the mind are a reality, and do prevent a level of social mobility that would be far more desirable.

If a dispassionate observer then asks you – "Why are there still poor people in Singapore?" I hope the answer will now be – "because sometimes an 'iron will' is not enough".

Comments:

A thoughtful, largely well-argued response, showing good sensitivity to the question and the struggles of the poor – barring the odd blip, which does not seem callous or intended. There is also effort at achieving balance, though penultimate paragraph was rushed (but do, after receiving this, develop it fully for your practice). If there's one gap, it's the lack of consideration of factors beyond the "education" years – some deeper consideration of adult issues was much needed.

Excellent linguistic ability – crisp expression; range of words; varied sentence structures; strong personal voice, enhancing communication of view. Organisation of ideas is also strong. A more developed conclusion would have sealed an all-round well-controlled response.

5

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2   **Sng Hong | 18A01C**

'Poverty is the result of personal failure.'
To what extent is this true of your society?

"Singapore aims to provide every individual with the means to realise their full potential" trumpeted Minister for Trade and Industry Chan Chun Sing in a dialogue regarding inequality in Singapore with Mediacorp's Channel 8 News. Just 53 years into its history, Singapore has evolved into one of the most affluent societies in the world, with a median household income of $9000 in 2017 (Singstat, Department of Statistics). Despite Singapore's economic prosperity, relative poverty still exists in the form of income inequality, as some struggle to make ends meet in a city with a cost of living second only to Tokyo. Theoretically, the income disparity between people may be seen to be an outcome of an individual lack of ability or resilience, given that Singapore boasts the systemic foundation for equal economic opportunity (in its practice of meritocracy) and the infrastructural support available to help its people escape the poverty cycle. However, I believe that may not hold true in reality due to social phenomena such as pedagogical inequality and social stigma towards certain groups in society, which create a 'glass ceiling' in society no matter how hard individuals themselves may work, showing that the root cause of sustained relative poverty may be societal rather than personal.

Theoretically, relative poverty and the inability to escape it may be perceived to be caused by an individual's lack of ability, given that Singapore's adoption of meritocracy is meant to accord equal opportunities to all its people, providing all with an equal chance of economic achievement and the means to escape from poverty. In Singapore, career progression and employment are based on achievement and ability, rather than other factors such as race or family background. As early as primary school, students are taught that everyone has an equal chance to succeed and that success is based on merit. This equality of opportunity thus seems to suggest that since everyone is at the same starting

point and that there is a fair and level playing field, poverty, or the lack of financial success, would reflect one's lack of capability. Even in employment, employers seek those with a stellar academic record, in the form of good grades (or the number of A's), which are used as a criterion for judging a person's value. By this logic, since individual ability is thought to be the deciding factor in life, it may seem that failure, in the form of relative poverty – not doing as well as others financially – and the inability to escape it, may be the result of a person's own lack of ability.

Furthermore, some may argue that even for those of 'lower ability', the relevant infrastructure and support available still create a good chance to succeed financially and escape poverty, and thus the income disparity amongst Singaporeans is often regarded as due to other 'personal failures' such as laziness. Minister for Law K Shanmugam noted in a Facebook post that even those seen to be late-bloomers will "eventually get there" due to Singapore's provision relevant infrastructural support, such as vocational schools like the ITE and schools for children with special needs that train them to have a skillset for securing employment. This means that those with lower academic ability and those with special needs are also given a chance to gain employment and prosper financially, reducing the income gap. In this sense, anyone who is still unable to rise out of poverty despite ample government support available may be viewed as simply being "too lazy" or "not hardworking enough" to succeed in our demanding and competitive society.

In reality, however, the presence of pedagogical inequality due to the income gap may greatly limit the economic outcomes of individuals, even if they are extremely capable and hardworking, and thus it may not be true that poverty is a direct result of individual flaws. Pedagogical inequality – the difference in the quality of education available or accessible to different groups of people in society – can potentially stifle one's progress in society, creating a 'glass ceiling' on one's career achievement and earnings. According to Fareed Zakaria, columnist at The Washington Post, employers desire applicants who possess "critical thinking skills". Yet, renowned academic and sociologist Teo You Yenn asserts that in Singapore, "critical thinking" is something that is only fostered in a limited way in the form of examinations for most mainstream schools, while some 'elite'

primary schools may inculcate it in their students throughout the school term. What this means is that a student's ability to think critically is no longer a measure of his or her own merit but a by-product of the education that he or she has received. By this logic, those whose families cannot afford to send them to 'elite' schools – schools that are famous for their education yet infamously expensive or hard to get into, such as Nanyang Primary School – find themselves handicapped, not by 'personal failure' but by a lack of financial resources or social influence. In addition, the increasingly exorbitant tuition industry in Singapore also reflects this suffocating 'glass ceiling' on financially poorer students. Tuition agencies such as The Learning Lab claim to improve a student's grades, but they charge sky-high fees that make them inaccessible to a majority of the population. The lack of access to higher quality education may result in candidates not performing as well as or being regarded as a less capable employee compared others who have access to it, rendering them unable to genuinely access higher-paying jobs or move up the social or corporate ladder as quickly. In consequence, the poor in Singapore may find it exasperatingly difficult to escape poverty or to greatly improve their socioeconomic status, not as a result of their own lack of ability but due to how pedagogical inequality has handicapped their careers. Therefore, persistent relative poverty and the inability to end the poverty cycle may not be caused solely by an individual's lack of merit, but rather may be created and sustained by social phenomena such as pedagogical inequality that greatly disadvantages the less well-off in Singapore.

In addition, social stigma towards certain groups of people in society also inhibits their career prospects, rendering it much more difficult for them to succeed financially or close the income gap, and thus it may be largely untrue that relative poverty is a result of their own lack of ability. For example, ex-convicts in Singapore may find it a Sisyphean task to re-enter the workforce and seek re-employment, due to prevailing social perceptions that they may be dangerous or even likely to steal from their employers. Even though this is a myopic mindset not backed up by any relevant data, non-governmental organisations such as the Yellow Ribbon project still say that it remains extremely difficult for ex-convicts to find new jobs. Businesses that hire ex-convicts, such as Eighteen Chefs, are the exception rather than the norm. Similarly, those with disabilities may find it an insurmountable challenge to seek employment, especially in the higher-paying jobs such as in businesses or law, even though their physical impediments may

have nothing to do with the nature of the job. For instance, those who have difficulty walking or are wheelchair-bound may be denied an accounting job. Social discrimination against certain groups of people in society may make it near-impossible for them to achieve even vaguely similar levels of financial success or economic prosperity to the rest of the populace, and this may have nothing to do with their individual ability. Thus, relative poverty and income inequality may not be a result of one's own lack of ability or laziness, but rather possibly caused by unfair treatment of certain groups in society.

In conclusion, even though poverty may theoretically be a result of personal failure, prevailing social conditions in reality significantly account for the 'glass ceiling' that prevents many from achieving financial success. On a deeper level, the equality of opportunity available due to meritocracy may never entail equality of outcomes, and this 'equality' of opportunity is also subject to debate given the worrying reality of pedagogical inequality in Singapore. Furthermore, the crux of the debate lies in the concept of nurture versus nature – will external support frameworks or individual ability (or lack thereof) be more important? In a country that continues to hold the promise of economic achievement and prosperity for all, the widening income gap may also be an alarming reflection of systemic or social problems, rather than simply individual flaws alone.

Comments:

Good effort. You are on the right track. Your point on meritocracy is good because you have provided a macro-view of the arguments.

However, do think about the grounds on which who gets what in Singapore. Also consider people's mindsets to the problem of poverty in Singapore. While that is your penultimate paragraph, you need to consider implications on welfare and subsidies in the long-term. How does this mindset further entrench poverty and limit the reach of the policies? Finally, think about how you could have better characterized Singapore.

6

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2   **Kaitlyn Ng Ke Yi | 18S06G**

'The provision of financial or material aid to countries in need does more harm than good.' Discuss.

Take a walk in a few cities in Africa today, and you may not even believe that this is one of the poorest continents in the world - or that most of the African population do not speak Chinese. Well-paved roads stretch for miles, and the urban African landscape is dotted with Chinese architecture, Chinese schools and Chinese shopping malls. Such a scene raises the question: does the provision of financial and material aid to countries in need, in this instance from China to Africa, do more harm than good? Traditionally, the path to prosperity of developing countries invariably requires the intervention of a wealthier country to provide financial and material resources. While financial and material aid is a direct way of bolstering the economy of a country in need and raising living standards, it carries with it a host of other issues: risk of exploitation, over-reliance on aid as an unsustainable source of national income, and infringement on a nation's sovereignty. In light of the severity of such consequences, typical financial and material aid given to countries in need may bring more harm than good.

The most visceral, extravagant displays of financial and material forms of generosity can be seen from the flow of foreign donations to countries that have experienced a natural disaster, in the form of direct material provision and cash transfers. While direct provision of financial and material aid in the short-term may alleviate difficulties faced by countries that find themselves in a disaster, long-term provision of aid to countries with more deep-rooted economic and social problems encourages over-reliance on aid as an unsustainable source of national income. One of the most common forms of aid provision is food and medical aid, where food and medical stocks are directly flown into countries in need to provide immediate relief. These kinds of aid can be immensely helpful to a country facing a sudden crisis, like a natural disaster, as it gives the government time and the fiscal budget required to rebuild infrastructure and restart the

economy. For instance, foreign aid provided to the Philippines after hurricane and tsunami disasters by richer countries in both Southeast Asia and around the world play a large role in ensuring the recovery of Philippines' economy, and vaccination aid for smallpox in South America, Africa and Asia helped to contain the spread of the disease, such that it was eliminated in 1980. In these situations, aid has helped countries in need get back on their own two feet and work towards a higher standard of living for the people. However, direct provision of financial and material aid cannot be used to solve deep-rooted problems like poverty and corruption, and in such cases, long-term provision of aid can in turn breed reliance and do more harm than good. For instance, while Angola receives a large amount of financial and material aid every year, it still remains one of the most impoverished nations in the world. Donations constitute the largest proportion of their gross domestic product, such that there was little incentive for the government to engage in fiscal and economic reforms to finance their own sending. As direct provisions of aid do not deepen capital, improve infrastructure or promote education, much of the population remains trapped in a poverty cycle, reliant on cash and material handouts to survive without a means to work. The situation is exacerbated by a corrupt government that usurps much of the financial aid provided, and many foreign countries like the US, seeing the futility of aid provision, have begun to tighten their budgets and draw out of such direct transfers. Hence, it can be seen that in the long run, direct provision of financial and material aid can bring more harm than good.

Not only are the impacts of aid a major consideration, so can the intention of aid provision impact the net harm or benefit of aid. Financial aid provided to countries in need by other richer countries and large organisations could compromise a nation's sovereignty, thus bringing greater harm than good despite the economic progress it can bring. Large investments in a developing country's infrastructure by large corporations and countries often carry their own political agenda. The recipient countries, having been greatly helped by the 'generosity' of their benefactors, are hence greatly obliged towards their political views. Hence, these developing countries are exploited as bargaining chips on the global playing field by the superpowers, and failure to cooperate with the political agendas of donor countries could cut these developing countries off from a steady investment flow on which they rely, as well as important trade relations, spelling certain doom for the country's economy. The sovereignty of the country in need is hence compromised, and the country's leaders will be unable to place national interests first in making important political decisions, which ultimately

brings long-term harm to the citizens. For instance, while extensive Chinese investment in Cambodia has greatly improved access to education, efficiency of production and overall standard of living in the country, Cambodia has risked regional cooperation with ASEAN countries in siding with China's agenda on the South China Sea dispute. In 2016, Cambodia opposed the proposed wording in an ASEAN foreign ministers' communique that alluded to the Permanent Court of Arbitration's ruling that China has no legal basis to exert its nine-dash-line claim to the bulk of the South China Sea. By standing on China's side regarding the South China Sea dispute, Cambodia risks potential alienation from other ASEAN countries, the US and Japan, which may undermine its long term economic and political interests. . Reliance on financial and material aid could hence compromise on the national sovereignty of the country in need, a key political infringement that cannot be offset by the economic benefits of the financial and material aid provided.

On a more individual level, the provision of financial aid to countries in need could bring more harm than good by allowing exploitation of the very people the aid is supposed to benefit. Developing countries, with poor labour regulations and even poorer enforcement of these regulations, prove to be easy prey for capitalistic vultures. Infringements on human rights is abundant as a result of well-meaning financial aid, as it represents a profitable business to be made out of human compassion for the disadvantaged. Just take orphan tourism as an example. Often slammed as a form of modern-day slavery, well-meaning visitors from richer countries like Australia visit orphanages in Vietnam where they spend time with the orphans and donate to the orphanage, believing that they have improved the lives of the children living there. However, 80% of children in Vietnam orphanages in fact have parents or family, and many children are forcibly separated from their family to fulfil the demand for orphans. Many children are purposely kept malnourished by orphan wardens to garner sympathy, and much of the donations are pocketed while the children continue to live in destitution. These children lack the capacity to rebel against the system, to fight for their rights to stay with their families, and governments are hard-pressed to deal with such exploitation in the face of their numerous economic and social priorities. It is thus easy for the donation system to be abused, creating more harm than originally intended. Another infamous example concerns the controversy surrounding micro-loans, which is financial aid provided to poor people at supposedly low or no interest rates, with the objective of helping them start a business. The attractive business model of microfinance - being able to

earn money while maintaining a favourable social image, led to a saturation of micro-lending banks in Bangladesh where the first bank was started. However, capitalising on the ignorance of their clients in finance, many banks exploit their clients by offering loans at high interest rates to "cover administrative costs". When borrowers were unable to pay back the debt, many had to borrow from other banks or even sell organs to finance their previous debts. A debt crisis amongst the poor soon broke out, pushing them deeper into poverty while banks get richer, exemplifying how exploitation of the poor can easily occur in the name of 'financial aid', doing more harm than good.

However, all this doom and gloom undermines the positive work that many non-profit organisations have done to help these countries in need. Provision of financial and material aid to countries in need can, in the long-term, bring more benefit than harm when the aid provided is well-placed, well-intended, with a consideration for future sustainability. A shining model of such success will definitely be the Gates Foundation. The Gates Foundation aims to provide financial and material aid, mostly medical, to developing countries to promote education and industrialisation, enabling the poor to escape poverty with their own means and ensuring the sustainability of a country's economy. By providing financial aid in the form of financing infrastructure and education efforts in African countries, the Gates Foundation has managed to not only increase the literacy of children in poverty, but also empowered mothers to improve their own standard of living by practising family planning, ensuring nutrition of the children and speaking up on women's rights. Without an ulterior motive other than to help these countries, philanthropists and non-profit organisations have come a long way in empowering women and breaking the poverty cycle – a social enterprise has even trained women to be solar power engineers in rural Vietnam communities, bringing energy to these villages that is a crucial first step to development. While such efforts may be expensive with no real benefit to the donor groups, aid rendered with the intention to help countries in need is a first step towards economic reform and self-sufficiency, and thus can bring more good than harm.

So, ultimately, does the provision of financial and material aid bring more benefit or more harm? The answer lies in the motives of donors and the appropriateness of the timing and form of aid provided to recipient countries. While in today's world, the vast majority of financial and material aid provision seems to be more of a bane than a boon to developing countries, we can anticipate a day where

the right aid, given at the right time, can lift these countries out of poverty and provide a better living standard for all. We are only as strong as our weakest link, so let us, as a global community, work to strengthen the human chain.

Comments:

Your essay grew in strength as it progressed; arguments and explanations were generally sound. In all, you managed to sustain focus on the "more...than" assertion, also providing breadth of discussion (e.g. short-term vs. long-term, nations vs. individual assessment) with well-developed illustration. A very good response!

Excellent all-round linguistic ability. Good range of vocabulary and sentence structure; crisp expression, good and apt inflexions. Organisation or flow of ideas was occasionally confusing, but overall the essay developed logically and effectively.

7

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2　　　　　　　**Valeska Tan Ying Lin | 18S03F**
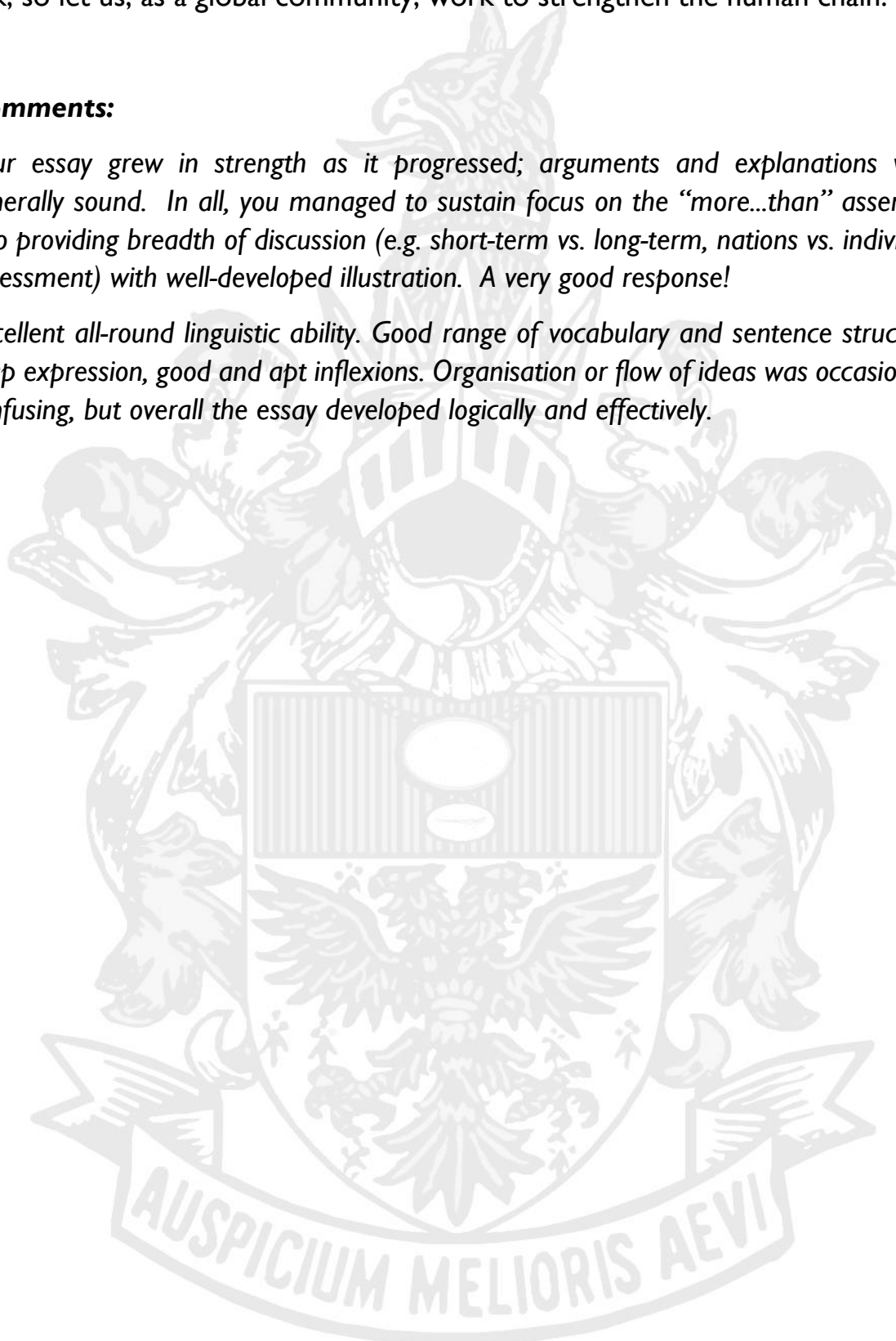
Should we even be wary of artificial intelligence?

"Cannot you see… that we are dying?" – E. M. Forster's chilling narrative, titled "The Machine Stops", written in 1909, is a highly perturbing prediction of the modern society. Set in a dystopian future, the main characters live and breathe in a machine. "The Machine develops – but not on our lies. The machine proceeds – but not to our goal," a character argues, positing that the self-aware Machine numbs humans' sense of space and sense of touch, limits human interaction, reduces love to a carnal act, and compels them to worship it. The dystopian setting is highly dramatised, but the effects of technology seem to ring true in our world right now. Some believe that artificial intelligence should be embraced as a tool to lead mankind toward a prosperous future, and that it warrants no anxiety, but that is merely a superficial and highly optimistic outlook. Considering the rapid pace of advancement in the field of artificial intelligence and its uses in the wrong hands, its likelihood to replace jobs of many worldwide and its evident lack of morals and human nature, it would be a huge mistake to not be wary of this form of technology.

Artificial intelligence is increasingly being incorporated into our society as tools and a form of progress, and its benefits are bound to push humanity to greater heights. In fact, many believe that worries about this technology are unwarranted as they are under the impression that such progress cannot be achieved in their lifetime. For instance, the use of artificial intelligence in the creation of algorithms to calculate Big Data is a bonus for many corporations and countries, who can use the information collected much more efficiently than before. The National Research Centre of Singapore uses drone technology and artificial intelligence to map out satellite images of a bird's eye view of the country, allowing the Urban Redevelopment Authority to gather trends and patterns about landmass, vegetation and sunlight, allowing them a better way to plan where the most suitable places to install solar panels are, redirect roads and so on. Furthermore, most countries are still in the starting stages of using artificial intelligence, such

that the progress made has yet to be seen as truly worrying. As much of this technology is still undergoing research, mistakes are made, as seen from the many failures self-driving vehicles have made, proving that artificial intelligence is not yet ready or overly dangerous. Hence, being wary of it is not entirely necessary at this point in time.

That being said, advancements in artificial intelligence are happening much faster, given recent breakthroughs, and can lead to very worrying security issues, especially if allowed in trigger-happy hands. One of the major features of artificial intelligence is its wide reach. When gathering data, it is likely to be able to obtain information from large pools of data. This feature is currently being used in the widest surveillance network in the world – China. This facial recognition technology is built using artificial intelligence, and has the ability to track people down in a matter of minutes. A British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reporter, who was flagged for arrest, was caught a mere seven minutes after leaving the airport. A man who was wanted for "economic crimes" was arrested while attending pop star Jacky Cheung's concert amongst 60,000 other fans. While this facial recognition technology may seem like a huge plus for law enforcement agencies, which can use a simple dragnet to narrow down their scope to find their target, the other uses of this technology are far more sinister. Due to inherent social biases and social prejudices in the programmers who create the algorithm, there might be inaccuracies in the technology used. Law enforcement agencies that have applied this technology in America found that the likelihood of identifying an African-American as a suspect was higher than that of a Caucasian person as the artificial intelligence had "learnt" more mugshots of African-American offenders than Caucasian ones. Some students at Stanford also created a "gaydar" algorithm last year, intending to use artificial intelligence to identify non-heterosexual individuals. The criteria were naturally based off of their own biased views, showing how easy it is to influence an algorithm that controls artificial intelligence. As more and more people can use open-source options to develop their own neural network of artificial intelligence, this may cause more harm than good. Therefore, we should be wary of artificial intelligence as it is developing faster than we think, and can be used by many worldwide for the wrong reasons.

Artificial intelligence also has the potential to steal our livelihood in the coming years, simply because they are more efficient, making this trend unsettling as mankind has to worry about being replaced by machines. As members of society,

having a job is fundamental and having that taken away by artificial intelligence is definitely a cause for concern. As of 2013, Mount Elizabeth Hospital in Singapore has conducted over 7000 robot-assisted surgeries and there are many more of such inventions being created. Eventually, as these robots are equipped with artificial intelligence, they may be able to replace surgeons entirely due to their higher precision and efficiency rate. Not to mention, robo-trucks are becoming increasingly popular as well. These trucks are meant for long distance, overnight trips to transport goods all over America. This is a more sought-after option by many delivery companies as this means that the trucks can continue driving non-stop, taking less time. Not only does this rid truck drivers of their jobs, it also spells bad business for many rest-stop joints. America has many of these towns that act as rest stops for drivers that pass by and making a living from it. Removing their source of income and culture is a huge downside to these residents. Clearly, artificial intelligence is likely to rid many people of their professions in the near future, which is a huge worry to those who are already living in competitive job-seeking environments. Hence, we should be wary of using too much artificial intelligence.

The lack of ethics and humanity in the nature of artificial intelligence is perhaps the biggest reason as to why we have to be wary of it. Just this week, it was reported that many Google employees were quitting the company, citing the defence technology as their reason. As programmers, they were tasked with equipping drones with artificial intelligence algorithms that could shoot down suspicious people if necessary. But if an innocent civilian were to be harmed in the process, herein lies the question – who takes the blame? The same goes for self-driving cars, whose programmers have to struggle with never-ending permutations of possible accidents, all of which require the algorithm to prioritise a life over another. Does the machine make the decision or the programmer? Since there is no real accountability for these situations, such as Tesla's self-driving car crash a few years ago and a recent one earlier this year, it raises a moral issue that cannot be solved. Furthermore, artificial intelligence is, after all, artificial. It may be based on the neural system of the brain, but it makes the humanity the brain has. Partially inspired by science-fiction television series, 'Black Mirror', the Luka chat bot allows users to "talk" to the deceased, which is a digital, artificial intelligence representation, based on the deceased social media profile, texts and photo albums. As if this were not creepy enough, a South Korean start-up aims to use virtual reality and artificial intelligence to recreate a hologram of the deceased that talks and acts normally. Just like that

episode of 'Black Mirror', however, this raises the question of authenticity and humanity. The replica may be a clone of the deceased, but it will not be able to copy the miniscule facial movements and nuances in tone the person may have adopted when alive. These inventions lack the warmth of human interaction, which is something all humans need. The Uncanny Valley, a theory proposed by a Japanese professor, posits that there is a certain threshold that humans have when accepting something artificial as real. This applies to many artificial intelligence robots in the market right now. Be it Sophia, the hyper-realistic robot, Peppa the Japanese robot monk who can conduct funerals, or Google Duplex, the human-sounding artificial intelligence personal assistant, these technologies, despite their amazing efficiency and creativity, all lack a very important concept – humanity. To allow artificial intelligence to take the place of humans as receptionists, monks, nurses and personal assistants is akin to removing our facilities for communication. We, as social beings, need to be wary of artificial intelligence, as the more it progresses without ethical guidelines, the more it limits our interaction with each other.

Artificial intelligence may have its benefits, but the pace at which it is developing is more than man can take. We should be wary of artificial intelligence, as the more it progresses, the more likely it may be used for the wrong purposes, or used as a replacement of jobs, as well as limits the human interactions that we have today. But by all means, the advancements in this field should continue, provided that it is under proper regulation and strict ethical guidelines. Artificial intelligence, when used effectively as a tool, can go a long way in boosting humanity's progress in science.

Comments:

A thoughtful response showing a balanced discussion and clear awareness of the issue in the question. Apt and quite wide-ranging use of illustrations, which are used to support ideas effectively. Clearly a fully relevant essay, demonstrating good and contemporary knowledge of the subject matter.

Very good linguistic ability. Use of felicitous expression and apt vocab. Assured and confident throughout. Very few errors and ideas are generally communicated in a cogent manner, with some degree of personal voice. Intro is effective, using a relevant lead-in and establishing engagement with the topic. Overall, enjoyed reading the essay!

8

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2   **Ashley Teo Jia Yee | 18S03S**

In a world where information is made up, can the media still be relied upon to convey the truth?

It would have been a nice and peaceful day for the customers in a quaint pizzeria in Washington D.C if not for the subsequent terror that unfolded. An enraged middle-aged man stormed into the pizzeria and opened shots on everyone, injuring a few in the process. This unfortunate incident, dubbed the "Pizzagate" incident shocked countries worldwide, for the very man had been informed by dubious alt-right news group that allegedly claimed that the Pizzeria was a guise for Hillary Clinton's covert sex ring that was trafficking young and innocent children. Given how false information can lead to extremely real and terrifying consequences, the media seems unworthy of any trust in today's world as it perpetuates false information. While media conglomerates and honchos proudly claim that the media can still fulfil its role of being an objective purveyor of the truth, governments and activists caution otherwise. This is understandably so, as absence of rigorous fact-checking due to the need for profit, compounded by the immediate pace fake news is churned out, it would be better if we take a more cautionary approach towards the media.

Admittedly, journalists and certain media behemoths will still vehemently posit that the media can still provide truthful and grounded insights for there is still fact-checking systems and protocols that guide the reportage of news and information. These journalists point to the fact that they still require multiple sources to confirm the information received before disseminating it. This is especially true for traditional media outlets such as hardcopy newspapers that often undergo rigorous and thorough fact-checking procedures before they publish such information. In fact, the world is still replete with examples of publishing companies that have been able to maintain their integrity and remain as an objective and impartial provider of truth, even as some companies turn to fabricating such information. Newspaper corporations such as the Straits Times in Singapore to BBC and The New York Times in the United Kingdom and United States respectively still prove to be credible news sites that people can

rely on. Furthermore, pundits also point to investigative journalism, where their main motive is to expose misdeeds and rampant corruption, thereby keeping other 'estates of the realm' reliable. Indeed, there is still a traditional recurrent motif of the "crusading press' that is expected to stay on hot-button issues and misdeeds like dog on a bone. The Joseph Pulitzer Prize for Journalistic excellence, for instance, has awarded journalist for the past four years on their bravery in exposing political malfeasance and providing the public with genuine facts. As such, the media still can be relied on even in a world where rampant disinformation proliferates quickly.

However, such instances of true and genuine journalistic rigour are the exceptions, not the rule. Unfortunately, as false information spreads indiscriminately across the Internet, many newsrooms around the world have also felt mounting pressures to 'publish first or perish'. Indeed, as fake news consistently bombards the internet, other news provider also eliminate rigorous fact-checking procedures as the process of fact-checking is not only time consuming, but does not pay off well financially as publishing first guarantees more profits. Ultimately, media outlets around the world have one goal in mind: maximise profits and stakeholder share. As a result, the profit imperative compounded by the salient problem of human avarice means that there are increased instances of salacious reporting and where news published is less factual and genuine. The infamous Brock Turner case, where a white male from Stanford (Ivy League School) allegedly raped a girl made the headlines almost immediately when vitriol started spreading across the Internet. It was soon revealed that no incriminating evidence could be found against Brock Turner[1], but the general public had already been greatly incensed over the issue, As news outlets around the globe compete with the fast speed in which fictitious news is churned out, the unfortunate reality is that, even the most trustworthy of media outlets may eventually succumb to eliminating the process of fact-checking and prioritise profits instead. In fact, fake news may be even more lucrative than actual news. A small town in Balkans called Veles has been accused of peddling fictitious stories, with the creators of such fake news, namely youths earning up to £1,500 a month. Therefore, we cannot depend on the media to fulfil its role as a honest provider of truth.

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[1] While the central ideas in this paragraph are sound, the evidence presented is inaccurate. Not only was there eyewitness evidence of Turner's assault, prosecutors also had access to photographs and text messages that incriminated Turner.

Additionally, the media can no longer be relied upon due to the wilful sharing of disinformation that results in extremely severe ramifications that makes it more difficult to regulate. Indeed, the democratisation of the media has meant that every individual is not only a consumer but also a producer of news. Consequently, the regulation of information online is more difficult now more than ever. This is especially so for more liberal countries, that view censorship as a form of infringement on personal privacy and rights. In countries like the United States, the United Kingdom and France, censorship is viewed as a tool used by authoritarian governments with oligarchic interest that seek to potentially undermine the basis of a well-functioning democracy. As news online becomes increasingly difficult to regulate, this engenders serious implications when fabricated information cannot be discerned by the public. The Pizzagate incident mentioned earlier as well as malicious and fake news during the American election period are a testament to the state of media in today's world. The recent incident in Germany where news of an immigrant raping a girl (Lisa F) in Germany also sparked widespread protest and flash points as the far-right used such an incident to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment. While it was later discovered to be fabricated, the ramifications had already caused widespread panic and even hate. Therefore, in a time where countries find it increasingly tough to regulate and police perpetrators of fake news, the media cannot be relied upon to convey the truth for what is false or genuine have become even more indiscernible.

Moreover, the media can be no longer be expected to provide us with factual information as it is increasingly owned by corporations and governments that can easily fabricate political information to sway public discourse. In more recent years, there has been an increased government acquisition of news outlets or state-owned newspaper companies sprouting up. In response to a difficulty in regulating information, the government has decide to take up the mantle against fake news instead. However, many governments use this as a false pretext to masquerade their own hegemonic ambitions to sway public learnings and peddle political information. In countries, such as China, Russia and increasingly Turkey, these governments have long been accused of manipulating the media to favour their own personal agenda. In Turkey, for instance, the shuttering of popular newspaper Zarman and the replacement with Erdogan's own choice of news editor have cause an inevitable shift in stance. From one that was critical of government policies and actions, it now extols governmental plans and gloss over

articles expressing dissent, thereby alluding to how the media cannot be relied on to tell the truth for malicious governments can utilise the media as a mouth piece and fabricate information too. Also, while large media behemoths have not vowed political allegiance to any political party, powerful media barons like Ruppert Murdoch, Jeff Zucker and Michael Bloomberg have long been accused of publishing certain facts while obscuring and concealing others to forward their own political agenda. As such, it is evident that in a world where fabricating information is so simple and quick, many hawkish politician, governments and corporations use the media to fuel graft and influence political leanings. Thus, the media cannot be relied upon to be politically agnostic and hold those in power accountable as well as present objective facts.

Lastly, the media cannot fulfil its promise of being an honest provider of truth as it traffics heavily in stereotypes that result in the misinterpretation and objectification of certain minority groups. Sadly, news outlets has started pander to the basest instinct and provide biased and even false information owning to the fact that news can be made up easily. As consumers demand to be titillated and entertained, news outlets serve up articles that are extremely emotionally-driven, hyperbolic and over-the-top. This results in the creation of more lurid fare that invariably elbows aside weightier issues that are considered 'staid'. Media trends that are insipid often permeate the Internet and this results in the proliferation of information that is misguided and far from objective. Silvio Berlusconi's media empire, Mediaset, constantly features Showgirls that pepper even the most ordinary shows. His satirical news programme 'Strip the News' further exacerbates the idea of Italian females as, first and foremost, sex objects rather than professional equals. This 'fetishisation' that is widespread in the media stems from the ease of creating information, truthful or not, that invariably influences the mind-set of the general public by its sheer ubiquity. Thus, the wiser option would be to take such information with a pinch of salt, as we cannot trust the media completely.[2]

In conclusion, while the media used to be a beacon of hope for many due to its ability to be providers of truthful and grounded insights, the media has unfortunately abdicated its responsibility in doing so. Perhaps, it is time for consumers to rely less on the media, but more on themselves in discerning the

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[2] This paragraph is somewhat less relevant to the question than your previous ones; the promulgation of stereotypes is not the same as "making up information".

truth, as we live in a world where information is easily fabricated. Therefore, any hope in the media being an objective purveyor of truth is but vestigial.

Comments:

Thoughtful response which is consistently argued. Depth of evaluation and good awareness shown of the issue; apt use of illustration most of the time although it could be clearer if media was mainstream or new or both.

Sustained clarity with details that are relevant to argument. Some examples are original, but some need more clarification to link to the point.

Language-wise, very good linguistic ability demonstrated with felicitous expression apparent. Coherent paragraphing, framed in precise language. Ideas are communicated with confidence and conviction, though introduction could have clearer thesis.

2018 | Y6 | GP Class Essay Assignment   Catherine Liew Hui En | 18S03L
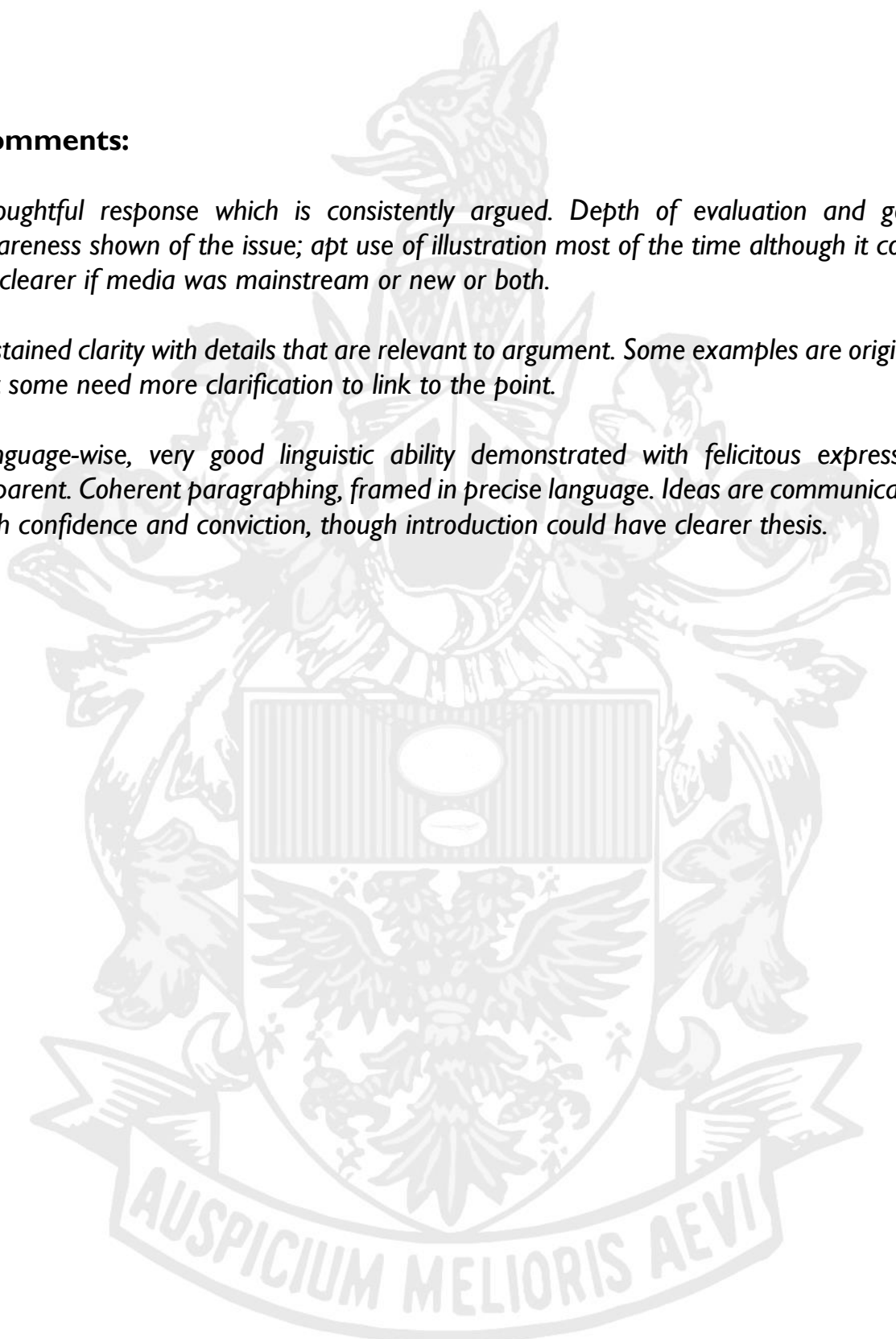
"History is just a set of lies." Discuss.

Throughout human history, people have sought to record their stories and life experiences and pass them on to their descendants. Motives behind this vary, from teaching their future generations important principles, to maintaining a sense of identity, and even to ensuring their version of things persists for one reason or another. So it is with history on a larger scale, the kind taught in schools and debated on by academics. Those who see this history as nothing more than falsehoods are jaded and cynical, not necessarily through any fault of their own, but simply due to the tendency for people to favour their own perspective and seek others' agreement. However, not only is asserting history to be 'only made up on life' disrespectful of the work of countless historians, investigative journalists and the like, this absolute view also undermines the power of history to affect the future in positive ways. As a result, I largely disagree with the assertion.

One can, of course, understand why some would see historical narratives as lies. Fabrications do exist that serve to further the purposes of some groups at the expense of others. Take for example the recent local hot topic: the debate on Operation Coldstore. When historian Thum Ping Tjin submitted his writings on the 1963 arrest of over 100 men to the Select Committee earlier this year, he was effectively challenging the official Singapore narrative by proposing that the government had carried out Operation Coldstore more to further its own political agenda as opposed to protecting Singapore from an imminent Communist takeover. Mr Thum point-blank called the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew a liar, accusing the government of lying in the history books. It is therefore clear that even in Singapore, which is often lauded for transparency of governance, there exist contending versions of past events, and it is naturally supposed that the leadership chooses and perpetuates the narrative that best supports its own purposes. In fact, any time a single or dominant organisation is given the power to officiate a particular version of history, one cannot be fully certain that they will be absolutely objective and unbiased towards themselves. Some even

blatantly ignore clear truths to favour a lie, such as in Japan, where students have long been given a very watered-down and historically inaccurate account of the atrocity that was the Rape of Nanjing. These students could very well grow up with a rose-tinted view of their own country—but it appears to matter less to the Japanese government that their students know the truth than that their pride is retained. Therefore, as long as there remain powerful groups and individuals looking to serve themselves, lies will persist in the history that is passed down.

But let us take a step back [and consider the other parties involved in fashioning history as we know it]. To insist that simply because these self-serving entities do exist and thus all history is nothing but a lie is to ignore the hard work of many others. By this I mean that the majority of what is established as history does go through rigorous cross-checking of many who seek out evidence for truths. For example, how would I have known the numbers of deaths in the Rape of Nanjing in Japan's official history records is far lower than what it actually is? And where did I get the idea of what something 'actually is'? This is made possible by truths that are revealed and accepted (almost) globally that debunk lies and false 'histories' some try to stick to. Another example would be how with Gorbachev's 'glasnost'—the movement towards transparency—came a more educated Russian populace that realised how false the Kremlin's propaganda could be. The subsequent disillusionment-fuelled movements showed the power of the people to demand truth. And in a time when the general public is getting more and more educated and aware of their rights, the right to information and thus to the facts of history is getting harder for leadership to deny. This is especially so with the increasing prevalence of technology—the Internet essentially being a place to communicate information—as well as globalisation. People now get information about their history from more than just what is set down as the official records, and to maintain political capital and credibility, governments, leaders and any other people of influence must tell the truth. Thus history records today are not as full of lies as the cynic would suggest.

At this point, however, it is necessary to go beyond why history could not be only a set of lies, to why we should not approach history with that attitude. Declaring something is a lie is in effect negating its authority to influence your decisions. With history, it cannot be so. There are clearly true developments that have left us where we are today, and accepting what is established as history has the potential to teach us important principles for the present and the future in order to progress. The recent amiable meeting of North Korea's Kim Jong Un

and South Korea's President Moon is an example of this. The two leaders met at a symbolic venue—the village of Panmunjom in the demilitarised border zone—to discuss the possibility of denuclearisation and other steps towards peace. This required a great deal of political will of both parties, but even before that, there was the need to face their long history of strained relations and learn from that history that peace was their common desire for the region. The importance of learning from history can also be seen in how significant locations are conserved and memorials set up, such as the statues of Japan's 'comfort women' or the Auschwitz concentration camp. These all serve as sobering reminders of the evil mankind is capable of and should thus avoid, once again cementing the importance of learning from historical truths.

Truthfully, much of history still remains debatable—although there is usually a majority of evidence pointing to one assertion in particular, intentions and motives are oft unclear simply because humans are complex. But perhaps what truly matters is what we do with information after proving it to really be history. Do we close the case and leave it as satisfactory head knowledge, or do we translate it into a driving force in our endeavours to better mankind?

Comments:

Content: Generally strong grasp of the question's requirements, addressing some key issues with insight and conviction. Still, a finer distinction could've been made between deliberate untruths vs lack of evidence/unavoidable selective/biased views that can affect veracity or accuracy. Also, the notion of competing/complementary narratives/versions should have been more deeply engaged with.

Language: Strong language throughout, with excellent inflections/variation in sentence structure to push arguments forward. Organisation of ideas is also very good, generally.

10

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2 | Paper 2 | Passage

Tim Wu writes about how convenience impacts modern society and our outlook on life.

Convenience — that is, the more efficient and easier way of doing personal tasks — is the most underestimated and least understood force in the world today. As a driver of human decisions, it may not offer the thrill of sexual desires or the allure of the economist's incentives. Convenience is boring. But boring is not the same thing as trivial.

However mundane it seems now, convenience, the great liberator of humankind from labour, was a utopian ideal. By saving time and eliminating drudgery, we assume it would create the possibility of leisure. And with leisure would come the possibility of devoting time to learning, hobbies or whatever else might really matter to us. Convenience would make available to the general population the kind of freedom for self-cultivation once available only to the aristocracy. In this way, convenience would also be the great leveller. This idea — convenience as liberation — could be intoxicating. Food would be prepared with the push of a button. Moving sidewalks would do away with the annoyance of walking. Clothes would clean themselves or perhaps self-destruct after a day's wearing. The end of the struggle for existence could at last be contemplated.

In the developed nations of the 21st century, convenience has emerged as perhaps the most powerful force shaping our individual lives and our economies. This is particularly true in America, where, despite all the paeans to freedom and individuality, one sometimes wonders whether convenience is in fact the supreme value. As Evan Williams, a co-founder of Twitter, recently put it, "Convenience decides everything". Convenience seems to make our decisions for us, trumping what we like to imagine are our true preferences. Easy is better, easiest is best.

Convenience also has the ability to make other options unthinkable. To resist convenience — not to own a cellphone, not to use Google — has come to require a special kind of dedication that is often taken for eccentricity, if not fanaticism. In fact, our taste for convenience begets more convenience through a combination of the economies of scale and the power of habit. The easier it is to use Amazon, the more powerful Amazon becomes and thus the easier it becomes to use Amazon time and again. Convenience and monopoly now seem to be natural bedfellows.

Given the growth of convenience — as an ideal, as a value, as a way of life — it is worth asking what our fixation with it is doing to us and to our country. I don't want to suggest that convenience is a force for evil. Making things easier isn't wicked. On the contrary, it often opens up possibilities that once seemed too onerous to contemplate and it typically makes life less arduous, especially for those who are particularly vulnerable to life's drudgeries.

The dream of convenience is also premised on the nightmare of physical work. But is physical work always a nightmare? Do we really want to be emancipated from all of it? Perhaps our humanity is sometimes expressed in inconvenient actions and time-consuming pursuits. Perhaps this is why, with every advance of convenience, there have always been those who resist it. They resist out of stubbornness (and it is important to note that they have the luxury to do so) but also because they

see a threat to their sense of who they are, to their feeling of control over things that matter to them.

We err in presuming convenience is always good for it has a complex relationship with other ideals that we hold dear. Though understood and promoted as an instrument of liberation, convenience too has a dark side. With its promise of smooth, effortless efficiency, it threatens to erase the sort of struggles and challenges that help give meaning to life. Created to free us, it can become a constraint on what we are willing to do, and thus in a subtle way it can enslave us. We may surrender too much when we let convenience decide everything.

If convenience then promised to make life and work easier for you, convenience now seems to be about making it easier to be you. In fact, most of the powerful and important technologies created over the past few decades deliver convenience in the service of personalisation and individuality. Think of the playlist, the Facebook page, the Instagram account. This kind of convenience is no longer about saving physical labour — many of us don't do much of that anyway. It is about minimising the mental resources, the mental exertion, required to choose among the options that express ourselves. The paradoxical truth I'm driving at is that today's technologies of individualisation are technologies of mass individualisation. Customisation can be surprisingly homogenising. Everyone, or nearly everyone, is on Facebook: It is the most convenient way to keep track of your friends and family, who in theory should represent what is unique about you and your life. Yet Facebook seems to make us all the same. Its format and conventions strip us of all but the most superficial expressions of individuality, such as which particular photo of a beach or mountain range we select as our background image.

Being a person is only partly about having and exercising choices. It is also about how we face up to situations that are thrust upon us, about overcoming worthy challenges and finishing difficult tasks — the struggles that help make us who we are. What happens to human experience when so many obstacles and impediments and requirements and preparations have been removed?

Today's cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is also a critically important part of human experience. Climbing a mountain is different from taking the tram to the top, even if you end up at the same place. We risk becoming people who care mainly or only about outcomes and have forgotten the value we find in our struggles. Therefore, we need to consciously embrace the inconvenient — not always, but more of the time.

Hence, individuality has come to reside in making at least some inconvenient choices. You need not churn your own butter or hunt your own meat but if you want to be someone, you cannot allow convenience to be the value that transcends all others. Struggle is not always a problem. Though it exposes us to the risk of frustration and failure, it can also teach us something about the world and our place in it. Indeed, struggle can be the solution to the question of who you are.

So let's reflect on the tyranny of convenience, try more often to resist its stupefying power, and see what happens. We must never forget the joy of doing something slow and something difficult, the satisfaction of not doing what is easiest. The constellation of inconvenient choices may be all that stands between us and a life of total, efficient conformity. ☙

2018 | Y6 | GP Common Test 2 | Paper 2 | AQ   Huang Bairun | 18S06A

In this article, Tim Wu discusses how convenience brings about much value but also highlights some concerns about its possible effects on individuals and societies. How far would you agree with his observations, relating your arguments to your own experience and that of your society?

In this article, Tim Wu has noted some benefits convenience brings and its potential drawbacks on society, some of which is observed in Singapore as well.

Tim Wu has mentioned that convenience has 'saved time and eliminated drudgery' (par 2, line 6). I definitely agree with this observation given that in Singapore many industries, agencies and groups prioritise efficiency and feasibility. The most recent example is that of Changi Airport's new Terminal 4, which features many automated processes, such as self-check in counters and automated boarding gates. This automation wave in Changi is motivated by Changi's high passenger volume, which demands time and labour-saving innovations such as these automated processes to reduce the hassle for travellers. This also aligns with the airport's vision of providing the most pleasant experience for travellers. Similarly, a majority of our supermarkets island-wide now adopts self check-out lanes which save shoppers' time by reducing queue times and reduce manpower. The latest NTUC Fairprice outlet in Ghim Moh, Queenstown has only one manual check-out lane, but offers six automated ones for shoppers. This is due to the benefits of automation aligning with our nation's manpower strategy to improve the skilled level of our workforce by gradually reducing such labour-intensive, time-consuming and low-skilled jobs.

Furthermore, Tim Wu mentioned that convenience empowers the general population with 'the freedom for self-cultivation' (par 2, line 9). I too agree with this observation as technology's convenience has indeed allowed Singaporeans to have more opportunities to enrich themselves and develop their abilities. For example, Singaporeans could learn programming and coding through websites such as DataCamp and CodeAcademy, accessible from their affordable smartphones. Public spaces such as the Jurong Regional Library provide 'Makerspaces' with cutting edge robotics technology to allow Singaporeans to develop and widen their knowledge of the 'Internet of things', skills which are

especially in demand in today's age with increasing disruptions by technology. Such avenues for self-cultivation is encouraged by the state's educational policies which have an increasing focus on hands-on, applied learning, with educational institutions such as polytechnics actively encouraging their students to capitalise on these opportunities for their own benefit.

On the other hand, Tim Wu also mentioned that convenience can become a 'constraint on what we are willing to do (par 7, ln 46). I agree that for particular industries such as ride-hailing and some aspects of education, convenience does restrict the choices people have to fulfil their needs. The example of Grab in monopolising the domestic ride-hailing marker with little alternative options shows that the most convenient option entrenches itself as the default option, with smaller competitors squeezed out of the market, reducing choices available to consumers. Similarly Google has become the de facto search engine for educators and students with a serious lack of home-grown search engines that could be a viable alternative to Google. These trends occur likely due to aggressive marketing, especially in the case of Grab, and expansion in multiple areas, as in the case of Google. Singapore's favourable business environment encourages such aggressive expansion, with the state even supporting the dominant service providers through investments by Temasek Holdings and GIC.

Yet, it is too extreme to dismiss convenience as limiting our options. On the contrary, convenience has opened up more options to Singaporeans in other sectors. In the food delivery sector for instance, companies such as Foodpanda and Honestbee provide a lot of options for Singaporeans to order their food from home and offices. In the news media, the convenience of status independent media sites has also encouraged the rise of alternative regulations does not curb the diversification of these industries, choices for the people consequentially become more diverse.

Comments:

Well evaluated – showing awareness of the issues surrounding the topic and Singapore.
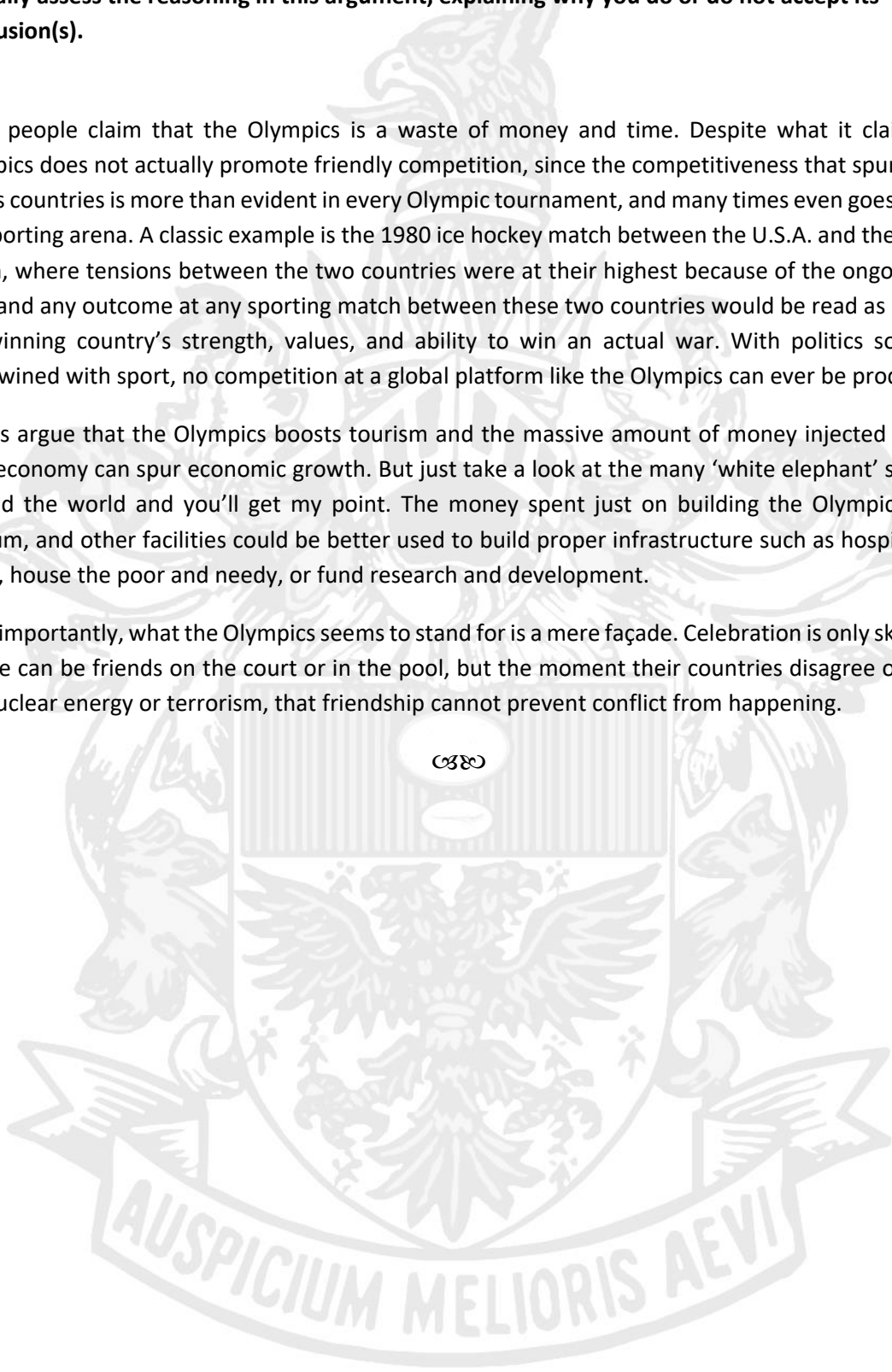
12

2018 | Y5 | KI Common Test | Paper 2 | Passage

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).

Some people claim that the Olympics is a waste of money and time. Despite what it claims, the Olympics does not actually promote friendly competition, since the competitiveness that spurs rivalry across countries is more than evident in every Olympic tournament, and many times even goes beyond the sporting arena. A classic example is the 1980 ice hockey match between the U.S.A. and then Soviet Union, where tensions between the two countries were at their highest because of the ongoing Cold War, and any outcome at any sporting match between these two countries would be read as a sign of the winning country's strength, values, and ability to win an actual war. With politics so deeply intertwined with sport, no competition at a global platform like the Olympics can ever be productive.

Others argue that the Olympics boosts tourism and the massive amount of money injected into the local economy can spur economic growth. But just take a look at the many 'white elephant' stadiums around the world and you'll get my point. The money spent just on building the Olympic village, stadium, and other facilities could be better used to build proper infrastructure such as hospitals and roads, house the poor and needy, or fund research and development.

Most importantly, what the Olympics seems to stand for is a mere façade. Celebration is only skin deep; people can be friends on the court or in the pool, but the moment their countries disagree on issues like nuclear energy or terrorism, that friendship cannot prevent conflict from happening.

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2018 | Y5 | KI Promo Exam | Paper 2 Response   Samuel Foo Hern Kai | 19A01A

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).

The author's argument is that the Olympics is a waste of money and time that does not live up to its supposed merits. His first sub-argument is that the Olympics do not promote friendly competition, as it allows for politically charged matches where the sporting arena becomes another platform for expressing geopolitical tensions, using the example of the US-Soviet ice hockey match at the 1980 Olympics. Secondly, he cites the poor record of the Olympics at boosting the economic growth of the host countries, referring to the waste of money on white elephant projects that are only used for the one-off Games, when money could be better spent on actually crucial infrastructure, thus generating wastage. Thirdly, he claims that the Olympics aura of friendship and harmony is a façade, by showing how the Games do not stop conflict from arising between countries.

Firstly, the author's arguments are largely cogent in recounting the failings of the Olympics at the things he expects them to achieve: I will go through why his sub-arguments are cogent later. However, the one thing holding us back from fully embracing the conclusion is the implicit premise that these are the only objectives for which we have the Olympics, and the only criterion on which we evaluate the Games' success.

Let us first examine the claim that the Olympics fail to promote friendly competition. Given that there are always underlying tensions between countries that overflow onto the sporting arena, it is true that friendly competition may not always be guaranteed by the Olympics. Therefore, I do agree that the Olympics sometimes fails the criteria as the author has defined it: the 1980 example is a relevant one, and one could say that the treatment of Jesse Owens at the Berlin Olympics in Nazi Germany is another good case of ideological tensions overflowing. Yet, we should ask ourselves if friendly competition is truly the reason we value the Games. Maybe that was the idealistic goal of Baron Coubertin, the modern Games' founder, but many value the Games not for the friendliness but for the competition in itself, maybe even as a proxy for global

superpower competition. For example, the US and Soviets were eager to have any chance of competing with each other during the heated parts of the Cold War (as with the space race for example), therefore the Olympics would likely have provided a good basis for bloodless proxy competition between the two: the lack of mutual cordiality would not have diluted both sides' interest in competing. Just because the Olympics fails one person's expectations does not mean other people do not have other views and purposes for wanting to keep and compete in the Games. Thus, we cannot write off the Olympics just because they fail this criterion.

Secondly, I agree with the economic angle that the Games can be a huge financial waste for countries, even though they are supposed to help countries gain more revenue. An especially striking example is the Rio Olympics, where people were unhappy with the resources wasted in building stadiums when resources were sorely needed for other national crises like the Zika epidemic, and the rich-poor divide in Brazil. Therefore, I do believe the author's argument that the Olympics are undesirable as they take a toll on host countries' economies is a cogent one. Yet, at the same time, we should ask if this really is sufficient to scrap the event. As I have said and will reiterate, that are other reasons for having the Olympics – as a platform for sporting competition and an expression of the pinnacle of Mankind's ability in athletic pursuits, for instance. Therefore, the lack of economic returns does not necessarily mean that the Games are a wholesale wastage.

Thirdly, the author makes the last claim that the Olympic values of friendship are largely superficial and shallow. However, is stopping conflict really the standard the Games should meet just to prove their values are being upheld? Not even the UN Security Council is capable of stopping conflict, so perhaps the ban is set too high. Also, nobody really expects the Olympics to stop conflict and maintain world peace: the fact that the Olympics were suspended during the World Wars seems to imply that world peace is itself a precondition for the Games to take place in the first place.

Therefore, the Games may have failed the author's criteria for success, and he proves that well, but it does not mean we have to scrap the Games, or that they are a waste, for there are other purposes for having them, and the author's expectations are set too high.

Comments:

Good job! Reconstruction of the author's argument is accurate and relatively well done. Evaluation is thorough and systematic, though some repetition of ideas is evident.

14

Assess the view that women have been unfairly treated today.

The world is currently experiencing a social upheaval against the discrimination against women that runs rampant in our workplaces, our communities, and in our culture, at an unprecedented scale. Just in the past year, the Time's Up movement served as a rallying cry for those in the film industry against a culture of sexual harassment of women, leading to a shocking fall from grace for a number of household names, from Matt Lauer, the host of a primetime morning show 'Today', to big names in entertainment, such as Harvey Weinstein, whose production company had churned out the likes of 'Pulp Fiction' and more. In the modern day and age, women are no longer restricted, in most cases, by the norms that were imposed against them by an oppressive patriarchal society. Indeed, there have been strides of progress to ensure gender equality in the past century. However, I am of the opinion that this issue of unfair treatment towards women remains far from resolved, and that is in spite of the paradigm shifts that we have seen in the fight for equal rights.

Firstly, one might argue that in the modern world, there is no apparent unfair treatment of women. Those who hold this utopian vision of an egalitarian society of the sexes often cite modern Scandinavian society as a prime example, how countries such as Norway and Sweden have fully embraced the concept of gender rights, which has manifested in their laws, social norms and even cultural practices. For example, a Gallup poll conducted in Sweden in 2015 found that among 12,000 respondents, 52% had no qualms seeing women in positions of power, and 63% felt that there was no longer a need for women to take on their husband's surname, and that there was no problem for the converse as well. Scandinavian countries have historically had the lowest rates of sexual harassment globally for the past decade, and the highest proportion of females as compared to males, averaging at 46%, can be found in Nordic boardrooms. The Scandinavian woman, who marries late in her forties and holds a high-ranking position in her line of work, is an exemplification of the social progress that has

come a long way in eradicating misperceptions and stereotypes of women, and along with it the unfair treatment of women, which Scandinavia is a strong indicator of success of. Therefore, one may argue that this view that women have been unfairly treated today is one that does not hold much ground, as there have been instances where this has not been the case. Legally too, women in these countries have been conferred equal status to men, and that is a key indicator of society's treatment of women.

However, it would be myopic to suggest that the treatment of women can be assessed based on the progress made by a select few countries, while discrediting a broader overview of the global outlook towards the issue. Unfortunately, although we have progressed considerably in terms of society's treatment towards women, the fact remains that the roots of patriarchy have been deeply ingrained in the psyche of a number of cultures which place men in a position of power above women. In conferring them that status and rendering women as subordinate to her male counterparts, this also serves to justify male chauvinism that is deeply seated in our society and perpetuate misogyny that is openly practised and condoned even today. The Time's Up movement is a prime example of the pervasiveness of such attitudes in societal norms. It serves as a rude awakening of how the silent majority have been conditioned for far too long to keep mum about these issues, for fear of condemnation and backlash from men in positions of power, and for fear of a lack of acceptance from the wider community. The discrimination against women in many workplaces is a glaring example of the unequal treatment of the sexes: a research study conducted by the Pew Research Centre in 2016 found that women earn roughly two-thirds of what their male counterparts enjoy for the same occupations; study conducted in Harvard that same year found that recruiters tend to place male applicants above women, with the perception that these men project greater confidence and authority, while women tend to lack the industriousness and drive in which men do, and thus are perceived to be less suited for the job. All these examples point clearly to the fact that society still collectively harbours stereotypes that suggest that women are of a less ability than men, and thus should be treated as lesser than them as them as well. Therefore, it is clear that women are indeed receiving the short end of the stick here when it comes to unfair treatment between the sexes in society.

Those who detract from this argument may claim that such inequality only manifests in less developed countries that are still deeply entrenched in sexist

conventions, but this is not the case; not all developed countries are immune from the unequal treatment of men and women. Within our shores, Singapore follows one of the few countries in the developed world to have yet to institute strict laws against marital rape, and instead immunity protection is still granted to husbands who are accused of such. These archaic laws may not seem to indicate the disparity of treatment between men and women, but are a reflection of our own society's resistance towards more progressive attitudes with regard to ensuring equality of the sexes. In China, while economic fortunes have seen leaps and bounds of progress in the past two decades, this is not for societal perceptions of gender. Women are generally still seen as the lesser sex, as evidenced by the high proportion of female infanticide cases that plague the country as a result of its restrictive One-Child Policy. Such crimes are often left unchecked by local authorities, and this is compounded by the fact that Chinese society has traditionally valued boys over girls. Consequently, the sex ratio stands at 117.7 males for every 100 females. Evidently, the manifestations of such unfair treatment of women goes as far as to include the killing of female babies for male heirs, which serves as a stark reminder of the pertinence of this issue even today.

Conversely, this unfair treatment towards women may be manifested in cases in which women are, instead, placed above men. This has been the largely misconstrued argument in the feminist movement, that affirmative action policies in support of female rights to the extent that it supersedes male rights is the right course of action to recalibrate the balance of the sexes. The evolution of societal attitudes is a key reflection of this skewed balance: a social experiment conducted in the US in 2016 recorded the reactions of passers-by who were witnesses to a case of domestic abuse in a heterosexual relationship, played out by actors, in public. When the woman was placed in a vulnerable position, in almost all instances there was a deliberate attempt on part of the bystanders to intervene. However, when the man was placed at the receiving end of the abuse, such interventions only occurred once every 12 times, and when surveyed, the general perception of the witnesses was that of apathy, and some had even remarked that the man 'deserved it' instead. This highlights how our perceptions have evolved to the extent that in certain instances women are seen to be granted 'social immunity' when the disparities in the treatment of the sexes are reversed. Moreover, the debate over maternity leave having a longer duration and being viewed as of greater importance as compared to paternity leave is also evidence of the fact that rather than fighting for the equality of treatment

between men and women, society has also inadvertently skewed the balance of the sexes by justifying misandrist policies and attitudes in the name of equality. Therefore, this further reinforces the opinion that there exists an unfair treatment toward women today.

As former Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki-moon once remarked: "Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, girls and boys. It is everyone's responsibility." It is apparent that in many State apparatus and in a vast number of sociocultural domains, there exists an imbalance in terms of the attitudes towards and treatment of men and women, which pervades in the present-day. There have been a multitude of solutions proposed in tackling this issue, but some suggest that women instead should be seen as superior to men instead to even out the balance, which does not help in ensuring the equal treatment of the sexes. Instead, what we as a society should tackle in our fight for equality is to surface the unconscious biases that have been ingrained in us through social conditioning, and to encourage greater dialogue across all strata of society. In this war against gender inequality, we cannot afford to stand aside.

Comments:

An insightful response, especially the last argument, which provides a different perspective to gender rights. Good illustration.

Language-wise, very clearly expressed ideas. Linguistically secure. Good range of vocabulary and sentence structure.

2018 | Y5 | GP Common Test   **Ian Tay Rong De | 19S06H**

How far can scientific or technological developments be a solution to global problems?

In the last one and a half centuries, mankind, yielding the mighty sword of science and technology, has cut away many of the chains of plague, disease and disasters that have put humanity under bondage for thousands of years. Science, which in ancient times was just a hobby for rich intellectuals, has now become our primary weapon against the problems that haunt this world today, from famines, to disease and climate change. Like the steel hull of an icebreaker ship, the progress of scientific knowledge and the development of technological advancements has been powerful. It has provided a solution to many problems faced by the world today as it provides greater understanding of the problem, provides the economic foundation required to solve the problem, and in many cases also provides a targeted solution to the problem at hand. However, other factors still have to be considered, and the world has to muster the determination to take action, before we can take greater strides towards resolving many issues the world faces today.

Firstly, development of scientific knowledge allows for greater understanding of the problem, and often also provides the political will to take action. Before the 18th century, doctors lacked the understanding of what causes illnesses such as the common flu. Incorrect theories involving "bad air" and "bodily humours" abounded, leading to ineffective and often dangerous "cures". However, through the work of leading scientists such as Louis Pasteur, scientists began to understand how bacteria and viruses cause illnesses and disease, and the discovery that bacterial infection is the cause for gangrene and sepsis paved the way for the use of disinfectants such as phenol, and later, antibiotics, saving millions of lives around the world. In a more recent example, through the greater understanding of genetics and molecular biology, scientists have been able to find out the root cause of many congenital diseases such as cystic fibrosis, paving the way for the development of more effective treatment and cures. These examples show how the development of scientific knowledge provides

the theoretical foundation required for the systemic search for targeted and effective solutions to tackle the problem. In some cases as well, the development of scientific knowledge provides the political will and driving force for governments and societies to take steps towards solving the problems that the world faces. In recent decades, climatologists have developed increasingly comprehensive models to predict the rise in temperatures caused by global warming, and the consequences it would bring. Forecasts which show a more than 4°C rise in temperature by the year 2100 and the effect of rising sea levels on coastal cities like Shanghai have helped to shine a spotlight on the severity of climate change, catalyzing public debate and governmental action to tackle this problem. Therefore, the development of scientific knowledge is absolutely crucial for the solution to global problems.

With this foundation of scientific knowledge (and sometimes a bit of luck as well), numerous technologies have been developed, or are being developed, which act as a targeted solution to many of the problems the world faces today. While many would point out the impossibility of a "magic pill" solution, it is undeniable that many technological developments have proven to be major breakthroughs in solving global issues. One example that would immediately come to mind would be the success of vaccines. The development of vaccines and their distribution and use in the past century has led to the complete eradication of smallpox – the first time in human history that a disease has been wiped off the face of the earth . Diseases such as polio have also been crushed, only existing in a few isolated enclaves around the world. Sure, it was no overnight cure, and required decades of government vaccine programmes and public expenditure, but without these solutions that have been provided by science and technology, the curse of smallpox may still be prowling our cities today. Another problem the world faces today is the problem of energy generation. Fossil fuels are nonrenewable and polluting, but other renewable energy sources remain inefficient, and nuclear fission technology poses safety concerns that cannot be easily dismissed (as seen in the recent Fukushima disaster). One solution currently being developed by physicists and engineers is nuclear fusion technology, which provides a promise of high efficiency and importantly, zero production of polluting or radioactive waste. While breaking even (where the energy output of the plant is greater than the energy input) remains elusive, scientists are extremely close to that goal, and are confident that commercial nuclear fusion plants can be built in just a couple of decades' time. The building of ITER, the world's largest experimental nuclear fusion reactor, brings us one

step closer to the goal of clean, efficient, safe and renewable energy generation. Thus, scientific developments and technological advancements provides targeted solutions to deal with the global problems that we face.

In addition, scientific development often brings about economic development, providing a foundation for solving other problems such as poverty, famine and disease. One example that everyone would know about would be the Industrial Revolution, with propelled Europe into modernity. It can be argued that the economic growth created by the technological and industrial developments during the Industrial Revolution gave Europe and North America a necessary foundation for the great strides in medicine, healthcare and science that occurred during that era. A more recent example would be the recent development in electronics and smartphone technology, which has led to an increase in demand for rare earth metals that are needed in the manufacturing of these electronic devices. The mining and extraction of these metals now provides a vital source of income for many countries in Central Africa, which historically has suffered from a lack of arable land for agriculture. This extra source of income can definitely go a long way in improving the living conditions and healthcare facilities in these impoverished countries. China, which has historically relied on its strong manufacturing sector, is increasingly trying to develop in areas such as artificial intelligence, smart technology, life sciences and chemical engineering, industries that will provide greater value and income to the country, helping the central government to achieve its goal of lifting millions of citizens out of poverty. Therefore, no matter in which country in the world, scientific and technological developments act as a primary driving force of economic development, providing a foundation and equipping countries with the ability to solve problems that the world faces today.

In spite of the power of science and technology, for real strides to be taken to solve global problems, other factors such as economics, governance and political will have to be addressed. Despite the technological advancements brought about by the Green Revolution such as GM (genetically modified) crops and High Yielding Varieties, the developing world is still facing a food crisis where food prices remain high. This is partly due to the economic policies in various countries; agricultural subsidies provided by the European Union have led to unnecessary surpluses leading to the dumping of food on global markets. Under the leadership of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, farms were confiscated from their white owners and given to black farmers who were poorly trained and

inexperienced, turning the "Breadbasket of Africa" into a country dependent on food aid. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, while mining for rare earth metals has expanded due to the development in smartphone technology, the protracted civil war has meant that standards of living have remained dismal. These examples show that despite the importance of science and technology, a lot still hinges upon the economic policies of a country, and the political stability of a nation. Lastly, despite repeated warnings from the scientific community about the dangers of global warming, the Trump administration pulled the United States out of the Paris Agreement, throwing the global effort to combat climate change into question. Thus, it appears that while scientific and technological developments are crucial in solving the world's problems, the global community has to take a stand in resolving the issues that the world faces.

What has always drawn me to the field of science and technology is the great potential that it has to bring about revolutionary changes in the world, and the great power that it gives to individuals, communities, countries and the world, to make the world a better place. Science is a great liberator, liberating the world from plagues and disease, liberating the world from poverty and inequity, and releasing us from the bondage of technological constraints. Ultimately, science is fair, and blind to the social and geographical divisions in the world; science has the power to benefit every nation equally. Science and technology is perhaps the first step we can take to put an end to poverty, famine, disease and climate disasters, but it has to go hand in hand with good governance, political will, and our determination to succeed. With the sword of science and technology in our hand, there is nothing that we cannot overcome!

Comments:

A thoughtful response, with some insightful parts. Analysis is evident and good examples were raised. Language used was generally very good. An effective introduction & conclusion were provided, with varied sentence structures and wide-ranging vocabulary displayed.

2018 | Y5 | GP Common Test   **Keane Loi Jun Yi | 19S03D**

How far can scientific or technological developments be a solution to global problems?

"He felt the shuttle slow to a stop. And with that, he had just finished an hour-long moon flight." These lofty words, taken from the iconic film "2001: A Space Odyssey", describes an ordinary man's near-routine flight from the earth to the moon. Unfortunately, space flights have yet to become as mundane and commonplace as predicted by dreamers of the past. However, we have certainly surpassed their expectations in various other ways, through the scientific and technological developments of modern medicine, the internet, and various other achievements which they could not have even dreamt of. Science fiction has correctly predicted one fact: despite extensive scientific and technological developments, global problems such as energy crisis and terrorism remain a reality and a feature of both the past and the present. Although the scale and scope of technological developments is astonishing, helping to play an important role in various global problems, it is undeniable that science and technology is heavily limited in their capabilities to solve global problems, and may even be the cause or enabling factor of some of them.

The main benefit brought by scientific and technological developments is the enhancement of the capabilities of humanity to tackle problems with new methods and perspectives. Through the relentless developments by research scientists, humanity is definitely capable of tackling problems on a global scale which would have stumped even the greatest minds a century ago. With reference to global problems such as overpopulation and pollution, science and technology have been key to addressing these problems. Through the effects of science, genetic engineering has produced variants of BT Corn, and even drought-resistant crop varieties, which have all played a part in making our crops resistant to environmental damage (from weather conditions, pests, etc.), acting as saviours to millions of farmers worldwide. It has increased exponentially the global production of food, helping to avoid the global crisis of overpopulation and famine, as predicted by the philosopher Thomas Malthus. With regards to

pollution, the technological development of infrared and radar scanners has helped to scan the approximate size of the Great Pacific garbage patch, so as to better develop strategies to combat pollution on a global scale. The application of various strains of bacteria capable of digesting non-biodegradable plastic by a university in Japan promises to be a solution to the millions of tons of plastic items floating in oceans globally. With overpopulation affecting multiple countries globally, and pollution threatening our earth's environment and causing extensive damage to local fauna, it can be seen that scientific and technological developments do play an important role in the resolution of global problems. Technology's enhancement of mankind's capabilities with regards to global problems has transformed them from the unthinkably complex to the highly solvable.

Another positive aspect of scientific and technological developments in the solving of global problems is its capacity to connect people globally. Beginning with the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell, followed by the advent of radio broadcasts and airmail, and continuing with the Internet, and the subsequent explosion of thousands of internet sites, technology has reduced the limitations of distance and speed to miraculously low levels, from standing a few metres away to contacting others globally. Although some critics might suggest that this has transformed the world into one "huge, gossiping family", even they cannot deny the benefits of such interconnection on a global scale. Through the cooperation of people worldwide, the coordination and discussion of global problems such as global warming can happen much faster. Through the transmission of guidelines and research online, individuals can all play a part in combating problems on an infinitely larger scale, through small actions they can undertake individually. For example, Earth Hour is a global event in which millions of individuals and thousands of corporations reduce energy costs by switching off the lights for an hour, so as to demonstrate their support in reducing the wastage of energy, through which the amount of fossil fuels can be reduced. Subsequent discussions and decisions made by people worldwide who observe this event can help to raise awareness globally of global warming, which is one big step in the solution to this problem. In another field, governments and police forces worldwide can share intelligence and technology to combat the spread of terrorism globally; Interpol is an international agreement by various European countries to work together and capture dangerous criminals, helping to fight crime on a global scale. Without scientific and technological developments, these solutions would be a fantasy of the future; now, the ability

for science and technology to connect people, corporations, and governments to tackle global problems such as international terrorism and global warming is definitely awe-inspiring. Scientific and technological developments have clearly played an important role in the solution to global problems.

However, scientific and technological developments definitely have their limitations. Firstly, through the enhancement of humanity's capabilities to execute its will, mankind clearly has also increased the propensity of realising the destructive potential of technology. Even today, the world's superpowers watch each other anxiously, for fear of first-strike advantage in the use of nuclear weapons. Through increasing the scale and severity of conflicts, scientific and technological developments have spawned ethical dilemmas and new global problems, rather than being the solution to them. For example, the development of remote drone technology, and various machines of war have increased the number of casualties worldwide. "Lone wolf" terrorists can now access online guides to make bombs from homemade materials, increasing the extent of terrorism on a global scale which is evident from how the Boston Bombers acquired knowledge to construct bombs from an online magazine published by Al-Qaeda. Terrorism groups can now threaten countries that are otherwise out of their reach globally, through the indoctrination of radicals overseas to perform the will of their masters. Thus, scientific and technological developments have enhanced our capabilities to create and enhance global problems, rather than be the solution to them.

Secondly, scientific and technological developments bring into question the economics of price; after all, technology is never cheap! Research often requires many hours of labour by scientists and researchers, as well as thousands to millions spent. Globally, this has created a clear distinction between the wealthy and the developing countries, since the former clearly has the advantage in its research capabilities over the latter. As such, even if wealthy countries willingly share their technology with others on a global scale to combat global problems such as pandemics and global warming, developing countries cannot afford to utilise such miracles due to the financial burden it may place on them. The genetic engineering of "miracle rice" promised to end malnutrition in poor countries, until it was discovered that the price tag was greater than the average poor family's monthly income. Technology always comes with a cost, and its utilisation to solve problems is limited without the financial capability to support it. With the recent scandal involving Martin Shkreli - who abused his company's

monopolistic power in inflating the price of the drug Daraprim to many times its original price - it is certain that those with financial power can still abuse technology for their own gains, rather than to help solve global problems.

Finally, scientific and technological developments are heavily limited by the motivations and mindsets of people to solve the global problem. Many global problems stem from actions taken by individuals on a personal level, and without altering their beliefs, any scientific or technological solution will just be a band-aid while the problem worsens. With regards to climate change and pollution, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and the reduction in the use of plastic bags are key to solving the problem. Science and technology can only go so far, and without people being willing to act by themselves, it would be impossible to resolve such crises. After all, humans are largely responsible for the creation of global problems today, and only through the global cooperation and actions taken by governments and individuals, can they be solved on a fundamental level.

In conclusion, the use of scientific and technological developments in the resolution of global problems may be called a double-edged sword by some. On one hand, it gives us access to methods and cooperation on a much grander scale. On the other hand, without the resolution of global problems at a fundamental level, scientific and technological developments are heavily limited in their capacity to do good, and may even create new problems. It would be more appropriate to think of them as a tool in mankind's ever-growing toolbox. Used wisely, it can accomplish much good, but one should not expect it to be a miracle pill to cure our every mistake.

Comments:

Content: Wide-ranging and fully relevant examples, with sustained clarity of argument. Thoughtful with a depth of evaluation and appropriate and effective illustration.

Language: Effective and competent. Clear organisation and flow, effective paragraphing and linking words. Some evidence of ranged variation in sentence structure and vocabulary

2018 | Y5 | GP Common Test   **Lim Zinn-E | 19S06J**

How far can scientific or technological developments be a solution to global problems?

The famously morose philosopher Thomas Hobbes once remarked that life was "nasty, brutish and short". However, scientific advances have allowed mankind to enter an age of prosperity and hope – medical technology has increased our life expectancy, while gadgets such as Amazon Alexa make our lives so much more convenient. However, the impact of these developments on an international scale is debatable, with a fifth of the world still living under the poverty line of US$1.90 a day. The very existence of these global issues raise doubts with regards to technology's ability to truly address them, but I am of the opinion that scientific or technological advances can be a solution to global problems.

Proponents of the view that science and technology are unable to solve global problems often cite the lack of access less-developed countries have to these advances. Research and development is a costly process, with Singapore investing $16 billion into this area alone. To many less developed countries across the world, these astronomical sums are all but out of reach. This problem is exacerbated by the profit-driven nature of science and technology today, with companies raising prices and squeezing consumers to the very last cent. For instance, genetically modified crops were hailed as the panacea to world hunger, but the profit-driven nature of the industry ultimately led to disaster. Monsanto, one of the biggest players in the GM crop market, is notorious for raising their seed prices and genetically modifying them to be infertile. As such, farmers are forced to purchase a new batch of seeds every season, leading to lower profits. In India, the problem has escalated to the point where farmers are committing suicide due to the heavy losses incurred. Although scientific or technological developments hold much potential in solving numerous pressing global issues, they are ultimately unable to realize this potential due to the financial limitations of research and development, as well as the profit-driven nature of research. With technology such as genetically modified crops out of reach for these less-

developed countries, problems cannot be solved on a global scale, and are limited to wealthier countries that have the financial muscle to support and fund this research. In this way, technology only serves to further entrench the inequality that is responsible for many global problems today. Evidently, the benefits of scientific or technological developments can be considered to be skewed in favour of wealthier countries. This results in less developed countries being left behind, which will only serve to create more global problems.

However, technological developments driven by need and not profit can serve as an equaliser, helping societies across the world progress. Scientific research is able to develop novel approaches to solving problems that have long existed on a global scale. The lack of clean water is a problem which has confronted humanity for centuries. From deadly cholera outbreaks in 19th century London, to the current water crisis that the city of Flint, Michigan faces, to wells contaminated by fecal matter in African villages, water is an issue that is faced by not only less-developed countries, but wealthier countries as well. Developments in filtration technology have allowed residents of Flint and children in less-developed countries alike to gain access to clean water, with chlorine tablets and activated carbon filters available at a low cost. With a greater emphasis on providing cheaper alternatives to existing solutions on the market, scientific and technological advances are becoming more accessible to everyone. By benefitting those that are truly in need of help, technology is able to act as a leveller, reducing inequality on a global scale. Scientific or technological developments can be a solution to global problems since there is today a greater emphasis on making technology readily available at a low cost.

Furthermore, technology is capable of providing innovative solutions to emerging problems. The continual push for advancement in the field of research allows creative solutions to be proposed. Many problems that we face in this day and age are highly urgent and difficult to address, but technology allows us to expand our capabilities and better equip ourselves in coping with these newfound problems. The emerging problem of global warming and the excessive use of fossil fuels has created a pressing need for alternative energy sources. This has fueled rapid development in the field of clean energy, spawning innovative solutions such as solar energy and electric vehicles. The Solar Impulse is the world's first purely solar-powered plane that has circumnavigated the globe, while research by tech company Tesla has led to highly efficient electric batteries that can power anything from a car to an entire home. With the ever-shifting

international landscape and the emergence of new global problems everyday, technology allows mankind to tackle these problems in a flexible and dynamic manner. The rise of globalization has led to many global issues becoming both more complex and severe, such as the energy crisis in recent years. Scientific and technological developments allow us to tackle these changes despite their increasing complexity, utilizing mankind's innate strengths of creativity and innovation to overcome these problems.

Technological and scientific developments also enable greater cross-border cooperation, allowing mankind to truly come together and face global problems. The scale of global issues is simply too large for a single country to take on, and requires the input and support of every country. With different countries possessing expertise on different issues, as well as the necessary resources to tackle them, technology and science facilitates communication between them. The Internet connects governments across the world, allowing them to communicate with the click of a button and facilitating collaboration between them. Technological developments have heightened the ability of humanity to communicate, allowing us to unite in the face of pressing global issues. But beyond the realm of communication, the establishment of a global scientific community has allowed greater collaboration between scientists on an international scale. As such, recent advancements that may benefit other countries facing similar problems can be shared easily via mediums such as science journals and research conferences. Historically, collaboration between scientists of different nationalities has led to incredible breakthroughs and the solution to the world's most pressing issues, such as the development of nuclear weaponry under Project Manhattan, which ultimately put an end to World War II. Therefore, scientific and technological developments are able to bring humanity together in tackling global problems, ensuring that advances are shared on an international scale.

While I concede that a greater emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring greater accessibility of scientific and technological developments for less developed countries, science and technology will undoubtedly play a key role in addressing global problems. The dynamic and collaborative nature of science ensures that scientific developments can benefit everyone regardless of their nationality. By focusing on the needs of humanity and the problems that have to be addressed, scientific and technological developments can, without a doubt, be a solution to global problems.

Comments:

Zinn-E, this is a well-expressed essay that shows adept control of the language. I'd have liked a more in-depth examinations of the limitations of Science and Technology in solving global problems but overall, your essay convincingly supports your stand. Perspectives surfaced are sensible and paragraphs purposefully developed to present coherent arguments. Well done!

2018 | Y5 | GP Common Test　　　　　　**Andrew Lau Ka Keong | 19A01B**

"Traditional media has lost its place in today's society."
Discuss.

During the 2016 US Presidential elections, a Facebook post of Pope Francis endorsing candidate Donald Trump was circulated a million times, whereas concurrently, an investigative scoop by The New York Times on Trump's tax returns was only shared 200,000 times. The fact that The New York Times, quite possibly the world's most renowned traditional media outlet, garnered less traction than a mere Facebook post of fake news is startling – illuminating the sheer scale and reach of non-traditional media in today's society. There are those who would argue that traditional media still provides a much-needed platform for political debate, and remains an authoritative, legitimate source of information in contrast to the spread of fake news in fringe media outlets. However, it is ultimately clear that traditional media is no longer where it once was: the advent of non-traditional media outlets has precipitated a democratisation of information, garnered a wider reach, and made itself far more accessible to the average layman. It is for all these reasons that traditional media has lost its place in today's society.

Some would argue that in our polarised political climate, traditional media remains a much-needed platform for civil, constructive discourse. The rise of social media, citizen journalism and fringe news sites has undoubtedly created an extremely adversarial political culture. Non-traditional news sites such as Breitbart consistently peddle right-wing propaganda, and even social media, such as Facebook and Reddit, is filled with groups firmly on either side of the political spectrum. The sheer lack of moderation and oversight, and ease of access of such new media allows for the creation of echo chambers where people consistently reinforce one another's political beliefs and ideologies. And therefore this results in the dissemination of views and information that, even if technically factual, are heavily weighted with a partisan slant and refuse to engage with the opposing view. This is where traditional media comes in – establishment newspapers and television stations, with their editorial oversight and reputation

for objectivity, play an important role in facilitating civil political discourse. A recent example would have been the debate between former Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan, top diplomat Chan Heng Chee and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam on the issue of Singapore's foreign policy stance towards China, that played out in the Opinion section of The Straits Times. Yes, the debate was heated, but each side crucially was able to meaningfully engage with each other's views, helping to further discussion of Singapore's place amidst an uncertain geopolitical climate. Traditional media, as an establishment institution, not only has the legitimacy to engage these thoughts leaders to present their ideas, but more importantly provides a platform to publicise these views. This furthers political discourse, which is undoubtedly even more necessary in a time when new media seems to be encouraging people to retreat into their political 'bunkers', firing shots at one another but refusing to step out on the battlefield.

Aside from furthering political debate, traditional media outlets also present an authoritative, legitimate source of information. Traditional news media, crucially, has editorial oversight – this means that there is a certain amount of filtering being done, ensuring that the information it releases is up to par. Moreover, traditional news media such as CNN, BBC or even Channel News Asia in Singapore have a reputation of trustworthiness to upkeep – forcing them to always ensure that their content is largely credible and up to quality. In contrast, with the advent of newer, non-mainstream forms of media, fake news has become widespread, due to a lack of gatekeepers or fact-checkers to ensure accuracy. The sheer accessibility and ease of use of social media – you simply type a few words, press a button and your work is there for the world to see – has therefore created a rise in online falsehoods or blatantly biased information. The fact that many countries, such as Singapore, Malaysia and Germany have established fake news laws is a testament to this. What we therefore have is the traditional media serving as an essential counterweight to the new media, providing objective facts to the populace.

However, this need not always be the case – in fact, even traditional media has demonstrated a penchant for sensationalism. A survey of British television and documentary filmmakers found that 52% of them faced pressure to distort the truth to create a 'more sensational, exciting and entertaining' programme. Clearly, in the present-day society, the position of traditional media as a

legitimate source of information has also been somewhat undercut by its movement towards sensationalism[3].

Moreover, what is even more threatening to traditional media's place in society is the democratisation of news and content that new media presents. As mentioned previously, the sheer accessibility and ease of use of the new media means that anyone can produce content – this has placed power squarely in the hands of the people, and away from large establishment media organisations. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rise of citizen journalism. A few years ago, when Mohammad Bouazizi self-immolated in a market square in Tunisia, the video spread like wildfire amongst Arabic social media and citizen journalism sites. This was an instance whereby ordinary citizens were the first to report the news, and engage in commentary on it, all thanks to new media. And the power of citizen journalism has helped to usurp traditional news media's place in society. Furthermore, such a trend is not simply limited to the news sector. The rise of entertainment sites such as YouTube and Soundcloud has allowed individuals to create their own entertainment content and expanded entertainment from the confines of television and the airwaves. In fact, YouTube channels such as Pewdiepie have billions of views, and Soundcloud has precipitated the rise of wildly successful young hip-hop artists such as Lil Pump and Chance the Rapper. Today, entertainment artists no longer have to have an appearance on television or a song on the radio to become famous – new media allows them to do it from their bedroom. With the rise of new media we therefore see a diffusion of power from establishment news and entertainment outlets to the masses. When content is democratised and everyone can be a creator, the role of traditional media as a gatekeeper is largely diminished. No longer does our media have to be filtered through newspapers or television; we now get it directly from individuals all around the world. Hence, it is clear that traditional media has lost its position of authority in today's society.

Yet another reason for the fall of traditional media is the much greater accessibility of new media. One way in which this is manifested is in the sheer reach of new media. At the touch of a button, I can tell the entire world how I am feeling on Facebook. Such instant, global communication is not something that can be achieved by print and analog media. But more importantly, new media is much more convenient. I can view my social media applications, or watch a

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[3] Insightful point, but development is rather brief.

video on YouTube all on my phone, perhaps on my train ride home. However, reading the physical newspaper or watching television requires me to be at home. Moreover, the on-demand nature of new media further increases its level of convenience. Given our hectic lifestyles, we might not always be free to watch that new show on Channel 5 at 9pm every night. New media outlets such as Netflix solve this by allowing us to view the media content on an on-demand basis, as and when we have pockets of spare time. As the common phrase goes, new media allows you to view content "wherever you are, whenever you are", as opposed to the technological limitations of traditional media. Additionally, new media is more tailored to the average layman. In today's society, attention spans are increasingly getting shorter. The man on the street might have no time to read a long news article or opinion piece, or to watch an hour-long documentary. He wants snappy headlines, brief summaries, and short, 3-minute videos. The issue is therefore that traditional media such as newspapers and television do not provide this; new media such as news apps or YouTube are better able to provide the bite-sized content tailored to our brief attention spans. As a result of the reach, convenience and attractiveness of new media, it has become much more accessible than traditional media. It is no wonder then, that many are spending much less time on newspapers and television, and the average teenager in Singapore spends 2 hours a day on average on their phones. With this loss in viewership, the traditional media has thus lost its position of influence in society.

In conclusion, the presence of gatekeepers in traditional media that make it a better platform for furthering civil discourse, and a more authoritative source of information – yet it is precisely the lack of gatekeepers in the new media that has allowed it to usurp traditional media in terms of authority, influence and reach in today's society. Traditional media has lost its place in society, and with each successive generation, it will only continue to plummet as new media continues its meteoric rise. Nevertheless, all is not lost for traditional media. In fact, one way in which traditional media outlets can regain their foothold in society is by making use of new media. Newspapers such as The New York Times and The Guardian have their own apps, and broadcast media companies such as Mediacorp allow audiences to view their content on-demand, on streaming platforms like Toggle. In fact, more than half of The New York Times' readership views the newspaper on its app! In order for establishment media to catch up, it needs to capitalise on the opportunities that new media presents. Regardless, even as these traditional corporations find new ways in which to

adapt, it is clear that they will ultimately leave traditional platforms like print media and television behind.

Comments:

Content: A thoughtful highly relevant response that shows sustained clarity of discussion. Ideas are developed in some depth and largely backed up with apt and effectively used illustration. Maturity of thought demonstrated.

Language: Controlled and effective. Very competent. Very clear structure and overall organisation. Range in vocabulary and sentence structure.

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2018 | Y5 | GP Common Test　　　　　　**Lynette Teo Xuan Hui | 19A13A**
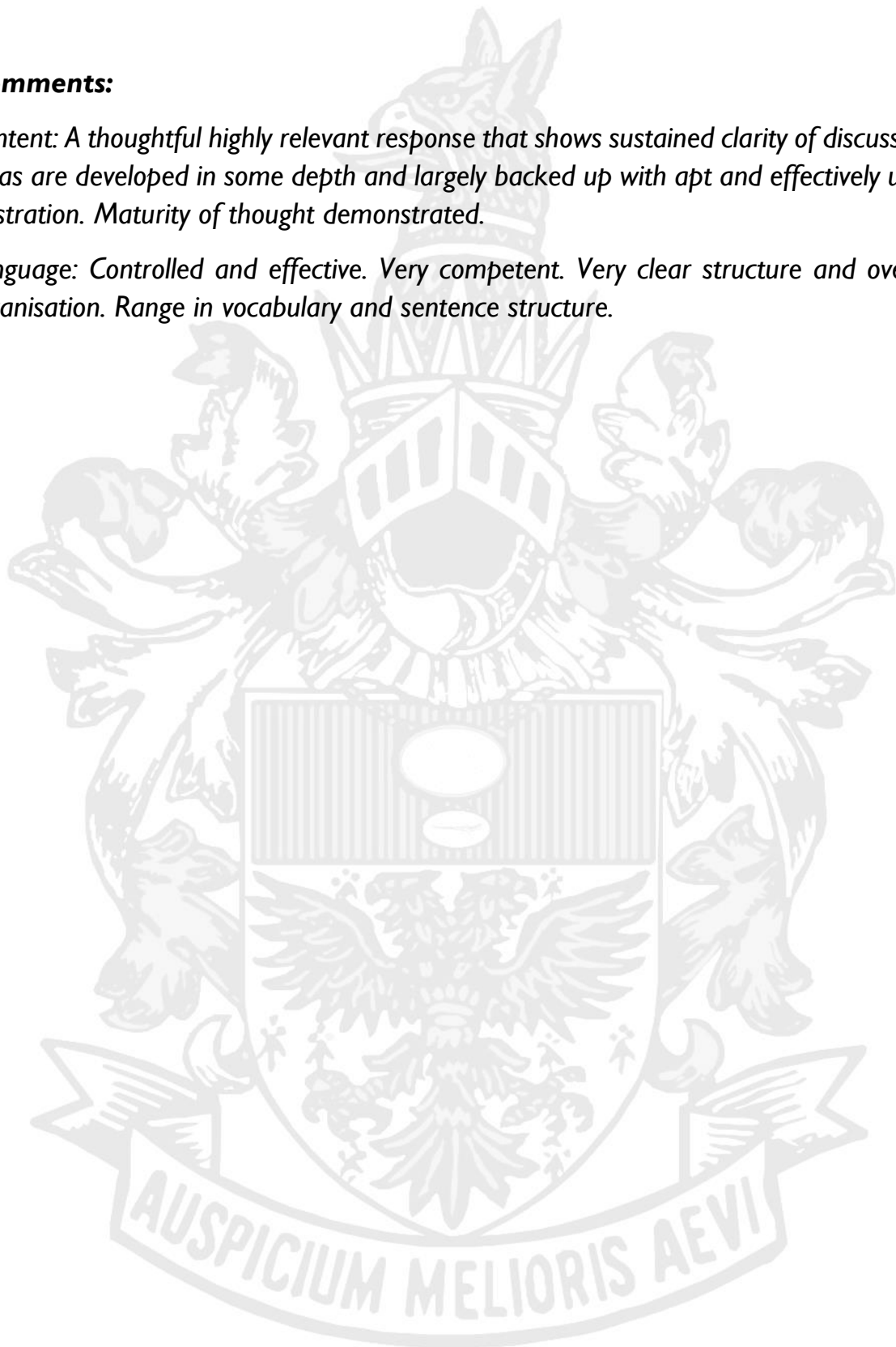
"A country should take care of its own interests before others.' What is your view?

With the advent of globalisation, our world has become increasingly interconnected. Even as the chasm between the developing and developed world continues to widen, one cannot deny that the socioeconomic interests of all countries are inextricably intertwined. This hence gives rise to the question of whether countries, notably those with greater resource and financial capacity, should solely prioritise its own interests over other, needier countries. While some may believe that a country's own political, security and economic interests should be its utmost concern in the allocation of scarce resources, I am of the opinion that while a country should preserve its interests to a certain extent, the world we live in today necessitates a shift away from such isolationist behaviour to one that facilitates the sharing of resources between countries, such that the interests of all parties can be served.

Those who contend that a country should take care of its own interests before others would posit that a government's responsibility is first and foremost to its own people. It must hence ensure the needs of its own people are met before allocating resources to foreign aid. If the government were to concentrate a perceivably excessive amount of resources to fuel development, eradicate poverty or aid disaster recovery in countries far away from home while the domestic situation appears bleak, the prioritisation of other countries resources over self would inevitably incite political discontent. In 2017, the Daily Express called for a petition against the British government to cut down on foreign aid spending in light of the National Health Service (NHS) financial struggles back home. Faced with the coldest winter in decades and a teetering social system due to an ageing population, the NHS' resources were stretched thin. Meanwhile, the British government continued to channel substantial amounts to foreign aid, amounting to $1 in $7 of the average taxpayers' annual income. Needless to say, in such situations, a country's people may view a government's hefty investment in other countries as negligence towards the need of its own people and a breach

of the social contract. Governments, desiring to remain in power, would hence have to bear in mind not to compromise its country's self-interests in favour of that of other countries.

However, detractors fail to acknowledge that in the increasingly globalised world we live in today, aid is not unilateral but bilateral. It does not only serve the interests of recipient countries but can bring about security, political and economic benefits for donor countries as well. Perhaps the most apt example would be that of the United States and South Korea. In the aftermath of the Korean War, the US pumped approximately $34 billion into the ravaged South Korean economy, clearly acting not solely out of self-interest. Today, South Korea's economic miracle can be seen as a diplomatic triumph for the US as South Korea has become one of the superpower's key allies in the Asia-Pacific – economically, it is the tenth largest exporter of US goods and strategically, a bulwark of security in the region. The transformation of the relationship between both countries from one of recipient-donor to equally matched trading partners is testament to the fact that not solely focusing on self-interest in the short run may instead reap greater benefits in the long term. The extension of foreign aid is not solely limited to the transfer of capital goods or services but also an act of solidarity, hence fostering strong diplomatic relationships that are long-lasting. Therefore, a country should not assume the narrow perspective that it must always take care of its own interests before others, as the provision of today's aid could translate into tangible benefits in the future.

Not only so, it is imperative to note that an isolationist approach is simply impractical in today's world. It is no longer possible for developed countries to be insulated from the socioeconomic challenges of the developing world as issues such as poverty, civil unrest and contagious diseases are no longer confined solely to developing countries but can manifest in very real threats to its developed counterparts as well. Hence, acting solely in self-interest is completely inadequate in securing national stability and security. One may look to the US' continued involvement in Afghanistan as evidence of not only acting in the interests of a war-torn country, but also to serve its strategic interests. Surely, the sheer number of lives lost in sustained battle in Afghanistan and the substantial resources poured into the cause seemingly act against the US' own interests. Yet, simultaneously, the country is a hotbed for terrorism and the US may have considered the dire impact to its national security should it decide to terminate its aid. Perhaps acting in the long-term interests of its people and

military personnel, it has then continued its aggressive counter against terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The aforementioned proves that governments must recognised that countries are not immune to seemingly foreign issues in other parts of the world and hence they must also consider the interests of other countries before self.

Of course, the need for countries to act in the interests of others through measures such as foreign aid cannot be viewed solely through the lenses of a cost-benefit analysis. Surely, another compelling reason for countries to extend foreign aid is the moral imperative involved. Developed countries, having enjoyed years of financial prosperity and whose affluent population continuously strives to increase their quality of life with unnecessarily luxurious products, are undeniably morally obligated to serve the needs of their impoverished counterparts. Key to this argument is the ambiguous definition of "interests". Surely, the interests of a metropolitan city like Singapore -- perhaps to increase GDP or construct more MRT lines – would vastly differ from a developing one like Kenya, where a substantial amount of the population lack food security and the most basic of needs. A country's interests are infinite and insatiable – As the population grows more affluent, their demands similarly increase in quality and quantity. And so if a country is to be constantly preoccupied with satisfying its own interests, when will it ever find the opportune time to look to the interests of others? Hence, I believe that foreign aid must also stem in part from a genuine humanitarian effort in forgoing some degree of costs incurred from prioritizing another country's interests before self. Granted, taxpayers' money could be spent on yet another piece of consumer junk or to boost national income a little more. Yet, one must also recognise that this same money could be used to save innocent lives. In 2010, foreign aid donated to the World Health Organization amounted to $27 per person annually in developing countries. While this may seem like a meagre amount to us, it can save lives from outbreaks such as malaria, AIDS or tuberculosis. In fact, the increase in foreign aid correlated with a sharp fall in childhood deaths from 12 million to 7.4 million in 2010. Hence, even if we were to discount the practical benefits of foreign aid, it remains that countries, comprising global citizens with a moral responsibility to our fellow Man around the world, should not only take care of its own interests but prioritise that of others when necessary.

Granted, some may contend that a government taking care of others' interests before self is an act of negligence or that foreign aid is ineffective in solving

problems both domestically and abroad. Yet, countries as central players on the global stage represent the stance we as humanity are to take against unfair oppression, disease and disaster around the world. Thus, countries must not always prioritise its own interests over others. Only then can all countries progress along the development continuum, and only then can we as global citizens resolutely say we have been morally accountable to the more pressing needs of our suffering counterparts.

Comments:

Wide-ranging arguments, fully engaged with the question. Examples enhance main points. Mature discussion. Insightful arguments throughout the essay showing flashes of originality. Use of language is idiomatic, excellent; varied sentence structures and wide-ranging vocabulary evident. Evidence of personal voice.
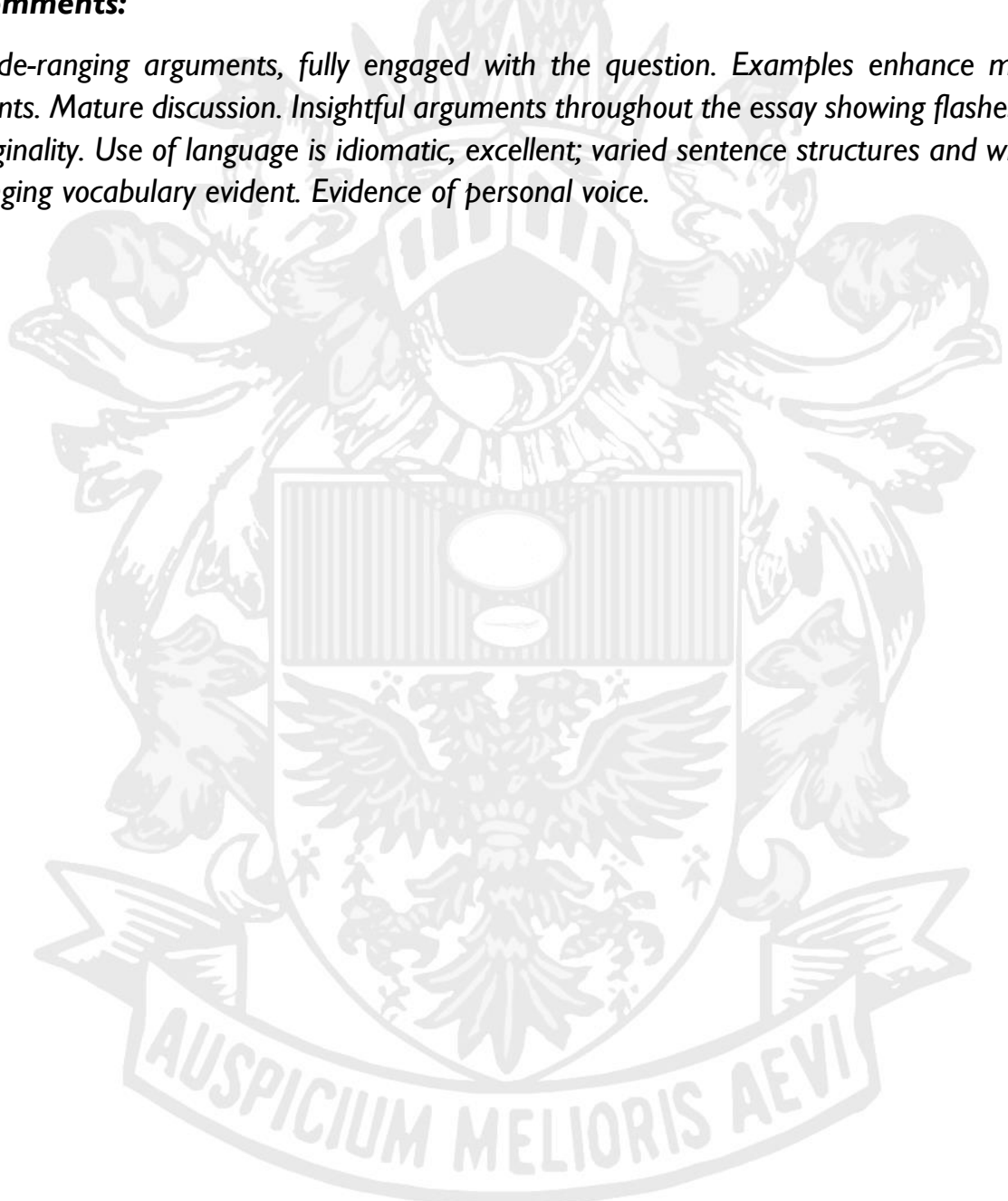
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