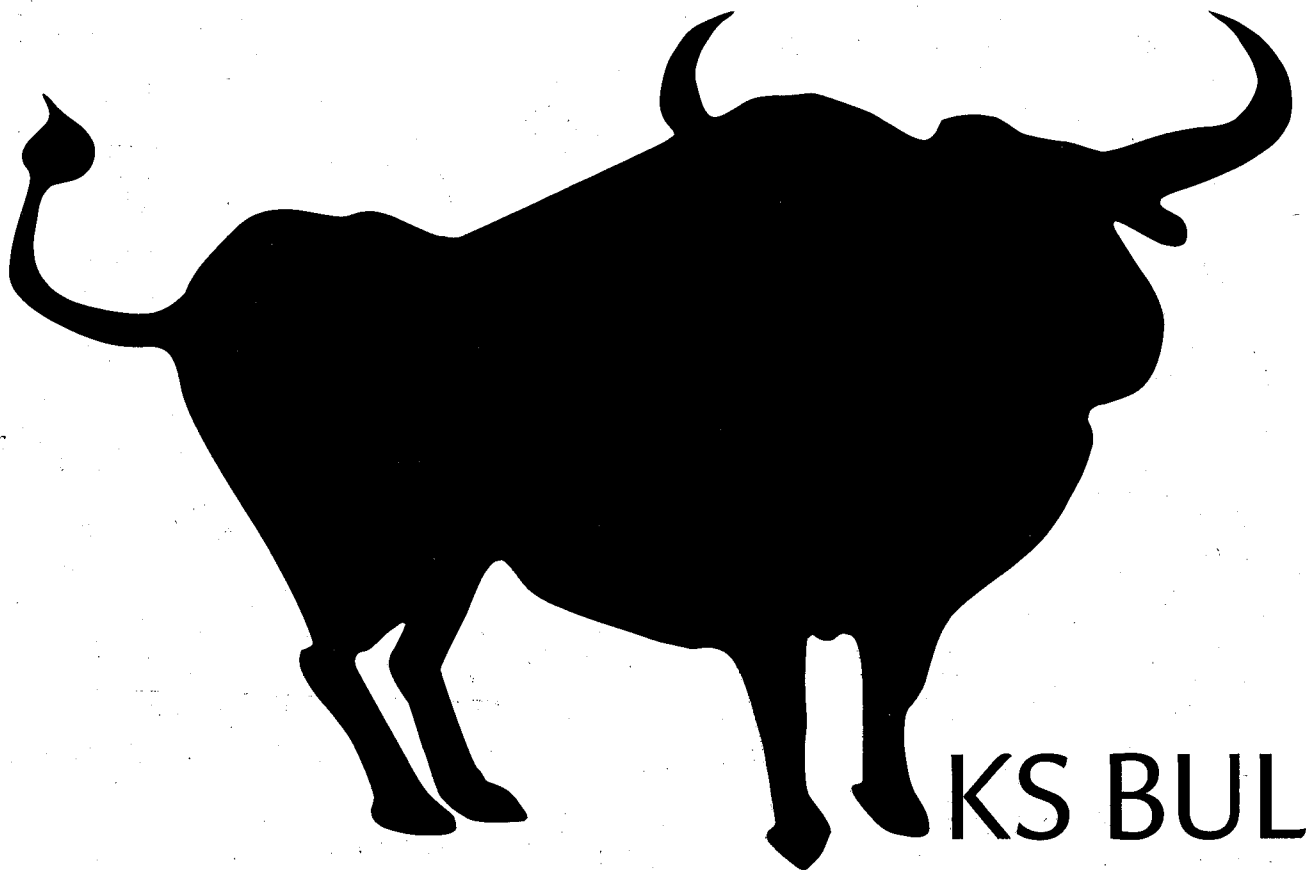


Raffles Institution  
(Year 5-6)  
Knowledge Skills Department



**KS BULL**  
Issue Two  
**2012**

# ksbull

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Issue Two 2012

# Message from the Principal

If you want to learn the *ying* and *yang* of the art of persuasion, do watch the video or read the text of Michelle Obama and Bill Clinton's speeches at the Democratic National Convention. The Clinton speech, touted as having hit a home run for Obama, was powerful in its use of rhetoric, bold statements, repetitive phrases and balanced sentences:

*I want to nominate a man whose own life has known its fair share of adversity and uncertainty. A man who ran for President to change the course of an already weak economy and then just six weeks before the election, saw it suffer the biggest collapse since the Great Depression. A man who stopped the slide into depression and put us on the long road to recovery, knowing all the while that nomatter how many jobs were created and saved, there were still millions more waiting, trying to feed their children and keep their hopes alive.*

Clinton's approach was methodical and factual, with a lot of statistics to illustrate change and positive growth, as well as to contrast the performances of the Democrats versus the Republicans. It was a speech befitting a former statesman who knew his facts and what the game was about. It was tough as *yang* can be, touching on the complexities of the huge state machinery and the mechanisms of government.

Michelle Obama's speech was feminine to the core. Her stories tugged at the heartstrings, painting the picture of the President as a father, son and husband; identifying his values as those of average middle class Americans who believe in working hard to ensure a future for their children. This was the story she told of her father:

*My father was a pump operator at the city water plant, and he was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when my brother and I were young. But despite these challenges, my dad hardly ever missed a day of work...he and my mom were determined to give me and my brother the kind of education they could only dream of. And when my brother and I finally made it to college, nearly all of our tuition came from student loans and grants. But my dad still had to pay a tiny portion of that tuition himself. And every semester, he was determined to pay that bill right on time, even taking out loans when he fell short. He was so proud to be sending his kids to college...and he made sure we never missed a registration deadline because his check was late.*

Her speech made many tear and purportedly racked up 28,000 tweets per minute.

As you read the essays in this bulletin, do look out for what arguments you find persuasive and the techniques that worked for you. These could be hard facts, powerful examples or simply heartwarming stories to bring home a point.

Happy reading.



Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)  
Principal

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# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

essay 1

'Religion has only resulted in divided societies'. What is your view?

Boh Ze Ka 13A01E

"Men will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest." This famous remark made in the heyday of the French Revolution clearly highlights the view held by many across the world – religion inevitably leads to a fragmented society. Since our primitive predecessors could fathom the notion of the divine, they have created social groups centred on the adoration and adulation of their gods, which have, on many occasions, prevented societal cohesion, a complex dynamic interplay between social, political and economic factors. However, the divisions created by religion within the macrocosm of society need not necessarily be pernicious, nor do they necessarily fragment society; instead they could even help to usher in a greater state of social, political and economic cohesion.

Undeniably, religion has created rifts in societies that have led to violence and bloodshed. This is primarily due to the hostile interaction between faiths bearing irreconcilable differences, precipitating a state of conflict whereby each faction attempts to unseat the other. This divide is potentially fatal, creating deeply divided societies. In Northern Ireland, for instance, hostile religious sentiments brewing between Catholics and Protestants have erupted into a period of death, murder and rancour. This arose primarily due to scriptural differences between two extremely related faiths, precipitating a multi-century long feud, which culminated on Bloody Sunday with the massacre of many Protestants. However, it is worth noting that Ireland today stands relatively united, boasting generally amiable inter-faith relations. While not an entirely extenuating circumstance, it does proffer insight into the necessity of a perpetual conflict, of which there is none here. Nevertheless, religion can and has led to deeply fragmented societies across the globe which has precipitated conflicts by virtue of their schismatic differences.

Also, religion has balkanised some societies by creating political disenfranchisement and emasculation. Throughout history, regions with religious majorities have often been ruled by religious minorities, preventing large swathes of the populace access to representation. This creates deep-seated political divides, which further drive a wedge between religious factions, leading to conflict and instability. In the Ottoman Empire, for example, Muslim Turks had repressively ruled majority groups of Orthodox Christians from Yerevan to Athens for centuries. While this by itself led to conflict on occasion, it more importantly prevented fair representation and political emancipation, leading to the birth of secessionist and self-deterministic insurgents across the Empire. In Syria today, an Alawi minority rules a Sunni majority, preventing the Sunnis access to religious freedom of expression and provision of needs, eventually causing the present-day Syrian conflict. Evidently, political repression on religious grounds has been a bone of contention throughout the times, resulting from a fragmented society which produces this almost sepulchral turn of events.

Yet, efficiently managed, religious divide need not cause societal divide, and can even allow a greater state of political stability. In regions of great religious diversity, it is often in the interest of all groups to agree to fair representation and compromise. This allows emancipation of all groups and an opportunity for political cohesion without threat of repression. In Lebanon, this is most pronounced in the unique form of confessionalism practised whereby the President is always a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni and the Head of Military a Druze. While Lebanon has faced sectarian conflicts, its political structure has undoubtedly remained secure, and their religious watchdogs in the government have vehemently safeguarded the rights of its diverse population. Not stymied by negotiations for their religious political representation, Lebanon still needs to work on its social cohesion, yet it has successfully adduced how religion may fragment society without detrimenting it politically.

Furthermore, some societies have managed to prevent religion from becoming a source of contention by offering rigorous concessions, instead creating greater social cohesion and in fact, peace and security. By accepting all religions in a steadfastly secular manner, yet affording religious liberties; one is able to ensure that religious factionalism does not translate into social division. This is especially evident in the heyday of the Mongol Empire, the largest empire ever known to man, stretching from the South China Seas to the Baltic Seas. While its rule followed a form of animism known as Tengri, the Muslim, Buddhist and Christian denominations were not repressed, affording them a sense of autonomy within a greater, cohesive Mongol society where viziers of different faiths congregated to run the state. As famously remarked by the Venetian explorer Marco Polo, "One could travel from Veneto to Cathay without fear of death or injury", it is indeed a remarkable statement in an era characterised by slaughter and wanton violence. This great peace and security, affectionately termed Pax Mongolite, demonstrates the manner by which its eponymous namesake was able to galvanise society despite religious differences through concession and tolerance.

Also, religion can serve as a unifying factor in its own right, societies which have been hostile or competitive can be brought together towards greater regional co-operation due to extenuating religious factors which allow these countries to put aside their differences in pursuit of a common goal. Sharing the same religion also helps to build a macro-society where cultural norms and etiquette are congruent, expediting processes, and especially driving economic cohesion. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for example, was formed from a collection of countries around or in the Persian Gulf. These countries, historically collections of warring tribes, have provided one of the most stable and most productive economic cooperatives in the world by virtue of their ubiquitous Muslim faith. Not only does this provide grounds for amicable relationships, they also ensure that the unique economic etiquette can be adhered to. This is spectacularly evident in the case of Bahrain, the centre of Islamic banking in the region. This is spectacular because Islamic financing follows a strict fiqh of Sharia law, under which muftis and scholars are able to achieve financial provision for the entire region and its society. More spectacular is the fact that Bahrain is a Shiite majority nation while all the other GCC states are Sunnis. This goes to show how religion can unite a macro-society towards greater economic cohesion, even overlooking schismatic relationships.

Moreover, to blame religion for societal division is myopic. Societal division results from a complex blend of factors, notwithstanding religion, it may be seen that religion could play two contributory roles without being the main factor for a divided society.

Societies that appear to be divided on religious grounds could actually be divided on ethnic grounds. This arises due to the fact that religious motivations are often seen as nobler than purely ethnic ones, and also that cultural factors often cause religion and ethnicity to become inextricable. In Chechnya for example, ethnic Chechen Muslims are opposed to ethnic Russian rule. While the Chechen Front uses an Islamic agenda to further its interest, the region is actually not staunch Muslim, instead practising some amalgamation of many religions. Thus, the divide is primarily ethnic. As such, even where religion does cause divided societies, it is often necessary to establish its wholesale relevance to the issue, considering also ethnic reasons.

Societies may also use religion as a front for political and economic factors that divide society. Often, religious groups dominate economic or political spheres, creating disenfranchisement not by virtue of religion but due to economic and social prowess. In Weimar Germany, for instance, the Jewish populace was vastly influential in financial and gubernatorial spheres, with the influential Rothschild family owning incredible tracts of the economy across Europe. This precipitated a nationwide hatred for the Jewish population; while taking on a religious stance, was actually rooted in economic and political considerations. As such, religion may not necessarily contribute to a divided society even when it appears to, and the two may arise and exist independently.

In conclusion, religion has led to divided societies, but not all the time. Furthermore, it is often necessary to examine if religion is truly the main cause to these divided societies, or if societal



divisions are necessarily evil. Fundamentally, religion need not be anathema to a cohesive society, and can even bring about great benefits. Properly managed, religion need not detriment social, political and economic spheres. To do so would require governments and populace to be more accepting and understanding. To this day, a preponderance of conflicts are fought on religious grounds with societies being wrenched apart and subject to cruelty; however, in an age of growing interconnectedness, I believe societal divisions and religious sectarianism may soon be a thing of the past and the auguries ring sanguine.

***Marker's comments:***

***Maturely argued; well substantiated.***



# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

## essay 2

'People who are in poverty have only themselves to blame.' Comment.

Koay Yi Ping Stephanie 13A01C

Every three seconds, a child dies of poverty. In today's world, approximately a third of the global population lives under the poverty line (USD1-2). 5% of the world's income is split over 95% of the world's population. With such alarming statistics confronting us today, it is evident that poverty is one of the scourges of humankind; indeed, it has always persistently plagued us since time immemorial. To argue that the poor 'have only themselves to blame' for their current plight connotes that they have control over their financial situation, and thus, should bear full responsibility for it. However, more often than not, the poor are trapped in the vicious poverty cycle not by their own hand, but by an unfortunate panoply of social, political and economic problems over which they have no influence.

Detractors may assert that, especially in our meritocratic society, 'no one owes us a living'. After all, has not this main tenet of Singapore served us well? Singapore has leapfrogged from a third-world nation to a first-world one in barely half a century, all on the basis of sheer grit and hard work. Opponents propose persistent effort to be the panacea for poverty, citing numerous rags-to-riches success stories, such as Steve Jobs, to buttress their point. With numerous financial aid programmes such as Workfare and the advent of small loans from microfinance companies in India, they argue that the poor surely have had opportunities to break out from the poverty cycle.

However, while it is indeed convenient to assume that the poor have bypassed these numerous opportunities simply because of sloth, it must be noted that these opportunities are often few and far between. While the poor in first-world countries and other welfare states may enjoy some amount of financial aid, this is sadly lacking in many other countries with a burgeoning poor population. For instance, nations in Sub-Saharan Africa lack basic infrastructure, let alone welfare policies. This further illustrates the poor's dependency on external financial aid, which necessarily requires the work of both local and foreign governments. Thus, most people in poverty have no control over whether they have access to such grants and aid, rendering any amount of determination on their part immaterial.

One of the major causes of poverty would be a corrupt government, or one so firmly swaddled in red tape that it would be impossible for the poor to take active steps to reverse their current situation. In the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami that struck Southeast Asia, a significant amount of food and monetary aid did not reach its intended beneficiaries, but was tucked away in the pockets of greedy officials. In other disaster-stricken countries, military junta stole donated supplies and sold them to disaster victims on the black market at exorbitant prices, leaving any excess unsold food to rot. In such cases, the needy are at the mercy of a larger external force at work, which tragically does not deliver on promises. To blame the poor in this case would be grossly unjustified, given their helplessness at the hands of an unfeeling establishment.

The poor's efforts to work their way up the social ladder are also severely hampered, even rendered useless by a conspicuous lack of access to education, which is caused by a slew of social problems over which they have no power to change. For instance, numerous countries in the Middle East, such as Oman and Yemen, hold on to strict patriarchal values that subjugate women in their society. Girls who have hit puberty are denied education due to religious traditions that demand the segregation of the sexes. The poor who have no political influence are at the mercy of radical religious groups that use violence to ensure compliance. Their inability to revolt against the unjust conditions they have been born into has resulted in less than half of the female population in Egypt being literate, and an even lower rate of employment. Many poor children, when interviewed by newscasters, profess a thirst for education. However, their inability to control their own fate, which lies in the hands of religious fanatics or backward value systems, renders any efforts useless. Clearly, this lack of ability to change their situation absolves them of any blame for their financial situation.

Furthermore, the fate of the poor is often bandied about not just by their own ruling government, but also by international powers. Economic superpowers such as the US wield vast amounts of influence over poorer nations and their people by virtue of their wealth – which the poor clearly do not possess. Such powers are oft motivated by their own self-interest, such as in cases of enacting protectionist economic measures or trade barriers that poorer nations – and their people – are too powerless to protest against. Food dumping by the US on poor African nations exemplifies this to a fault, cutting off their ability to trade and earn their own revenue. People who are in poverty are powerless under their already corrupt governments – what more on a global stage? It would be myopic to claim that these people have full and undivided responsibility for the level of poverty they have sunk into, given the inexorable forces that have caused their misery.

In conclusion, it would not be inaccurate to state that poverty is more of a birthright rather than the result of one's own inadequacies; more often than not, the conditions that result in poverty are the consequence of a series of causes and effects in a big picture that the poor have no share in. Rather than quibbling about who takes the lion's share of blame, we should focus on our own part, as global citizens, to eradicate poverty.

**Marker's comments:**

***Your confident command of the language made this a delight to read. Your arguments are cogent, well-substantiated and show global awareness. You may want to consider other arguments about how the poor may be partly responsible for their poverty - especially if the poverty were due to lifestyle habits or addictions like gambling, spending beyond their means, over-reliance on handouts, etc. - in order to achieve greater balance.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

essay 3

Should scientific research be largely driven by commercial interests?

Lim Jie Rui Gerald - 13S06O

In the fiction series 'Resident Evil', the multi-billionaire biomedical research firm Umbrella Corporation was odiously depicted as a monstrous, purely profit-driven research giant without an iota of regard for humanity. The twisted experiments carried out on all things living stemmed from research into the T-virus, resulting in an armada of zombies that decimated an entire city. Although such heinous over-stepping of ethical boundaries in the name of science – for money, of course – has not reached such exaggerated levels today, the issue of profit-driven research has plagued citizens, governments and scientists alike. I strongly believe that scientific research should not be largely profit driven today, as it represents an unhealthy deviation from the original noble ideals of Science, and could result in detriments to society at large.

Firstly, Science is meant to benefit mankind, and the ultimate aim of research should be to create higher standards of living and quality of life for all, especially the poor who need it the most. Yet new products born from breakthrough in Science that have been vaunted as 'revolutionary' and 'extraordinary' often have this nasty habit of being unspeakably expensive. The poor who often need help the most are swamped by exorbitant costs from a plethora of patents and research costs that fill the pockets of the already rich research giants. Much of such profit-driven research aimed to alleviate the sufferings of the poor only serve to widen the rich-poor divide. A salient example of this would be the advent of genetically modified (GM) crops in what is dubbed the 'Green Revolution'. GM seeds for a cornucopia of superior crops such as frost-resistant tomatoes, pest-resistant lettuce and vitamin-rich Golden Rice have been hailed as revolutionary breakthrough that would catapult the poor from rags to riches. Yet the technology involved remains too costly for the poor who cannot enjoy the benefits brought about by GM as a result of patents from profit-driven company Monsanto. To make matters worse, Monsanto cunningly creates seed that produce infertile parents, so that at the end of the season the farmers must purchase more seeds from them. Another drug Truvada was very recently touted as the drug that would most likely turn the tide on the epidemic caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In the US, this drug costs a whopping USD900 a month. Patients without means can least afford to buy such expensive medication. In both cases, only the rich benefit and the poor do not, a corollary to the widening gap between the rich and the poor. Evidently, scientific research in such a profit-driven manner has failed to meet the aims of Science.

Furthermore, Science driven by commercial interests often leads to unethical and morally suspect outcomes. In the blind pursuit for fame and fortune, researchers may resort to academic dishonesty. Hwang Woo Suk, a South Korean scientist, was hailed as a super scientist by the world and awarded millions of dollars in grants for his supposed work on stem cell research, which were eventually found to be based on fabricated experiments. Such lack of integrity and ethics are born out of a fervent desire for riches and accolades. The profit-driven nature of research would result in many scientists treating research as a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Moreover, profit-driven research has the potential to directly harm humans. To lower costs of research and maximise profits, scientists have been known to cross moral boundaries, such as unconsented or coerced human experimentation to save funds on paying subjects to cooperate. The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment in Alabama is one such example. Blacks were unsuspectingly injected with the Syphilis virus for scientists to study its effects on the human body, all the while believing they were receiving free healthcare. During the Holocaust, the Angel of Death, Dr Josef Mengele went much further to conduct vivisections and other experiments on Jewish twins and pregnant women, killing most of them. But the most horrific and morally abhorrent experimentations were carried out by Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army during World War II. Prisoners of war were treated as free human subjects and subjected to extreme torture for scientists to study the effect of hypothermia, botulism, venereal diseases and a whole host of evils on the human body. Although the last two



examples had elements of hatred and vengeance in them, it is probable that profit-led scientists could carry out such abominable research.

Unfortunately, money makes the world go round. It is the sad truth of life that researchers and firms must have monetary incentives to carry out research and development. After all, scientists are humans who must eat, and are subject to human desires for grandeur and luxury. Research giants like GlaxoSmithKline are businesses and have to answer to their shareholders at the end of the day. Thus, critics would say that research firms should be profit-driven or no results would be produced. Nevertheless, scientists have a responsibility towards the people and it would be naïve to claim that money and business sense can excuse firms from conducting harmful research or set unattainable prices.

In conclusion, money cheapens the pursuit of science, which should be a noble journey to explore the myriads of wonders of our world. Biologist Edward Jenner had a heart of gold. His research into vaccines was driven by passion and curiosity, leading to the discovery of preventive inoculation against smallpox using cowpox, which saved thousands of lives. Despite the ground-breaking discovery, Jenner refused to file a patent, stating that patents and profits would prevent those who needed his invention from gaining access to it. Hence I believe that research should be driven by passion and interest, as well as the needs of humanity today.



# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

## essay 4

Should scientific research be largely driven by commercial interests?

Wong Li Hong : 13A01C

Since the time of Thomas Edison and the invention of the light bulb, millions of steps have been taken in the field of scientific research. From the cell-phones we tuck away in our pockets to the liquid seeping into our vessels through the doctor's syringe, we owe most of the things in our environment to the advances made in scientific research. Though there have been constant innovation and discovery throughout the years, the motivation for such discovery and research has changed incredibly over the decades. Research today, unlike the situation in the 18th century, is carried out largely with a commercial agenda. Firms and laboratories are filled with researchers and scientists searching for the latest breakthrough to give their employers an edge over competitors in the market. Thus the concern has arisen: should scientific research be conducted for commercial interests? While some may argue that scientific research driven by commercial interests may, in certain cases, result in the exploitation of the underprivileged, commercial interests provide firms and organisations the incentive to create the most competitive and relevant products and therefore it is right for scientific research to be driven by commercial interests.

Some may argue that when scientific research is driven largely by commercial interests, firms may seek to utilise every opportunity to cut costs and exploit the poor. This is certainly a prevalent issue. Monsanto, a multinational giant in the agriculture industry, is guilty of such crimes. Monsanto discovered a genetic modification for crops which made it impossible to plant a second generation of the same crop by using the seeds of the first generation. By selling such genetically modified seeds to farmers in rural areas, Monsanto created a complete dependency of farmers on the giant firm. Farmers had to consistently purchase seeds from Monsanto at ridiculous prices in order to ensure the continuity of their harvest. This is a perfect example of how a firm, through seeking to maximise its commercial benefits, has conducted research resulting in the exploitation and even suppression of the lower-income groups. Commercial interests, some argue, give firms and organisations increased incentive to cut costs and corners, and find new ways to exploit the vulnerable. When Nike developed new machinery that required almost no skill to operate, its factories in Pakistan started using child labour to cut production costs and wages. In our increasingly competitive markets, commercial interests have indeed spurred firms and organisations on to research and develop new ways to maximise profit, resulting in the unjust treatment of the poor.

However, it would be foolish to overlook the benefits that firms and researchers driven by commercial agendas have brought to less privileged communities, simply because of a few selfish individuals. Where commercial interests are at the heart of the affair, scientific research by firms has brought about great changes to lives in developing countries around the world. The Mexican government, for instance, hires local firms to develop affordable technology that farmers in rural areas can purchase and utilise to increase their efficiency, and consequently, income. The government can provide monetary incentives for firms to develop technology to address the needs of the lower-income communities, and this results in a concerted effort to find ways to improve the lives of people. Also, in 2010, a tablet-maker in India invented a new tablet device that could be produced at nothing more than USD33, remodelled into the Joo Joo tablet. This enabled poorer families and consumers in India to enjoy and make use of more advanced technology usually made available only to the higher-income market. Commercial interests, as seen, can also spur producers to develop and research new areas that consequently result in the improvement of lives for the poorer communities. Therefore, commercial interests should be the core motivation for scientific research because in many cases it provides incentives to improve the lives of people where it is needed.

Furthermore, where the middle and higher income segments of society are brought into focus, commercial interests provide incentives for firms and organisations to continue researching ceaselessly to develop the most competitive and appealing products. End users benefit from having

an entire selection of the latest cutting edge devices from which to take their pick. Take for instance the smartphone market; easily one of the most competitive consumer markets in the modern economy. Smartphone producers such as Apple and Samsung compete ferociously to gain the upper hand in terms of market share. While these companies bare their fangs at each other, conducting technological and scientific research to create the world's most powerful and feature-packed smartphones and tablets, end users are sitting by the side rubbing their hands in glee. The result of such commercial incentives is an extremely competitive market that spouts a new product every three weeks – much to the consumers' delight. The sports apparel industry is another relevant example. Nike, Adidas, Puma, Li-Ning, and thousands of others want a slice of the tantalising pie we know as the sports apparel market. This gives such firms reason to expend large portions of their resources to develop the most compelling and competitive products. In the third quarter of 2011, Nike reported USD84 million spent on research and development alone. This enormous sum of money has indeed paid dividends – the Nike 'Lunelite' series and Nike 'Plus' gadgets are testament to this fact. When Adidas countered Nike's strategy by implementing research schemes of its own, it developed the new 'Adizero' series and 'miCoach' gizmos to keep its foothold in the market. The result of such a dogfight was, is, and will continue to be nothing but joy and ecstasy for consumers and purchasers. Commercial interests spurring scientific research does, indeed, help create the most competitive products.

In addition, by setting commercial interests as the main incentive for parties to conduct their scientific research, firms and organisations have all the more reason to develop products which are relevant and which address the most pressing needs of society. The medical industry is an excellent example of this. Millions of dollars have been poured into scientific research by hospitals and medical firms in their quest for more effective treatment solutions for cancer patients. Where maximising profit is the end goal, such firms, being enticed by the enormous and lucrative markets, are motivated to develop the killer product that will address the most pressing needs of the community – and their balance sheets. Medical firms around the world are in an endless race to develop affordable vaccines for all sorts of diseases, in a bid to line their pockets. Such competition significantly speeds up the research process, and the result is a quick addressing of the most urgent problems faced by society. If commercial interests were to be pulled out of the picture, medical firms and private hospitals could dawdle and take their time in addressing the most critical and prevalent needs – hardly an entertaining or comforting thought. To put it simply, when commercial interests are the main drivers of scientific research, problems are solved, fast.

All in all, balancing the debate on the main motivations behind scientific research is certainly not an easy task. Thanks to the nature of humans, issues do arise when commercial interests cloud the minds and conscience of large firms, who have no qualms about exploiting the poor to maximise their own profits. However, we should definitely not be as myopic as to disregard how these very same interests can incentivise companies to create change for the needy. Finally, we should take into account how it is to the credit of such commercial interests that firms are developing products which are not only attractive and competitive, but also relevant and useful. Therefore, when we take a step back to look at the larger picture, the commercial interests behind scientific research have indeed brought our society more benefit and advancement than harm, and scientific research should thus be largely driven by commercial interests.

#### **Marker's comments:**

***This is a fluent, coherent and well-substantiated piece with a clear focus on the question. You may also want to consider other important arguments on the dangers of conducting research largely driven by commercial interests e.g. the falsification of research findings, which could be hazardous to public health, and so on. Give greater balance to your arguments by thinking about how such dangers could then be reduced.***



# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

essay 5

'The pursuit of gender equality will do more harm than good.' Discuss.

Teo Zhi Yao Samuel | 13S03F

The parenting classes were originally termed "Mommy and Baby". Then, men started attending, their infants in tow. Males attending the parenting classes became so widespread, that this prompted the string of parenting centres in Midtown Manhattan to rename the classes, "Parent and Baby". Meanwhile, women were entering the workforce in large numbers, many even becoming the sole breadwinner of the family. This figure, in the USA alone, has risen from three percent in 1980 to twelve percent in 2008. Welcome to the new world, where our relentless pursuit of gender equality has caused a significant change in gender roles. Women are no longer confined to their homes, and men are also expected to play a larger role beyond the workplace.

Since the feminist movement, gender equality has become a key agenda for many governments across the globe. Till today, gender equality remains one of our top priorities. Yet, this seems to be a social movement that we are following blindly, and we have not really considered the consequences of such a pursuit. In fact, while most people will praise the equality movement, there remains a small group which has continuously criticised it. Nevertheless, I am of the opinion that the pursuit of gender equality has and will do more good than harm, and there is no reason for us to stop our pursuit to make gender equality a reality.

Firstly, we cannot deny that there are significant differences in the manner in which men and women think and act. The gender equality movement allows us to benefit from a combination of input from both sexes, and this benefits society immensely. In particular, the increasing acceptance and introduction of women into jobs traditionally dominated by males has resulted in new perspectives. These jobs are often redefined for the better. For example, women have proven their usefulness in United Nations peacekeeping missions, to the extent that the recruitment of women to mend what war has wrought has been elevated to one of the key strategies of the United Nations in the 21st century. In countries like Sudan, analysts point out that the introduction of women into peacekeeping missions has improved their effectiveness, primarily because of how women are perceived not as invaders, but as allies, and are more welcomed by the locals. It is not in the nature of most women to act in a callous manner, and they are often more aware of consequences their decisions can bring. Therefore, such decision-making has helped to bring peace to these war-torn countries, something which has not been so easily achieved for decades. Even in industries closer to our daily lives, like the medical industry, the same phenomenon has been observed. The National Health Service, which controls much of the United Kingdom's medical industry, revealed in its 2010 annual report that women were an astounding five times less likely to receive patient complaints than male physicians. The report went on to attribute this trend to women being better communicators and more patient in addressing patient concerns. Of course, this does not mean males are no longer relevant today, since there are biological and behavioural characteristics that only men possess. With reference to my earlier example on peacekeeping missions, men still form 60 percent of such missions as they are still considered integral, working in the background to effect change in these communities. Research has also shown that the temperament of men is particularly useful in medical specialties like surgery, where doctors are required to think on their feet and react appropriately to the situation. What the gender equality movement has enabled us to do, however, is to enjoy the best of both worlds. Without such a movement, it is likely that women would never have deviated away from what we consider feminine jobs like nursing or teaching, and perhaps would have never entered the workforce. Fortunately, increased equality for women has allowed us to tap on the expertise they bring to benefit society.

From a purely pragmatic point of view, gender equality provides a lot of benefits. From an economic perspective, gender equality may very well be the solution to the flailing economy in much of the world today. Europe's Southern fringe, long uncompetitive and in debt, has been considered the

European Union's weak link and its economic collapse has even threatened the fundamentals of the Euro. Other than shaky economic policies and a need for restructuring, an important point to note is the deeply entrenched machismo present in the region. Unsurprisingly, such attitudes are reflected in how countries like Italy have a skewed ratio of male to female employment in its workforce, with women lagging behind by more than twenty percentage points; in the USA, this figure is only twelve, in the UK, eight, and in the Scandinavian countries, about four. In these countries, as in many other developed countries, women already outnumber men in the number of college graduates. Yet, in Europe's Southern fringe, many are made to feel unwelcomed in the workforce and consequently, choose to leave when they get married. The pursuit of gender equality can potentially alleviate this problem by changing societal perceptions and making it easier for women to pursue their careers. In so doing, this adds taxpayers to the economy both today and for tomorrow. At stake is the ability to sustain the post-World War II benefits the "world's lifestyle superpower" accords to its citizens – unemployment benefits, cushy pension schemes – in short, the ability to maintain the coveted welfare state itself. Furthermore, while the gender equality movement has seen males take up more active roles in parenting, which many see as detrimental to the economy since males have to sacrifice their time at work, even such a change has its economic benefits. Research by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research on "fertility intentions", found that women are more willing to give birth if they have a peace of mind that such a hefty responsibility can be split with their spouses. This explains why the USA has continued to maintain its total fertility rate at healthy levels of 2.1. In comparison, despite all the monetary schemes pushed out by the Singapore government to encourage citizens to give birth, our total fertility rate has dropped to a historic low of 1.2, far below replacement levels. It appears that pursuing gender equality may also very well be our solution to the declining fertility problem, and the money saved on baby bonus schemes can be channelled to other forms of social provision. In short, even from a purely economic perspective, the pursuit of gender equality has brought much good.

On the other hand, we also have to consider that society is currently in a state of confusion on where we stand in our fight for gender equality. While traditional gender roles have been shifting, social perceptions do not seem to have changed. This has been particularly detrimental to romance. In hip television series *Sex and the City*, lead character Miranda goes speed-dating. The first three times, she admits that she is a corporate lawyer and wastes her eight minute pitch. The fourth time, though, she lies that she is a flight attendant and immediately scores a date with ironically, a lawyer. It seems that even the media admits that female empowerment, undeniably brought about by the gender equality movement, is killing romance. Furthermore, with these changing gender roles, there is a group who wants to get married but cannot find a mate, especially in countries like Japan and Korea, where a significant group of talented and incredibly stunning individuals fail to find a partner. Then, there are also the alpha females who do marry the alpha males, but end up in divorce. As statistics by the US Census Bureau show, the reason why these individuals choose divorce, as indicated by them, is not due to a lack of love for each other but a lack of understanding and different priorities. Lastly, there is another group which stays together, but engage in a range of ridiculous behavioural antics to re-establish males as being superior in the relationship. Last year, the New York Times featured a couple who chose for the man to stay home while the woman worked as a surgeon – a change in roles definitely brought about by our pursuit of gender equality. The wife recounted how her husband would insist on whipping out his credit card to pay for their meals, which the husband attributes to not wanting to "feel like a pimp". Much of society no longer demonstrates gender discrimination thanks to our pursuit of gender equality, but gender bias, which is less misogyny than unconscious sexism, is still very prevalent in our society. Hence, the gender equality movement has created a contradiction between priorities, where women may have opportunities to further their careers, but at the expense of how society perceives them and the success of their relationships. This may not be a huge problem, if not for how surveys show the main worry women have is "to grow old alone". Evidently, relationships are still highly prized by society today, and yet it is the changing gender roles brought about by the gender equality movement that have hindered this aspect of our lives.

Nevertheless, it is also important to emphasise that our pursuit of gender equality continues to be in a process of reconstruction. Most individuals will agree that for much of the 20th century, the



archetypal gender roles were male as breadwinner and female as follower. With the gender equality movement, this code can no longer be assumed. Our relationships may appear to be threatened by this movement, but with greater equality, this may very well not be the case in the future. Already, there has been the rise of the new age man, who is supportive and understanding of his wife's needs. For example, during Hillary Clinton's race for the Democratic Party's Presidential Nomination, former President of the USA (aptly termed the most powerful man in the world), continued standing by her side and supporting her through her endeavours. Our work in ensuring gender equality in the workplace is pretty much complete as this has been the key focus since the beginning of the movement. As the movement progresses, the focus is evolving to changing societal perceptions, including a proposal for a joint Academy Awards so as to depict both genders as equal. With proper effort, the ills of the gender equality movement can very well be mitigated, and our worry about female empowerment killing romance may very well be unfounded.

In conclusion, gender equality has not, and will not, do more harm than good. On the contrary, our pursuit of gender equality is very beneficial on many counts. Therefore, there is no reason for us to stop pursuing this goal, and in actual fact, efforts should be stepped up for society and individuals to reap the fruit of our labour.

**Marker's comments:**

***You write well. However, take note that a paragraph should not aim to squeeze in as many examples as possible. Pick one or two strong ones and elaborate. Brevity is a skill you need to master.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test (2012)

## essay 6

'New media is a new evil.' Discuss.

Wee Zi Ying : 13S061

With the rise of the Internet and other multi-function mobile gadgets, traditional media has given way to new media. Such new media enables users to access information anytime and anywhere, encouraging creativity and interactive user feedback. Many bemoan the fact that the increased accessibility brought about by new media has allowed profit-driven interests and harmful ideologies of governments and large corporations to be more easily proliferated than ever before, hence presenting a 'new evil'. While this is a convincing argument, it should also be considered that the evil brought about by new media may not be new at all. The new media can also encourage creativity and productivity, serving to better inform the electorate to make wise political decisions. In this way, new media can also bring new benefits as well.

The general perception that new media is a new evil has come about because audiences believe the increased accessibility of new media allows profit-driven interests of large corporations to become more easily proliferated than ever before. This, in turn, means that when media outlets provide inaccurate information to draw in viewers and generate profit, more people are affected and adopt inaccurate views on world events. For example, many news channels have adopted the concept of providing only bite-sized information to audiences such as the "News in 5 minutes" section of the Straits Times. Because so many of these traditional media outlets also use new media such as online articles to attract more viewers, the number of people who are receiving and accepting the alleged inaccurate information has grown to a much larger number than in the past. Another example of this would be the Invisible Children project which aimed to use new media, such as the KONY 2012 campaign on the Internet, to stop the Lord's Resistance Army, led by Joseph Kony, from training child soldiers and murdering helpless Ugandans. However, it has recently been found that the campaign, while immensely successful due to the harnessing of the new media, neglected to inform the public that Kony was already running for his life, and out of Uganda. The Ugandan people have also voiced concerns that the campaign might hamper the relative stability they have already achieved. Such examples suggest that the widespread usage of new media allows inaccurate information to be spread more quickly than in the past, hence being a 'new evil'. If viewers do not take the time to source out alternative viewpoints to better discern these new media messages, they could very well be accepting these inaccurate information as hard truths.

New media has also been perceived as a new evil because it has been used as a platform to spread harmful ideology to a wider audience. For example, political leaders in Singapore have recently raised concerns that members of Muslim extremist groups have been using online platforms to spread their beliefs to young Muslims. In Syria, we see that the government has set up Facebook groups and Twitter accounts to track down protestors, hence fuelling the bloodshed and internal conflict in the country. These examples suggest that new media can threaten entire societies with the spreading of extremist or harmful political ideology, something that would have instead been suppressed in the traditional media, thereby making new media a 'new evil'.

While it is valid to say that new media has allowed new evils to infiltrate public mindsets, it can also be argued that new media has led to a more well-informed, vibrant electorate that can fuel democracy in a country. For example, in the months leading up to the 2011 General Elections, Singaporean online users sparked lively debates on the Internet that dared to challenge the conventional viewpoints perpetuated by decades of authoritarian rule. Usage of social media websites such as Facebook also allowed news reports on pertinent political issues to be accessed freely and easily by members of the public who were not interested in politics before. This has resulted in a less compliant electorate that argues for more alternative views in Parliament, which could be seen in the election results, where the ruling People's Action Party's stronghold was somewhat weakened. This implies that new media has the potential to rejuvenate and better educate the electorate to boost politics in a country, which

is especially important, since democracy fundamentally relies on an informed electorate. Hence, new media has the potential to bring political benefits as well.

Furthermore, one of the most important characteristics of new media is the generation of interactive user feedback and creative points of view. Many forums and websites support User Generated Content, creating a platform for ordinary people to voice their ideas and concerns. This can be seen on social networking sites such as Tumblr, where artwork and essays on key issues like gay rights, feminism and challenging authority can quickly garner the necessary attention from other users. Indymedia, an independent new media outlet featuring articles from journalists around the world, has allowed different viewpoints to be read and discussed. In this way, media audiences can be engaged in critical issues and gain a better understanding of viewpoints that are different but just as valid as their own. This is in contrast to the passive feeding of information by governments and large corporations that is commonly associated with the traditional media. Therefore, new media can encourage creativity and train audiences to have a wider global perspective, hence bringing about new benefits as well.

In addition, because new media allows information to be accessed anytime, anywhere, information has become more accessible. This increases productivity because people can be exposed to and educated on new ideas on-the-go without having to visit a library and search through numerous bookshelves and archives before finding the relevant information. With this increased efficiency, people become more productive, which can go a long way in boosting the economic progress in a country. This can be seen as another new benefit brought about by new media.

The idea that new media is a 'new evil' can also be argued because the proliferation of profit-driven interests of media outlets has been going on for centuries in the traditional media. Media has always been biased and inaccurate to a certain extent because it has always been governed by large corporations and governments. The spread of harmful ideology through the media could even be seen during the Cultural Revolution through the reading of Communist texts and radio broadcasts. The fact that new media exacerbates existing profit-driven interests and harmful ideology more than in traditional media, is not enough to make it a 'new' evil.

In conclusion, while new media has brought new evils in terms of increasing the proliferation of profit-driven and hence inaccurate information, and has also allowed extremist beliefs to be spread, it has also resulted in greater political participation, creativity, perspectives, and productivity. Nevertheless, regardless of whether new media is evil or good, it certainly is here to stay. Audiences must take the initiative to educate themselves on different viewpoints so they do not buy in to inaccurate media easily but are instead discerning of the media messages that they are bombarded with daily.

**Marker's comments:**

***A good, well-informed, organised essay.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 7

'Literature, drama and art all amount to making something out of nothing.' Is this a fair assessment of the arts?

Kwek Mu Yi Theophilus 12A01B

The statement that "literature, drama and art all amount to making something out of nothing", while not wholly untrue remains, at best, an incomplete evaluation of man's artistic efforts. Rather than examine how literature, drama and art do not encompass all genres of artistic expression or how "making something out of nothing" is a poor summary of man's creativity, this essay will tackle the larger implication that art serves to capture the non-existent, and nothing but that.

It is not difficult to see why many may claim the above. Artistic expression often takes place by filling a blank page or canvas with that which has little direct or tangible merit to society. In most places, unless carried out by those renowned in the field, artistic expression pays little, if nothing at all, and is hence assumed to have no inherent value. And even where artists claim to have drawn on social or historical themes in their artwork – a number of Damien Hirst's installations, for example, were intended as commentaries on commercialisation; and Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony was meant to commemorate Napoleon's string of victories – there is often little discernible relation between creation and inspiration, at least to the untrained eye or ear. The fact that artistic expression seems to conjure, out of a vacuum, products with no clear origin or goal, serves to explain the statement that the arts "all amount to making something out of nothing".

Its dismissive tone aside, the statement in question also implies that apart from pure creation (i.e. the spontaneous invention of stories, plays, songs, paintings, and so on), the arts as a pursuit of humankind, have no particular source or legacy. Separate from the above concept of artistic expression having no origin or goal, this aspect of the claim sees that the arts – in reference to the collective oeuvre of artists from various genres – neither build on any pre-existing heritage, nor establish their own.

This claim fails on several levels.

First and foremost, despite the intangible nature of inspiration, imagination and talent that go into the creation of any art piece, to claim that art is derived "out of nothing" would be to negate the efforts of artists in honing their craft, developing their styles, and translating their ideas or ideals into their art. A famous anecdote tells of an exchange between a Manhattan passer-by and the great violinist Jascha Heifetz; when the former asked how one could get to Carnegie Hall, the latter, characteristically blunt, replied: "Practice." Indeed, it can be said that any achievement in the arts is the result of a lifetime of sheer effort, and the 8-hour-a-day practice schedules described by many professionals attests to this. One must recognise that artistic expression and creativity are made possible by the slow – and often painful – development of skill, which involves no less physical and mental agility than those adept at other disciplines. It is certainly not just the point of "making something out of nothing" that constitutes the arts, even if one chooses to describe the creative process as such.

Second, the depths of personal experience – which in the case of many artists, are linked to the cultural and historical events of the day – are crucial components of artistic expression as well. Despite the previously-mentioned perception that even where artworks are deliberately meant to capture a particular experience, no observable link exists to remove the element of experience from any artist's life would render him incapable of producing art. As writer Henry David Thoreau put it, "How vain it is to sit down to write when you have not stood up to live", and the absence of stimulation from artist's sense and perception would provide little to translate to the canvas. Without having experienced the Industrial Revolution, for example, it is doubtful that Charles Dickens would have produced his magnificent novels about Industrial England, nor would Fyodor Dostoyevsky have written his critique of Bolshevik Russia had he not experienced its reign of fear. To claim that the arts are derived "out of nothing", again, negates these integral experiences that have gone into the work.



Third, the cultural heritage of the artist's respective places of origin and the artistic legacy of their predecessors must be seen as factors in the creation of the arts. The process of artistic creation, besides being influenced by personal skill and experience, is profoundly affected by the styles and movements that shape each period of art history in each part of the world. The tragedies of Sophocles, for example, in Ancient Greece, drew extensively on the mythology of their day (incorporating figures such as Tiresias, the blind prophet, and Oedipus, the ill-fated prince), as well the established patterns of the theatrical genre that had been laid down by playwrights before Sophocles. The Shakespearean tragedies, in turn, though belonging to a time and place far removed, further developed the plot and character features of tragic plays, and incorporated the elements of Renaissance England (in their use of the British monarchy, etc.). Both cultural heritage and artistic legacy thus have an irrefutable part to play in the creation of the arts, and the claim that the arts arose "out of nothing", would be to discount these as well.

Even if the three aspects of artistic expression discussed here were to be ignored, can we say that "making something out of nothing" is "all" the arts amount to? Certainly not. Having arisen as the products of phenomenal individual effort, historical circumstance and a broader cultural artistic legacy, the arts are, for us today, resounding monuments of mankind's journey through the ages. Museums around the world collect and contain artworks to this end: they serve as ready testaments of all we have achieved and endured as a civilisation. To take the Palace of Versailles, France as an example, the artworks arranged in chronological order therein tell a moving tale of France's history, both through their depictions of historical events and observable developments in their styles. Where artistic creation continues to be practised today, it is not a mere miracle of "making something out of nothing" that the statement seems to suggest, but living evidence of how an artistic tradition that has been passed down to the artists of today continues to be cherished and built upon.

In conclusion, yes, the arts involve the creation of beauty from intangible things, and this process may be construed by the pragmatic mind to be "making something out of nothing". But in such a consideration, one must not forget the heritage, history and hard work that have gone into the arts, and not assume that this is "all" the arts "amount to".

**Marker's comments:**

***A thoroughly enjoyable read that shows breadth of knowledge and insight into issues central to the question. You've convincingly argued your case through aptly-chosen examples, thorough examination of the quote from different perspectives and clear paragraph development. Excellent work!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 8

'Image is everything.' How far do you agree with the statement?

Tan Fang Min Grace 12S03N

In a world full of strangers and uncertainty, we are often forced to use image to make an initial judgment on a person or thing. We make use of varied information, whether it be a physical form of image, or a mental image constructed from prior information. Without any other knowledge, it becomes inevitable that one must infer from image in order to respond, akin to judging a book by its cover when that is all that is available. Hence, image indeed plays an important role, regardless of whether you are the judge or the one subject to scrutiny. However, when additional knowledge about the subject is available – when an excerpt of the book is found, in addition to its cover – image may become less relevant. Thus while image does play an irreplaceable role in our lives, it is not, in fact, everything.

The concept of “branding” a product, or creating a highly recognised and favourable product image, is always a hot topic among businessmen, and some may even say it is the sole route to success. Branding does indeed appear to be extremely important, and a quick examination of the world's successful companies such as Apple, Nike, and Prada reveals that branding has played an extremely large role in their success. This is highly logical. As most consumers are not experts in the production of phones, shoes or handbags, they would need to rely heavily on image in order to make a judgment about the quality of the product. Due to the favourable image of such products, such as that of being fashionable or of high quality, consumers are able to trust that their purchases will be worthwhile without gathering information on every single purchase. This is key especially in the establishment of new companies, as illustrated in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*. As a small, relatively unknown shoe producer, Hush Puppies was facing dismal demand and was on the brink of shutting down. However, a few trendsetters happened to don Hush Puppies in public, creating a fashionable image for the brand, and business boomed overnight despite absolutely no change to the product. In this case, image was crucial in encouraging customers to even consider buying the rather unknown shoes, amidst a deluge of brands available in the market. Hence, it is clear that image plays a crucial role in business, influencing consumer choice when information is limited, and crucially kick-starting the establishment of brands, even leading some to say that “image is everything”.

However, if one scrutinises the situation more closely, one will realise that while image is crucial, it is not the only important factor in the commercial world. The role of image is to allow for customers to make an initial judgment, both on new brands, and novel products. However, when the consumer has made the purchase and can use the product, the quality of the product plays an equally, if not more, important role in satisfaction. Even in seemingly image-driven markets such as that of luxury goods, image is backed by good quality and innovative design, leading to truly satisfied customers. The importance of substance becomes painfully clear when considering the faddish nature of certain products, and their eventual failure. The initially incredible popularity of bubble tea was highly image-driven, having been considered the “cool” thing to indulge in for a period of time. However, as the substance of the product itself did not live up to expectations, and with many low-quality bubble tea shops attempting to jump on the bandwagon, demand eventually fell to more reasonable levels, leading to massive closure of smaller chains. Hence, even in the commercial world, image is not everything – without substance to garner customer loyalty, positive image produces nothing more than a fad, and profits would quickly dwindle.

Objects such as consumer products are clearly not the only thing judged on image in our society. As evidenced by the growing number of “self-marketing” courses available, personal or social image is also seen as crucial in our society. This has been exaggerated with the advent of new media, which has made it possible for every person to create and maintain a public image. In our modern society, image nearly always creates a strong first impression before interaction can occur, if it ever does. For celebrities, image is often all the public will ever be able to see, with most of us unable to ever

meet them, causing us to base our judgments of them on appearance and their public actions. This then influences the celebrities' popularity directly. This is clear in the cases of Chris Brown, Tiger Woods and other disgraced celebrities who learnt this truth the hard way when their image was shattered and popularity declined drastically, even though they kept up their performance in singing and golfing respectively. Even for laymen, image, such as online persona and physical appearance, plays a huge role in daily life. It is not unusual for employers or teachers to conduct "background checks" on potential employees or students using their Facebook profiles, which can give vital clues about character and more. Studies have also shown that more attractive females are more likely to be hired during job interviews, as long as the interviewer is male – if she is female, the converse is true, possibly due to being viewed as a threat! Hence, it is clear that image is a critical factor in our personal lives, and as such, that it is understandable why image may be seen as "everything".

However, akin to the case of products, image is not the sole deciding factor in our daily lives. For interviewees who may have garnered a top job based on image, it is eventually their work which determines whether they are worthy employees. Even in romance, initial attraction based on image cannot play out unless there is additional compatibility in terms of personality and preference. Indeed, even for people who may have started with an unfavourable image based on stereotyping, such as Jeremy Lin, who as an Asian was not expected to have great talent in basketball, the initial negative image results in even greater celebration of the individual as an underdog if success is achieved. Hence, just like in the case of consumer goods, personal image, while determining initial interactions, is often not the ultimate factor in our lives.

Image is an important tool for making immediate, initial decisions based on superficial impressions. Without a favourable image, a job applicant might be passed over at a job interview despite hidden talent, and a book could literally be left on the shelf if its cover was not enticing enough to encourage a reader to pick it up. However, in the long term, when people have been able to see past the superficial and know the object or person better, image will no longer be sufficient to determine their interactions and impressions of it. Hence, image, while important, is not everything.

***Marker's comments:***

***Grace, this is a very well-written and well-organised essay that features pertinent points and sustained argument. A couple of examples can be improved on to make a more convincing case. Nonetheless, a delightful read on the whole!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

## essay 9

Do you think that your society will benefit from having more freedom?

Fan Jia Rong 12S06G

Freedom – be it freedom of speech, freedom of choice or otherwise – is a contentious issue in many societies today. Governments have continually struggled to strike a healthy balance between the freedom and control of individuals in the country. In the context of the Singaporean society, however, I think that it is high time that more freedom be given for the eventual benefit of our society.

One of the most frequently repeated arguments for having less freedom in the Singaporean society is the long-term economic survival of the country. With the capable People's Action Party (PAP) at the helm, capable leaders would make good decisions efficiently for the country. This clearly leaves little room for debate on most issues since it is assumed that the paternalistic government knows best. Over time, such ideas have permeated the Singaporean populace, leading them to be largely politically apathetic. Nevertheless, it is undisputed that the remarkable economic transformation engineered by the Singaporean government in the past 47 years has led to many benefits for society.

Furthermore, it is also said that having less freedom would result in a more stable society. As the political philosopher John Locke theorised, people should be willing to give up part of their freedom in exchange for limiting others' freedom. This has transpired into many laws that the Singapore government has enacted, ranging from the harsh punishments serving as a deterrent for crimes, the banning of socially undesirable things like chewing gum to even criminalising alternative lifestyles through laws like Section 377A (dealing with homosexual acts). This has ensured the relative peace and stability that Singapore has enjoyed amidst the chaos that has been gripping neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, evident in the political instability and the high crime rates. These benefits that the Singaporean society has enjoyed have undoubtedly come as a result of reduced freedom.

However, for all the positive effects that less freedom has brought to the Singaporean society, it is definitely no longer relevant in today's context. There are many benefits to be reaped too, should the Singaporean society be given more freedom.

First and foremost, better decisions would be made in charting the course of Singapore's future. While this may seem paradoxical by seeming to contradict the view that a strong paternalistic leadership is best, it is actually more beneficial because the decisions made by the leadership would be better informed. No matter how capable a government is, it would be unable to consider all the viewpoints related to a given issue and hence might not make the best decision. This can be seen in the case of the gazetting of Chek Jawa as a nature reserve in 2000. While the government had initially planned to use the swampland for military purposes, persuasive campaigning by the Nature Society was able to reverse their decision, having convinced the government of the need to preserve such marine biodiversity in Singapore. Such collaborations between the government and civil society (which includes non-governmental organisations like the Nature Society) would only be possible if more freedom is given to civil society groups to air their views. At present, while the government has many platforms like the Speakers' Corner at Hong Lim Park and REACH (Reaching Everyone for Active Citizens @ Home), people have still refrained from voicing their opinions, and this can only be to the detriment of society. Hence, it is essential that more freedom be given so that decision-making processes would be better and fairer.

Furthermore, it is essential to note that the Singaporean society has rapidly evolved since its infancy in the 1960s, with more people wanting their voices to be heard. Often comparing with the United States where freedom is enshrined in the Constitution, many of Singapore's educated youth do wish to have an increasing say in national issues and policies. The current generation of Singaporeans are more well-educated and discerning, aware of the rampant censorship (and self-censorship, in

the case of traditional media) in Singapore. They have definitely made their voices heard through the voting results at the last two General Elections, with public support for the ruling PAP plunging to 66% in 2006, and again to a record-low of 60% in 2011. While the government has acknowledged the need to be more “consultative” in the words of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, I think that increasing the PAP’s new media presence by maintaining an online feedback channel is definitely insufficient. To get closer to achieving an active civil society, as envisioned by former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in 1997, the government definitely has to relax its stringent controls on civil society today, by having less censorship and reversing the fearful mentality that many Singaporeans possess with regard to speaking up against the government. This would effectively allow for more discourse in the Singaporean society, which is definitely beneficial in giving everyone an active stake in the future of the country.

Having more freedom would also mean that Singapore would be on par with other developed countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany, allowing society to benefit from the influx of ideas. Singapore has been criticised by many as “having a First World economy but a Third World government”. Singapore also ranked as one of the bottom 40 countries in terms of human rights in the world. All these, coupled with the stringent censorship laws in Singapore, have limited the sharing of ideas across different countries. This greatly hampers the discourse present in the Singaporean society and is definitely undesirable. While Singapore’s government has largely ruled the country for the most part of 47 years since its establishment, it remains to be seen if this is the best and only way forward for Singapore. It is, hence, evident that sharing of ideas that is possible only with more freedom; is essential to Singapore’s progress and this can only be done by refraining from political crackdowns on opposition figures for instance.

While thus far the notion of having more freedom has many inherent benefits for the Singaporean society, it is also essential to note that certain freedoms have to be limited for the good of society as well. Serious crimes, for instance, still need to be met with serious punishments. Tough decisions that the government deems necessary for Singapore’s future still have to be made. Giving society too much freedom would invariably lead to chaos and unhappiness amongst disenfranchised citizens. Hence, while the Singaporean society would definitely benefit from increased freedom, it is essential that a balance be struck. Only then would Singapore have a more involved civil society as envisioned by former PM Goh, for the betterment of all Singaporeans.

***Marker’s comment:***

***Jia Rong, this is an excellent essay! A balanced approach with convincing arguments put forth with a sound knowledge of the context of Singapore. Well done!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 10

'Fine in principle but a failure in practice.' How far do you agree with this assessment of democracy?

Chen Qihang 12S03F

"The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter." This famous quote from Sir Winston Churchill, seen as one of the most influential people in Europe and world history, sums up the cracks and crevices that exist in this edifice of governance that so many countries all over the world have adopted. Many would argue that democracy is "fine in principle but a failure in practice", but this essay seeks to show that though the implementation of democracy does result in many problems, some of them can be resolved, while others are simply ineluctable, and thus, democracy is not a complete "failure" in reality.

On paper, democracy is the panacea to all problems in that it stipulates collective action of a government and the people whom it represents in making informed political decisions. The democratic government is the top organ of the state, but can only function in the presence of the blood it pumps – i.e. the people who voted them into the office. When decisions are made after careful political discourse and rounds of debate, one would expect implementation of laws to garner only positive effects in society. However, this is possible only when holding several utopian assumptions, most of which are not practically true.

The bureaucratic red tape, first of all, that follows democracy is a major setback to the positive aspects of democracy. The characteristic presence of an opposition in most modern democracies presents a healthy alternative view to the opinion of the incumbent power, but it also brings along slow decision-making processes and inefficient governance that can potentially harm the people. Although this diametrically opposing view can rectify mistakes made by the incumbent, more often than not, opponents turn this window of debate and intellectual exchanges into a platform to filibuster bills, caricature the negative impacts of the opposition's proposals, and even smear their opponents' campaigns to advance partisan agendas. These underhand measures often embroil bipartisan politicians in conflict and political stalemate. For example, it took the USA almost 45 years from Lyndon Johnson to the current President Barack Obama to finalise a universal health reform bill under the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. This much-needed policy benefited millions of Americans who had suffered because of inaccessibility to efficient and cheap healthcare, despite living in one of the most developed nations in the world. Their long wait and pain were exacerbated by the senseless opposition from Republican politicians and right-wing pundits who did not believe in handouts. As a result, for the past five decades, the USA has had one of the worst healthcare systems in the world among developed nations, especially when compared to allies such as the United Kingdom and France. The failures of governance as brought about by bureaucracy are even more emphatically exhibited during times of emergency. During the cataclysmic financial meltdown of 2008 which was due to Americans' profligacy and poor regulation, the Obama administration encountered massive difficulty in passing bailout bills. The above examples all show how the presence of opposition in democracy can help a nation progress in theory, but in reality, result in the direct opposite.

The tyranny of the majority in democracy is not so much of an issue if one looks at things from a utilitarian perspective, which assumes that the majority's decision is always the best since it benefits the most number of people. However, in many cases, the marginalised interests of the minority discredit democracy as a practical structure of governance. Those in power often pander to the needs of the majority that voted them into office, but the needs of the minority groups are seldom met. On moral grounds, it hardly seems justifiable that those who pay the same amount of taxes are granted the same constitutional rights, and have the same right to choices in life are losing in this big game of numbers. This mis- and under-representation is further worsened when voters are not educated on the right choice and moral high road to take. Former US President George W. Bush's second inauguration would not have taken place if voters had considered John Kerry's campaigns more carefully and anticipated the

poor foreign policies of the Bush administration. Same-sex marriage would not be banned in so many states in the USA if general voters looked beyond fundamentalist Christian ideology to recognise valid alternative perspectives on the issue outside of their faith. Vis-à-vis the above examples, it is not difficult to see how the theoretical assumption of democracy that voters know what they are doing and the majority is always an accurate representation of individual interests is not true. In a democracy, “power and rights to the people” often exclude the minority, because practical implementation does strip them of both.

Corruption and abuse are also predominant in many developing democracies. Those in power often misuse their position and the trust of the people to further personal agendas and place self-interests ahead of national ones. At the turn of the decade, Thailand's democracy appeared to be crumbling as it sank into a quicksand of turmoil and a cloistered mess of multi-partisan conflicts – something similar to the Hobbesian war of “all against all” – *Bellum omnium contra omnes* – and they were all sparked by the controversial ousting and exile of defamed ex-Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra over money-laundering accusations. Silvio Berlusconi, the second longest-serving Prime Minister in Italian history (after Mussolini himself) had a seventeen-year political life that was coloured with the reds of prostitution scandals, greens of money-laundering accusations, and blacks of mafia affiliations. On a more global scale, in the larger democracy of the United Nations, Russia and China vetoed a decision to oust the Syrian dictator Al-Assad (the former, by speculation, protecting its own interests by limiting the American sphere of influence in the Middle East) even though it was a morally insensible decision to allow Syrian civilians to continue suffering. Thomas Hobbes' argument that all humans are inherently selfish holds true here. To further personal interests, corruption and abuse must triumph over the theoretical fairness of democracy (which assumes all leaders to be wise and judicious). Thucydides, in his *The Melian Dialogue*, sums up this behaviour and thus the failure of practised democracy with his conclusion that moral considerations of right and wrong “have never yet turned people aside from the opportunities of aggrandisement offered by superior strength”.

However, the checks and balances that exist in both theoretical and practical democracy mitigate corruption in the democracies that we observe today. The people, which the system empowers, do hold more power than delusional kleptocratic rulers can estimate. The eighteen-day civilian-led coup on the lethargic Mubarak regime is an accolade of youthful heroism and political courage. Consider too, the Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa, whose efforts to silence the mainstream media were met with an assassination attempt; or the Iranian protests in 2009, where dissidents such as Jafar Panahi shook the throne of Ahmadinejad more vigorously than he thought. People are discretionary, and their sharp sense and will allow them to play the role of political vigilantes and rectify the failures of implemented democracies with their own efforts, without government intervention, or despite military efforts to silence them. Other laws in the system, such as meritocratic policies and having to maintain three branches of democratic government allows far-sighted leaders such as German Chancellor Angela Merkel to be voted into office, while keeping society and the edifice of democracy free of nepotism, dynastic rule, or cronyism, like those in oppressive authoritarian regimes of North Korea and Syria. The structure of democracy on paper is intricately designed by initial input of Greek wisdom since time immemorial, and later additions of experience by leaders who all walked the path of fair and just governance. The involvement of people and various judiciary, legislative and executive floodgates of check and balance keep the state free from the political sewage water we call corruption.

With the cognisance of the aforementioned arguments, it is acceptable to conclude that democracy is far from the idealistic dream of the ancient Greeks. The process of societal development also means a greater compilation of different factors that impact the success of a democratic system. While factors like the bureaucratic vitiation of political process, tyranny of the majority, inability of voters to make informed votes, and corruption exist, we must not forget the checks and balances that can mitigate some of these problems like power abuse, and establishment of minority protection acts

to protect their interests. The overarching reality is that problems do exist in democracy, and every other political system for that matter. Eventually, however its benefits triumph predominantly.

**Marker's comments:**

***A passionate and erudite take on issues. Greater care needs to be exercised in how you shape your introduction and conclusion to allow your thesis to shine through. This is an excellent and enjoyable piece armed with sound conceptual depth and masterly use of choice examples to sustain perspectives generated by question. Well done, Qihang!***



# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 11

How far do you agree that war is a necessary tool for peace?

Charisse Foo Tsien Mei 12A03A

At first glance, the idea that war is a necessary tool for peace seems to be a highly dangerous one, but there is also more than an inkling of truth to it. This essay will argue that while war sometimes is indeed a necessary means to achieve peace, there are undoubtedly other avenues to reach the same end. In being the antithesis of peace, war reminds us too that we give up peace at our own peril, and ultimately, it may not be war itself, but the threat of war that keeps peace.

Firstly, as much as it may run contrary to our modern sensibilities, there are indeed cases where war, or military action, is necessary to achieve peace. Take the fall of Nazi Germany for example: the Holocaust could not have been stopped other than by military action; if the Allies had not opposed and attacked Nazi Germany militarily, Hitler and the Nazis would simply have continued their genocide and ethnic persecution unchecked. Similarly with the more recent invasion of Libya, military action was a necessary tool to bring down Gaddafi and achieve peace, saving the lives of civilians. As President Obama said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, war is sometimes needed to achieve peace, and in fact, in times when this is the case, “inaction tears at our consciences”. Such inaction was witnessed during the 1977 Cambodian genocide under Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge regime, where the United Nations (UN) and United States (US) did nothing to stop the mass killings that were going on; similarly, in the “ethnic cleansing” of the Tutsis in 1994 Rwanda, no immediate action was taken by the outside world. War can in fact be a tool to prevent further loss of human life, and sometimes might even be the only available means to do so. In cases such as these, war is a necessary tool for peace, not to mention, justice.

However, the notion that peace necessitates and thus can justify war is indeed a dangerous one when misused, and history has provided ample proof of that. Hitler viewed war as a necessary means to achieve “Lebensraum”, or living space, to accommodate Germany’s growing population, using the lofty ideal of a “Third Reich” to justify his aggressively expansionist foreign policy in conquering neighbouring countries through military action. Similarly, extremist groups such as al-Qaeda view war as a necessary means to combat American influence and promote their own agenda of religious fundamentalism. It is all too easy to construct an ideal vision to work toward, and then use that vision to justify any means necessary to achieve it. War might be a necessary tool for peace in some cases, but this logic can easily be distorted deliberately by states and even non-state groups to advance their own agendas.

The noble aim of achieving peace can undoubtedly be reached through means other than war. Diplomacy, in fact, is an entire field dedicated to non-violent negotiations that enable nations and states to pursue their own interests without having to wage war on one another. The formation of international bodies such as the UN and organisations such as NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) arose precisely because of the need to find alternative, peaceful means to reconcile the national interests of different countries. All countries aim for peace as an end, but when individual interests clash and conflicts occur, surely these conflicts can be resolved through negotiations and not only through war. Granted, there are issues that negotiations cannot fully address – take territorial disputes such as the longstanding Spratly Islands case for example – but in these cases, international law comes into play, implemented by organisations such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Peace, in terms of reaching an acceptable consensus when conflicts occur, can definitely be achieved through non-violent means; war is far from being the only means available to resolve conflicts.

The effectiveness of actual war as a tool for peace can also be questioned. It all sounds rather counter-intuitive: could violence, the opposite of peace, be the only way to achieve peace? Even in cases where military action alone can save lives and prevent further conflict and bloodshed, the repercussions of violent warfare run contrary to the intended end of peace. The atomic bombs in

Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for example, ended World War II and thus apparently saved more lives than it took (since more soldiers and civilians would have died had the war dragged on), but it is still difficult to reconcile the impact of its nuclear devastation with its aim of achieving peace. The world war might have ended, and perhaps violence was the only way to combat similar violence, but it is clearly far from ideal. War is only a necessary tool for achieving peace as a last resort, because the repercussions of violence are always painful and more often than not, far from peaceful.

All in all, while war is sometimes the only way by which peace can be achieved and lives can be saved, increasingly there are other avenues to achieve this same end: in the forms of international bodies, laws and treaties. Ironically, most of these arose after the world had witnessed the horrors of war and countries came together to implement measures that would make war and its violence less necessary. In being the antithesis of peace, war reminds countries of the violence and horrors that occur when peace is lost; instead of being viewed as a tool to achieve peace, war is increasingly being seen as an undesirable last resort, when all other options have been extinguished. In that sense, as countries instinctively shy away from the notion of war, it is not actual war but the idea of its horrors that contributes to peace. Nations will still build their military strength, and states will still be prepared to go to war, if necessary. But all that preparation might just be so they will not ever be pushed to act, to break the peace.

***Marker's comments:***

***Very cogent and well-developed arguments!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 12

'Moral considerations hinder scientific progress.' Comment.

Wang Lanqiao 12A03A

Ever since the Scientific Revolution, there have been numerous breakthroughs in science that have led to significant scientific progress. Governments, firms, research agencies and a multitude of other organisations are devoting massive funds into scientific research in the hope of gaining new knowledge regarding the world around us and finding new ways to harness the natural world for their own purposes, thereby bringing about scientific progress. Yet, many such forms of research have received strong opposition, mainly due to moral considerations regarding the ethics of the research process and ramifications on society. Thus, although I agree that there are moral considerations that stall scientific progress, I feel that the question generalises the effect of moral considerations on science. I believe that science and ethics should work hand in hand to balance each other, and that in reality ethics has less impact on scientific progress than the question implies.

Firstly, I concede that in many cases, strong moral concerns may indeed hinder scientific progress. For example, stem cell research has been halted or banned altogether in many countries around the world because of potential ethical concerns. This may prove to be a great loss to both science and mankind because stem cell research is the gateway towards a better understanding of the human anatomy as well as the potential key to advancements in medical treatment for previously untreatable diseases such as cancer and organ failure. Because this research is halted due to ethical concerns, this represents an opportunity lost for man to discover more about the natural world, and this is a significant loss to scientific progress. Should these moral concerns affect the progress of research in many areas of science, this may result in a standstill in scientific progress because anything mired in ethical controversy may be terminated. Science is a discipline that questions the unknown, and such moral considerations will hence erect a significant barrier to its exploration and hence, fewer discoveries may be made, and scientific progress may be hindered.

However, when we take a step back and reconsider the issue, we realise that these moral considerations may be necessary in order to check science and its discoveries and progress, because the breakthroughs and progress in science may result in a consequence that is immoral and undesirable. If we re-examine the case for stem cell research, we can see that there is validity in the moral considerations voiced by religious and pressure groups. Although stem cell research may potentially create bountiful benefits for everyone, the fact remains that the research requires stem cells harvested from dead embryos. This is scientific progress that is built upon the corpses of young lives, and this no doubt raises many ethical concerns regarding the sanctity of life. Do we really want our scientific progress to advance at the expense of human life? I'm sure most would not wish for that to happen. As such, there are many instances where moral considerations are needed to restrain science because of the ethics and morality that is involved in the issue in question and the scientific methods of research. Science is neutral, and is largely defined in black and white, right and wrong. Reality, however, is a tapestry of varying colours that is rarely neutral, and there are far more facets to reality than science. As such, we need these moral considerations at times to act as a check and balance to scientific discoveries that may have deep moral ramifications. Hence, while moral considerations may hinder scientific progress, they may be necessary if the scientific progress comes at a huge ethical cost to society.

Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, the statement generalises the effect moral considerations have on scientific progress. There are occasions where moral considerations have spurred mankind to delve into scientific research that has led to breakthroughs in science and great scientific progress. For example, moral concerns regarding the effect of polluting industries on the people living nearby had paved the way for scientific research in efficient and clean waste disposal technologies that

can preserve the health of people around. In China, people living near coal mines are constantly exposed to coal dust that coats their lungs and slowly suffocates them to death. As such, the central government is now looking into scientific research that can prevent these people from suffering the consequences of breathing massive amounts of polluting material (e.g. medical transplants, cleaner technology) and this may create breakthroughs in science. As such, there are times where ethical concerns, such as the effect of toxic dust on neighbouring peoples, can motivate governments and other organisations to invest in scientific research, and this propelling of research can in turn lead to scientific progress. Thus, moral considerations may not always be an obstacle to scientific progress, but may also have the effect of becoming a driving force for new scientific research and progress.

However, having examined the effects of moral considerations on scientific progress, it is also worthy to note that moral considerations are not the main hindrance to scientific progress. If there was a bigger culprit that prevents scientific progress, it would be financial constraint. The Industrial Revolution that saw unprecedented progress of science and innovation was fueled by the desire to trim production costs and make more money. Large pharmaceutical firms such as GlaxoSmithKline emphasise progress and discovery to find new drugs that can make money. Why has there not been a cure for AIDS despite the fact that it is a pressing problem that kills over 5000 a day? Certainly, no one would have moral dilemmas on the research of AIDS drugs, but scientists and pharmaceutical firms are still unwilling to increase their research and progress in this area because of financial considerations. It may not be profitable as compared to a new antibiotic, and so they are reluctant to push for such scientific progress. The same problem recurs for malaria drugs. It is not moral considerations that hinder scientific progress in this case; it is the lack of financial incentive. Hence, while moral considerations may hinder scientific progress, financial considerations play a much larger role in preventing scientific research and progress.

In addition, there is the question of the degree to which moral considerations really affect scientific progress in reality. Going back to the example of stem cells, moral considerations have resulted in a ban on stem cells in certain nations, but stem cell research is still notably active in many countries, including Singapore, that openly boasts of its prowess in the stem cell research area. Genetic engineering is much frowned upon due to its ethical concerns of the sanctity of nature and dangerous hybrids that could be created, but that has not stopped UK scientists from creating human-cow genes that combine the human and bovine genome to create a wholly unnatural hybrid in a nation that is so fervently against genetic engineering, that all genetically modified products must be clearly labeled and genetically modified foodstuff face an outright ban. As we can see, despite great outcry due to moral considerations that the public and other groups may have, these moral considerations are frequently dismissed when weighed against actual scientific progress. Occasionally, moral concerns may hinder productive and desirable scientific progress, but more often than not they may help in preventing scientific research that is morally dubious or undesirable. At times it may even help scientific progress by providing the desire for scientific discovery. But all of the above pale in comparison to financial concerns, and if the remuneration is large enough, the ethical concerns are more often than not brushed aside in favour of scientific progress that can result in financial rewards. As such, moral considerations in reality have limited impact on scientific progress, because of the presence of more tempting financial incentives.

In conclusion, moral considerations are needed to check scientific progress, but they are rarely able to do that in real life. With man gradually coming up with more and more ethically-debatable scientific discoveries such as cloning and nuclear technology, it is time that the world re-evaluates the value of scientific progress and implements a system that can efficiently check undesirable and morally dubious scientific research. For this, we should learn from the United Nations' resolution that banned human cloning. Although difficult to police and enforce, it is a start that can allow scientific progress to be balanced by ethical concerns.

**Marker's comments:**

***Very well-developed argument that is cogently presented. Weighing moral considerations against financial incentives in evaluating their impact on hindering/advancing scientific progress was a deft stroke.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

essay 13

Would you agree that we can do little to help the poor in our world today?

Ching Wei Liang Samuel | 12A03A

Poverty in our world today seems like a widespread and unsolvable problem. Everyday, we hear about another famine or drought that is wiping out the poor in some country. The statistics themselves do not offer much encouragement – over 2 billion people, out of the Earth's current population of about 7 billion people, live below the absolute poverty line of less than USD2 a day. It often makes one feel overwhelmed and jaded at times. Poverty often arises due to failures of governments and the exploitation of workers by multinational corporations (MNCs) and hence is often entrenched in the system. However, we, as individuals, and as a community are able to harness innovative business models, the Internet and our skills to alleviate the standard of living of the poor around us and to improve their current circumstances.

*Prima facie*, poverty is often hailed as a systemic problem due to corrupt governments and the result of our capitalist system. Due to the inherent nature of our capitalist system, capitalists own the factors of production and hence are able to systemically exploit their workers to maximise their profits. As such, the wages of these workers are depressed and society evolves into a class-based society of the haves and have-nots. This model of thinking, as posited by Karl Marx, rings true in our world today. MNCs such as Gap and Nike have been found guilty of systemically and continuously exploiting their workers. In the Sri Lankan garment and textile factories, workers are forced to work for more than 12 hours everyday and are paid less than USD1 per hour. The conditions are harsh and workers can be fired on the spot if their work is found to be dissatisfactory. Furthermore, apart from the capitalist machination, corrupt governments such as those found in Indonesian and Sub-Saharan African countries such as Uganda, have siphoned money out of their coffers and failed to extend help to the poor in the country. As such, these vast and entrenched systemic failures have many thinking that little can be done to help the poor unless one holds extraordinary power and position in the world. Many of us would feel that as mere individuals, we are not able to do anything to solve such a fundamental issue.

However, despite the above systemic failures, the individual in our world today has much leverage to push back against these failures and bring perpetrators to justice. Take for example the recent campaign against Apple to look into its production chain in Shenzhen, China, to ensure that the workers there are not exploited. Also, average citizens around the world have campaigned and petitioned for MNCs such as Gap and Nike to look into their supply chain and have generated enough momentum to force Nike to address unfair treatment of their workers around the world, most recently in Indonesia where Nike settled for a \$1 million payout to its workers there. Furthermore, citizen groups such as Avaaz have united individuals around the world to stand behind citizens of a country to stand up against corrupt rulers and to force more transparency in these countries. As such, we should not be intimidated by these problems and unite to challenge these failures to alleviate the suffering and the poverty of those around us.

Furthermore, we can support and pioneer innovative business models that target poverty and sustainably improve the quality of life of the poor. One such example could be Professor Muhammad Yunus, Nobel Peace Prize 2006 and the founder of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. Early on in his career, he was just another economics professor in the University of Chittagong in Bangladesh. However, he saw the widespread poverty around his university and decided to do something small for the poor by taking over the loans from the loan sharks and lending out of his own pocket, \$27 to forty-two people in a tiny village. It was from this small and simple act of challenging the money lending process that he pioneered the microfinance model. It was from that simple act that he developed the concept of social business, where he created a business to address the problems of the poor, as evidenced through companies like the Grameen Bank and Grameen Danone. Similarly, in Singapore, it was a simple act of looking to the traditional model of philanthropy and doing something extra,



which resulted in the creation of Give.sg by NUS undergraduates. Give.sg has grown exponentially and have helped and raised more than \$500,000 since its inception in 2007. As individuals, we can effect much change just by looking at the struggles of the poor today and going the extra mile to help solve their problems. It is not that we, as individuals, are incapable of helping the poor, rather, it is often due to our own pre-conceived notions of helping the poor that hinder us from helping them.

In addition, as individuals and as a community, we are able to harness the Internet to help the poor today. The Internet has enabled us to reach out to more people in need. The sprouting of online microfinance firms like Kiva.org and Wokai has opened the floodgates for individuals to loan to the needy in any part of the world. Milaap.org, a Singapore-based start-up, has also empowered people to loan directly to the poor in India to improve their basic needs such as sanitation and primary education. Furthermore, telemedicine has also enabled us to directly address health issues in distant locations. Also, crowdsourcing platforms such as Ushahidi, enable and empower the poor in times of disasters when they lack facilities and provisions to survive. By promoting and participating in these activities and furthering these innovations, we are able to empower and alleviate the problems faced by the poor in the world today.

Also, we are able to use our bargaining power as consumers, and financial capital as investors, to ensure that we are benefitting the poor. For example, we are able to choose fair-trade products that ensure that the primary producer in the supply chain is paid fairly for his share of the produce. We can buy from brands such as Honest Tea and fair-trade coffee houses such as The Pigeonhole in Singapore, to ensure that the producers are not deceived and tricked of their share. Furthermore, our investment decisions need not solely focus on the financial returns. We should invest in impact investors such as WillowTree Impact Investors and Absolute Impact Investors, which act as fund managers, investing in social businesses and socially responsible enterprises, which in turn help the poor directly. Our capital can be used and developed to effect change, not just through donations, but also through the everyday choices we make in our life.

Lastly, we can also use our skills to enhance and improve the living conditions of the poor. Increasingly, college and high school students are putting their skills to use through volunteering with Non-Governmental Organisations and charities to improve the standard of living of the poor. For example, Swarthmore College in the United States offers a grant to any student to develop a community project and it also offers the student the chance to take a gap year in their studies to pursue these projects overseas. Moreover, working adults are also able to help charities and social impact organisations by volunteering their time and expertise to help these organisations further their impact. Recently, a new field of philanthropy – venture philanthropy has also taken root in many countries, where working adults with skillsets can act as both venture capitalists and philanthropists to enter a social impact organisation and value add to it. Lastly, online volunteers on portals such as Sparked.com and Concern.sg have enabled individuals from around the world to aid organisations in other parts of the world with their specific skillsets. As can be seen, the opportunities to help alleviate poverty, regardless of the scale, are everywhere and equally widespread as poverty itself. We, as individuals, are able to take on these opportunities to improve the lives of the poor, even if it means helping one person at a time. Together, as a community, we will be able to push the living standards of the poor and solve some of their most pertinent problems through our own skillsets.

In sum, the twin failures of governments and corporations have resulted in the widespread poverty we see in our world today. However, we should not be disheartened as it is the very result of these failures that requires us to step in as individuals and as communities to help the poor and the unfortunate around us. Through the use of innovative business models, harnessing the power of the Internet, developing conscious consumption and investing, as well as using our personal skillsets and talents, we can, as individuals alleviate and improve the conditions of the poor around us. After all, as management guru C. K. Prahalad asserted in his seminal book, *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid*, the poor are not any less capable or less worthy than any of us. We have to change our misconception of the poor as people who are less capable than we are. Furthermore, we should

not forcefully impose our ideas of development and economic growth on the poor. After all, like the poor in Bhutan, they are often more content and “happy” with their lives than we, with all our wealth and consumerism. As such, helping the poor should not just be about increasing their wealth but rather, working hand in hand with them to improve their standards of living and to learn from them at the same time.

**Marker's comments:**

***Excellent effort though it is evident that you were rushing towards the end of your essay. You clearly know a lot, but might want to take more care in selecting more significant examples you can set into a deeper discussion about.***



# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 14

'Science makes belief in God obsolete.' Comment.

Yu Lidan 12S06P

People are curious by nature, and will always seek to understand that which surrounds them, unearth that which has happened before them and predict that which will happen in the future. Since time immemorial, religion, especially those propagating belief in higher being(s), has always been a source of divine instruction for those seeking explanation for their existence and that of the vast complexities of nature and life. On the other hand, science has developed from tiny communities and slowly gained influence among societies. It also aims to provide explanations for natural phenomena, but instead of doing so through God's word, it does so through rigorous experimentation and observation to establish solid proof for the laws of nature. Although science and religion do represent divergent approaches, they are not mutually exclusive ways of life or schools of thought; hence the continuous progress in modern science will not necessitate a decline in religion, or render the belief in God obsolete.

Proponents of the argument that science makes belief in God obsolete will probably point out that faith and reason, the cornerstone of religion and science respectively, are, in fact, mutually exclusive approaches when both are applied to the same issue or purpose. Science relies heavily on logic and rational thought. For a theory to be widely accepted by the scientific community, corroboratory evidence and experimental results have to establish beyond all doubt that a valid induction or deduction has been made. The belief in God, in contrast, relies on faith, which is the unwavering confidence in an idea or a figure, regardless of any rational proof presented. As can be seen, science and religion are ultimately divergent in nature and cannot both be employed for the same purpose, for example, to explain natural phenomena. Given the rapid progress in modern science, one can hence comprehend the reasoning that science will make the belief in God obsolete.

Another reason why many possess the notion that science and religion are mutually exclusive could be due to the various conflicts between the two throughout history. Some more obvious contradictions due to the two include heliocentrism as supported by empirical evidence versus geocentrism as backed by Bible passages, or Darwin's theory of evolution in defiance of creationism. Such scientific theories or discoveries often incite a backlash from the churches, as they are viewed to have undermined religious doctrine. The theories that these scientists propose blatantly contradict God's word, and were initially viewed as disrespectful by religious authorities as such ideas were proposed by men, who are lesser beings than God himself. However, the influence of scientific communities slowly expanded and rational thought and systematic observation are heralded for the advancements in technology and the vast improvements in healthcare as well as the material standards of living today. As more and more people come to accept science as a reasonable explanation for natural phenomena, it would seem that fewer of them would subscribe to God's word as the two are contradictory in nature, thus rendering the belief in God obsolete.

However, proponents of these two arguments are too short-sighted, or even closed-minded to say that belief in God has been made obsolete. There are many instances where science and religion have been successfully integrated. Liberal Catholics, for instance, have been able to reconcile the scripture with Darwin's theory of evolution. In addition, reason, although a divergent approach from faith, can instead serve to complement or reinforce faith, and both can function to aid humans in better understanding the world. Buddhism encourages investigation based on causality and empiricism, representing an extraordinary convergence with the scientific method. Moreover, Abdul-Baha'i, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, stated that religion without science is superstition and science without religion is materialism. One of the key foundations of the Baha'i faith is the harmony of science and religion – both are interdependent. If people remain open-minded, then they would be able to realise that the divergent natures of science and religion do not render the two mutually exclusive. Instead, they could well complement each other through their interdependence, and hence the belief in God still remains very relevant even in the face of science.

Another reason that the belief in God still remains relevant today arises from the perspective that science and religion serve different domains of our human experience, and when each remains in its own separate domain, they can coexist together peacefully. This idea has been expressed in the works of scientific writer Stephen Jay Gould. Science gives explanations for objective facts and the laws of nature, whereas religion can also provide insights to a variety of conundrums for which no explanation can be found in the domain of science. Religion can also serve as a moral compass, and is often the motivation behind the research works of many great scientists. 1996 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Richard Smalley, believes that the universe is exquisitely fine-tuned for human life, and that “we are somehow critically involved in its purpose”. Smalley represents one of the many scientists who espouse religions’ ideals when thinking about science. In addition, he also revealed that modern science only serves to reinforce our belief in God, as the more we discover about the universe, the more we can appreciate God’s handiwork, proving once again that science and religion can be good complements to one another. Another prominent geologist, James Hutton, was prompted by his theological views to develop his theory of geographical uplift. His religious beliefs inspired his thoughts about the flow of energy, and led him to make a significant contribution to the realm of science. The above examples show that religion often exists in a separate but complementary domain to science, as a motivation for instead of a hindrance to scientific breakthrough. Hence, the belief in God still remains very relevant even with the widespread influence of science today.

It has to be acknowledged that faith and reason, and by extension, religion and science, are largely divergent approaches, but they are by no means antithetical. In many ways, they are good complements to each other and exhibit a symbiotic relationship. Ultimately, one has to realise that science and the belief in God have the same aim – to better human life. Both are “tools” which serve to fulfil this purpose through different domains of human experience – one more material and tangible, the other more spiritual and intangible. Therefore, as long as this universal purpose remains unchanged, both science and the belief in God remain very relevant to serve this purpose, and neither should be obsolete.

**Marker’s comments:**

***Content is relevant, coherent, concise, supported and insightful essay. An enjoyable read. Coherence however and support for some paragraphs and claims can be improved. Excellent command of the language.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 15

Discuss the extent to which it has become harder to lead healthy lives today.

Jasmine Liu Jia Hwei · 12S03K

Here is a sobering fact: 75% of money spent on healthcare in the United States is used to cure chronic illnesses that can be prevented. Obesity and lung disease come to mind, as well as some perhaps more obscure but nonetheless rampant illnesses that plague our society such as food allergies and digestive problems. In today's world, where medical technology is ever growing to meet our needs, and where health and fitness have turned into mainstream concerns that transcend the offices of fitness gurus and hospitals, it is hard to imagine that we are a society declining in health. If health were to be reduced to a list of statistics including lifespan and birth mortality, then we are certainly not doing badly in improving our numbers. However, if health should be regarded holistically as a measurement of the quality of people's lives in physical, emotional and environmental terms, then we are certainly declining, and the presence of mental illnesses, sub-standard nutrition in school cafeterias and expensive commercial gyms are a testament to this. It is hardly appropriate to dismiss this as the fault of a lazy humankind. The growing number of health science researchers today proves we are aiming to lead healthy lives, but are unsuccessful due to a number of factors such as an increased pace of life, poorer lifestyle habits, miseducation of the public and the commercialisation of health as a commodity, which combine to create a world in which it is becoming very hard to lead normal, healthy lifestyles.

Many quote childhood obesity as evidence of a society that fails to put health before wealth, blaming fast food and a lack of playgrounds for this growing epidemic in today's world. However, fast food and inactivity are merely symptoms of a larger problem resulting in so many overweight children. Children are suffering the effects of an increased pace of life that put speed and quantity before quality, where parents, schools and even health ministries are all to blame for their negligence in cultivating good, old-fashioned habits that would not only prevent obesity, but a plethora of other childhood illnesses that are caused by the poor habits of children today. By simply examining the quality of cafeteria food in schools in the United Kingdom, one would be appalled to witness how French fries constitute a staple in every child's meal. Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver had started a campaign to introduce better food to schools, as documented in a television series. In his quest to do so, there is a certain emphasis on education, not just for the children, but also for the adults responsible for the current state of cafeteria food. In a few brief episodes, one becomes privy to the stubborn attitudes of the adults he tries to educate. A quote from the head cafeteria lady puts it perfectly, "we don't have time to make such food". It becomes apparent that the children's preference for unhealthy food is a by-product of our increasingly fast-paced society where efficiency is valued over quality. Even in Singapore, where obesity is fast becoming a problem, we see a correlation between the booming takeout and restaurant businesses with our growing obesity rate. The truth is that one does not cause the other; they are both merely symptoms of this problem: that the pace of life here has made it hard for us to cultivate good dietary and lifestyle habits, making it harder to lead healthy lives. It is a problem that evidently does not just afflict the United Kingdom and the United States, but many fast-growing cities including Singapore.

Another problem that afflicts many urbanites of today is the growing shadow of mental illness over city-dwellers. Studies have shown that depression is an urban illness, suggesting that although it is not necessarily caused by city life, city life may play a part in aggravating patients' symptoms, making it harder for them to recover. Once again, it is not just the presence of mental illness that leads us to believe that it is hard to be healthy in today's world; it is the declining emotional health of people that is the root cause for concern. As cities grow, so does the number of youth suicides per capita, causing one to wonder if we are neglecting emotional well-being in our quest to improve our physical health. South Korea, a country known not just for its advancements in cosmetic surgery but also in other surgical technologies and research, has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. The environment in which we live in does affect our emotional well-being as well as our physical well-being, and it is sad to observe that some countries have yet to realise this. *Mind Your Body* had recently released a special report on a growing trend of young depression patients. This comes in

spite of our nation's many advancements in stem cell technology and medicine, and is undoubtedly evidence that longer lives may not necessarily translate to more emotionally balanced lives in today's world.

In spite of the above illustrations on the poor state of health in many societies today, we have to acknowledge that the world has made other advancements in healthcare, especially in developing countries. After all, Jimmy Carter had recently reported that cases of guinea worm disease has dropped from 3.5 million in 1987 to 1060 today, undoubtedly a testament to the power of education and preventive care. Malaria has become virtually non-existent in Singapore, although dengue is still rampant, and health expectancy of many developing countries has risen in the past decade. These are evidence of vast improvements in health in the developing world. Some may also point out that while our developing nations are seeing a new crop of problems, health has become more of a concern than ever. Gym memberships are becoming commonplace, research in dietetics is attracting a new flood of young undergraduates, and fitness and lifestyle programmes are all over television, reminiscent of Jane Fonda's exercise movement in the 70's. These all seem to point to a society where health is wealth, and it is easier than ever to gain information on how to be healthy, and to lead healthier lives.

However, such an argument ignores the statistics that show that health issues going mainstream have not significantly improved our health markers. In fact, these gyms and marathons may have sprouted in response to our growing health problems, but they are also further evidence that we are in dire need of reminders to keep healthy. Furthermore, making health issues mainstream may further aggravate our problems by the sheer amount of misinformation available online and over mainstream media. Uncertified diet pills can be easily bought online by unsuspecting customers, and juice fasts not scientifically proven to be beneficial, can mislead many in their quests to achieve better health. It may be observed that some people have resorted to suing the healthcare industry for products that appear more commercial than truly beneficial, and a lawsuit against celebrity trainer Jillian Michaels is just one example of many. The word "health" has become a term exploited by money making establishments, from food and beverage giants such as Pepsi Co, which market sugary juice drinks as "healthy", to questionable homeopathic practitioners who promise "improved health" from expensive herbal remedies. The commercialisation of health proves to be ultimately more confusing and harmful than good to a world in search of better health.

Returning to the point on developing countries benefiting from improved health in today's world, it is evident that progress does bring about better health, but progress and health are not necessarily symbiotic phenomena. In fact, in today's world where we pride ourselves on outstanding medical advancements and an over-growing healthcare industry, it seems good old-fashioned well-being has become a lost cause. We tend to lose sight of the basics of health, the bigger picture, where good health can be achieved by good diet and lifestyle habits, appropriate public education from qualified and preferably non-commercial sources, and by paying some attention to the more obscure, but no less important, domain of emotional health. To quote Adam Bornstein, former editor of Men's Health and current editor of Livestrong.com, the key is simply to "live the healthiest life you can enjoy". Hopefully our ever-complicated world can appreciate this simple philosophy one day, and being healthy can be an uncomplicated and basic affair.

#### **Marker's comments:**

**Content: Relevant, insightful, supported and concise. An enjoyable read. Some slips in relevance, elaboration, argumentation and support provided.**

**Language: Excellent command with clear paragraphing and topic sentences. Paragraphs and overall essay are coherent.**

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 16

"The rise of the East and fall of the West are inevitable." Do you agree?

Tan Teck Wei 12A01B

Since the turn of the century, the number of Asian millionaires has quadrupled, Asian countries have been steadily rising up the United Nations (UN) Human Development Index, and US President Barack Obama has declared Asia a 'pivot' region for the US to maintain positive relations with in the years to come. By all accounts, the rising economic, social, and political influence of the East is an impressive and perhaps unstoppable force, leading some to call this "the sun rising in the East as it sets in the West". However, despite the leaps that Asia has taken, even when juxtaposed against the relative failings of Western states, I do not believe it is inevitable that the rise of the East and the fall of the West will come to pass.

What exactly does the rise and fall of a nation mean? Across history, all great powers have experienced the peak of their powers, followed by a decline in global influence, be it ancient Chinese dynasties, the British Empire, or the more recent unipolar world of US dominance. A country's power can usually be split into three domains: economically, it must be prosperous and wealthy; socially, it must be cohesive; politically, it must be stable domestically and influential internationally. The rise of the East and the fall of the West thus implies that Asia is on an upward trend in all these areas of development, while the US, Europe, and other parts of the Western world are on a relative decline.

There are many who are quick to proclaim the rise of Asia and the fall of the West as inevitable, because of the rapid growth in Asia and the sudden and unexpected meltdown of the Western world's might. They believe the underlying reasons for such a trend will only become stronger over time, hence reinforcing their claim. On the one hand, in the case of Asia, there are many good reasons to predict massive growth in the years to come. Economically, the liberalisation of China has turned it into Asia's engine for growth. China manufactures over 25% of the world's products due to its cheap supply of labour, well-constructed infrastructure, and a pro-business government. As more multinational corporations (MNCs) like Nike, Adidas, Timberland, Apple, and Microsoft move to China, they bring wealth and socio-economic progress to the Chinese people. However, this does not apply only to China, but to Asia as a whole, for three reasons. First, as China's standards of living go up, this advantage of low labour cost shifts to other countries in the region, such as Vietnam or Indonesia, hence sharing the benefits of MNC-driven growth. Second, China's production is not wholly domestic; it meets international demand through trade links and supply chains in the region, because supply chains that are geographically close are often cheaper. For example, Singapore's collaboration with China, the Suzhou Industrial Park, focuses on using Singaporean firms to produce for Chinese manufacturers, who then assemble components before re-selling to MNCs. Finally, China shares its wealth through unconditional developmental aid, allowing the less fortunate economies in Asia to break into the international economy. When combined with the relative strength of other Asian economies, like India, Singapore, and South Korea, Asia's economic progress looks secure. This already gives it immense global influence, and yet Asia is trying to go one step further. Led by China, rising nations such as India and even Malaysia are modernising their armies and navies to project power internationally. In the cases of India and Japan, there is even a push for them to become permanent members of the UN Security Council. Hence, in all these ways, and in so many others even the weight of academic literature cannot fully describe, let alone this essay, the rise of Asia looks set to continue into the future.

At the same time, it can be argued that the Western world will never recover from its current doldrums. This is primarily because their economies are weak and structurally flawed: in America, the combined budget deficit is projected to take 30 years just to repay in full, and even then to its greatest rival, China. Its education system ranks behind many Asian countries, including China, Japan, Korea, and even Singapore, in terms of equipping children with the skills they need in a knowledge-based economy. Its political climate is an even greater obstacle to political reform, since the Democrats and Republicans simply cannot agree on whether to raise taxes or cut spending drastically; if neither is done, there is no way any US President can trim the existing deficit. Similarly, Europe as a bloc



is faring no better: the euro zone is in crisis, and its member nations have been unable to find a resolution to the debt troubles of Greece. In addition, it is not at all clear that the private sector will find some way of overcoming this crisis: just three days ago, JP Morgan Chase reported \$300 million in debt, so large for any one firm that it was distorting the investment bonds market. These economic struggles have implications for the West's political stability and power projection abroad. The rise of radical politics like the Tea Party in the US, and the recent election of right-wing candidate Francois Hollande to the French Presidency reflect a broader disenchantment with Western politics as a whole. Similarly, even though the US may currently have the largest military in the world, government funding for the military is being reviewed and cut; the US was consigned to playing a supporting role in Libyan intervention arguably because of financial concerns. Similarly, that France and Britain had to share aircraft carrier capabilities by joining elements of their respective navies is reflective of their diminutive and diminishing power. Hence, those who claim that the rise of the East and the fall of the West are inevitable seem vindicated by current affairs.

However, it is important to put these claims in context: even though the East has done a great job thus far, and the West has disappointed almost all of its citizens, there are still many good reasons for the East to falter and for the West to launch a resurgence. Asia may still find means of overcoming these obstacles, and the West may find even more ways to shoot themselves in the foot, but the point is that these trends of upward growth and downward regression cannot be taken for granted.

What exactly are the reasons for limiting Asia's growth? First, not all the wealth generated has trickled down to the people, and this is often a cause for widespread dissent. Without an equitable and fair society, no country can claim to be a great power while facing problems from within. For example, Indian activist Anna Hazare recently went on a hunger strike with the support of thousands to protest against the rampant corruption of the Indian government. Similarly, the Chinese responded to the devastating high-speed rail train crash by protesting against the Chinese government, because they saw this as an instance of penny-pinching gone wrong. If the people of Asia feel disenfranchised politically with the economic distribution of resources, this could check the growth of Asia.

Second, it is not clear that Asian economies will be able to continue their spectacular rates of growth in the short-term. Most Asian economies are most effective at supplying low-skilled labour, but this will not be enough. There is currently a lacuna in upgrading the skills of factory workers and allowing them to move up into more valuable industries. In addition, there is often a lack of local startup firms, because they cannot compete against the larger MNCs, and their cost-efficiency. This is especially the case in China, where inadequate laws on intellectual property allow bigger firms to steal the ideas of newer small enterprises. All this hurts innovation and upward mobility in the global economy. If Asia is not careful, it could find itself unable to break into the more value-added rungs of the global economy.

Third, even if we assume that Asia could make this leap, longer-term concerns are so unpredictable that we can never say for sure if the rise of Asia is inevitable. In the 1970s to 1990s, Japan looked to become the next great economic giant. It was ultra-competitive in technological production, and even became at one stage the second largest economy in the world. There was a genuine fear in the US that the Japanese would simply out-compete American firms and buy them over; this was perhaps most frighteningly portrayed in Michael Crichton's novel *Rising Sun*. However, the Japanese economic machine faltered, and it never hit these same peaks ever again. Experts disagree on the exact reason: some say it was an ageing population, others that complacency had set in. Regardless, the point is that these same obstacles could still check Asia's growth, and we are simply not able to call it inevitable at this point in time.

Similarly, there are reasons to believe that the West could still hold on to parts of its power and arrest its slide into mediocrity. First, it still produces the most culturally desirable products in the world. American and European brands continue to be our number one choice day in, day out, for better or for worse. For example, McDonald's, Starbucks, Nike, Adidas, Nestle, Louis Vuitton and Coach are all premium brands that we relate to all around the world. Hence, when we buy any of these products, our dollar goes into a Western economy and hopefully stimulates its recovery.

Second, it continues to be a hotbed for research and innovation. Western countries tend to have a liberal atmosphere about them, and this opens up opportunities to try out new ideas or conduct groundbreaking research. This is complemented by well-honed intellectual property laws that encourage innovation, because they give innovators the financial incentive to undertake risk. For example, the companies that thrive in the new global age are overwhelmingly Western: Facebook, Google, Amazon and UPS. Western economies will thus benefit from the boosts of new firms and the adaptability of existing firms in the economy.

Finally, the weight of history suggests that Western countries can find ways to pull themselves out of decline. In America, there is a proud belief in the idea that America can pull through anything; be it the Great Depression of the '30s, World War Two in the '40s, or the threat of terrorism after the September 2001 attacks, there is an "American optimism" about America that suggests it will find a way to succeed, in the words of Thomas Friedman. Similarly, Europe's collective hardship after World War Two led to prosperity in the later parts of the century. This is always hard to quantify, but the will of a people to repair their country and the leadership of a democratically elected champion are the elements of the Western world should we discount, at our peril.

No one doubts that thus far, Asia has been able to embark on an unprecedented path of growth. This does not mean, however, that it will continue this forever while the West lags behind. Already, China and India have had to revise their expected growth rates downward (from 7% to 5%, and 9% to 8% respectively) amid a harsher economic climate. Reality suggests that a globally interconnected economy entails mutual benefit or mutual sorrow. If Asia is dependent on Western trade, and vice versa, one cannot benefit absolutely while the other suffers absolutely. Hence, the stagnation of the West could ironically limit the growth of the Asian economies, while conversely, the growth of Asia could pull the West out of recession. This is why the EU is trying to remain China's biggest trading partner with even more trade liberalisation, and the US is entering free trade agreement talks with ASEAN in the ASEAN+3 dialogues. Thus, we cannot deem the rise of Asia and the fall of the West inevitable, not only because there are good reasons to believe that either of these trends could be reversed, but also because economic reality suggests that the next twenty to thirty years will not be a zero-sum game: the East and West will most probably sink or swim together. Let us hope it is the latter.

**Marker's comments:**

***Excellent! A good balance; I have enjoyed the historical, social, economic tour – Thank you! Nuanced, credible, and well-reasoned and substantiated. Natural and very fluent!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 17

"The rise of the East and fall of the West are inevitable." Do you agree?

Aditya Hanumaraddi Kurtakoti 12S03Q

A brief review of the daily headlines would show that the East – which refers to countries such as China and India – is making relentless progress, while the West is stuck in a rut that is difficult to get out from. Political commentators and politicians alike are suggesting that the future belongs to the rising powers of the East, while the West seems to be facing nearly insurmountable challenges that presage its ultimate decline. The reality, however, is a bit more complex and nuanced than what many would have us believe. The rapid economic and industrial progress of countries in the East, coupled with the declining economic vitality of the West would suggest that the rise of the East and the fall of the West are inevitable. Along with economic power comes political power, which countries in the East are gaining and those in the West are losing. This would also lead us to the same conclusion of the inevitability of Eastern dominance and Western decline. However, on closer examination, it would appear that countries in the East have to contend with numerous problems – indicating that their rise is not entirely guaranteed. Whatever the case, one thing is for sure – momentous changes in the global scene are happening, and things will not quite be the same ever again.

Countries in the East, particularly China and India, are experiencing tremendous economic growth, while those in the West are mired in crises, and are finding it difficult to recover their footing. China, until recently, was experiencing annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth in the double digits, and has managed to overtake Japan's economy in terms of absolute size. In India as well, major reforms carried out by the then Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, have led to tremendous growth and the emergence of a massive middle class. Along with China and India, other countries – South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore – have posted solid economic performances as well. With the economic rise of Asia, pundits and academics alike, claim that the economic centre of gravity is shifting to the East, thereby marking the emergence of Asia onto the world scene. On the other hand, prospects do not seem so bright for countries in the West. Despite recent increases in employment, unemployment in the United States is still very high. GDP growth has slowed considerably in the US, and there are still concerns that it might slip back into recession. In Europe, the Eurozone is still mired in a deep economic and debt crisis, and leaders now seem to be talking about a Greek default and its consequent exit from the Euro. Spanish youth unemployment is also the highest among all developed countries, with no sign of decreasing in the near future. The economic rise of Asia, accompanied by the economic decline of the West would make it seem that in the economic sphere, Asia's rise and the fall of the West are indeed inevitable.

Along with economic power comes political power and influence, and here too, the increasing political power and influence of the West makes it seem that the rise of the East and the fall of the West are inevitable. Buoyed by its economic performance and realising the need to protect the country, the Chinese government has ramped up spending on defence. It now has its first aircraft carrier, and is developing its first stealth fighter. India has also made huge budgetary commitments to upgrade its military, given that its military hardware is ageing fast. Furthermore, China is on a charm offensive in Africa, wooing countries with various forms of aid and development assistance, which come with almost no strings attached. This has increased African support for China. All these point to the fact that countries in the East are becoming increasingly assertive, and militarily and politically more powerful. On the other hand, countries in the West seem to be facing political and military decline. Britain has announced that it intends to reduce its number of aircraft carriers [two new carriers to enter service by 2018], while the US Defence Secretary Leon Panetta has made it clear his intention to embark on aggressive spending cuts. Furthermore, the expensive wars fought in Afghanistan and Iraq have severely dented the political influence and credibility of the US, currently the most powerful nation on Earth. Domestic political issues have further reduced the political credibility of European countries as well. The intense voter backlash against austerity and economic difficulties has led to radical and fringe parties gaining traction in the electorate. For instance, the Greek party Syriza, which campaigns for a renegotiation of the austerity measures, gained a convincing vote share in the recent Greek elections, while the anti-immigrant party of Geert Wilders in Denmark, now known





as the Party for Freedom, has almost moved into the mainstream of politics. The emergence of such radical and fringe parties definitely puts a dent on the political influence and credibility of Europe, especially in the long term. The rapid political rise of Asia, combined with the decline of Western political influence, would make it seem that Asia's rise and the fall of the West are inevitable.

However, on closer inspection, there appears to be problems in the East, while the West has not lost everything just yet. While countries in the East have made extraordinary progress in gaining economic and political power, there are still problems and flashpoints that show that Asia's rise is far from guaranteed. Unless they are able to effectively and adequately address these problems, they might completely derail what would seem to be the inevitable ascension of the East. Firstly, the political conflicts in the South China Sea and on the Indo-Pakistani border have to be addressed. China claims that territories in the South China Sea are part of its sphere of influence, a claim that other countries are quick to dispute. The recent "pivot" of the US to the East has only exacerbated a dispute which has the potential to spiral out of control, thereby undermining the rise of the East. Furthermore, the barely functional government in Pakistan may not be able to secure the numerous nuclear weapons it possesses, thereby raising the possibility that they might fall into the wrong hands – those of extremists and radicals. This could prove to be potentially destabilising for the entire region, thereby undermining Asia's rise to dominance. On the other hand, Western countries still have much to cheer about. Despite the economic difficulties they are facing, their economies, in terms of absolute size, are still far ahead of those of the developing countries in the East. Furthermore, they are home to innovation and world leading companies like Apple and Facebook, which represent the future of creativity that will come to define the global marketplace. Also, despite the numerous economic and political problems the West is facing, those problems can still be resolved, providing hope that the West may not entirely be in decline after all. For example, under President Obama, troops in Iraq have ended their combat mission and have handed over responsibility of internal security to the domestic forces. Given these issues, Asia's rise and the fall of the West would seem far from inevitable.

The fact that Asia's cultural influence is weak, and that of the West is strong, means that in this sphere at least, the rise of the East and the decline of the West are not entirely inevitable. In a world where cultural influence is almost as important as that of political and economic influence, it pays to project one's "soft power". China is having much difficulty in this area – its films and productions are still not as popular as those of Western countries, even in China itself. On the other hand, the cultural influence of the Western nations, particularly the US, is unparalleled. The Golden Arches, for instance, are instantly recognisable everywhere, and Western music and pop culture is admired and consumed all over the world. At least in terms of cultural influence, Asia's rise and the fall of the West are not entirely inevitable.

The rise of China, India and other Asian powers marks a momentous change from the past, when Europe and the US were unquestionably the dominant powers. It would seem now that the world is very much at a tipping point. The actions that the Eastern countries take to tackle the domestic and political issues they face will determine the future trajectory that they take. Meanwhile, the decision that Western countries make about the problems they are facing today will go a long way in deciding the destiny and position of these countries in tomorrow's world.

**Marker's comments:**

***You're obviously very knowledgeable in this topic, and it shows in the essay - a joy to read. Insightful and well-substantiated arguments.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 18

Do you agree that the tools of social media have reinvented social activism?

Seethor Jun Xian Bryan 12S03G

It is indeed a telling sign of the times when one of the world's most respected and eminent magazines chooses to crown "The Protestor" as its Person of the Year for 2011. TIME magazine's suspicious choice accurately reflected the social zeitgeist that the world of 2011 was going through with its somewhat unprecedented actions. Yet, given the spate of tumultuous protests across the world occurring within such a short time period – Occupy Wall Street protests worldwide, the various Tahrir Square sit-ins and the anti-austerity protests that still continue till this day in Greece – the veracity of the idea that "The Protestor" could be the Person of the Year is not such a shocking claim after all. These various protestors may each have their own separate agendas and motives, but there is one striking similarity between these seemingly isolated incidents occurring around the globe – the prevalence of the use of social media. From the ingenious use of 140 character long 'tweets' to organise protests that would ultimately topple the Mubarak regime, to the creation of Facebook events inviting people from all walks of life to sit in at various parks around America as part of the Occupy Wall Street movement, it is unquestionable that the tools of social media have had a profound effect on the way we perceive social activism. Considering this then, would it be mendacity on one's part to say definitively that the tools of social media have reinvented social activism? This essay will posit that despite the great power and clout still held by traditional media such as newspapers and print, social media's ubiquity, accessibility, efficacy, and speed have impacted the very way we perceive and engage in social activism to the extent that it would be undeniable that social media has revolutionised, and reinvented social activism.

Nevertheless, it remains useful to consider the views of those who espouse the opinion that social media, being but a fad, has not reinvented social activism, and that traditional forms of media such as print and television still reign supreme. Adherents of these views argue that as much as social media has the potential to revolutionise social activism, it is an undeniable fact that the catalyst behind any successful social activism attempt lies in soliciting the help of the rich and famous. The power exerted by the rich and famous, and its corollary ability to mould and shape the mindsets and views of those whom the social activist wishes to target is a redoubtable one, as evidenced by the panoply of non-government organisations fronted by Hollywood A-listers such as Ellen DeGeneres, Brad Pitt, George Clooney, and the like. Ellen DeGeneres, for instance, is a fervid supporter of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) rights, lobbying on various occasions through her wildly influential eponymous show, The Ellen DeGeneres show. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt too have engaged in numerous publicity stunts reported in newspapers worldwide to raise awareness of the prevalence of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa, in a bid to raise funds to ameliorate the rapidly deteriorating situation. George Clooney too, the dapper debonair of Hollywood, found the chance to engage in social activism through his (very intentional) public protest about human rights abuses in Omar-al Bashir's war-torn state of Sudan. His extremely (once again, intended) public arrest by police outside the Sudanese embassy generated so much hype and awareness that internet traffic and searches regarding the Sudanese human rights abuses tripled in the hours and days after his stunt. Indeed, the near-fanatical following of fan-boys and fan-girls alike across the world of their favourite idols and celebrities has been used and harnessed by the powerful and influential to further their social activism goals worldwide. This, proponents of this stand argue, remains as the bedrock of social activism, for people do take notice when the rich and powerful speak. The occurrence of social media, then, is but a flash in a pan, for its minute effects can hardly match up to the omnipresence of the soft power exerted on us by celebrities from halfway across the world. Social activism's success, then, lies largely in soliciting help from the rich and famous, and the emergence of social media has not detracted from that, and thus, it is impossible to claim that it has been revolutionised or reinvented.

The second salvo fired by advocates of the claim that social media has not reinvented social activism is that the power of 'old' and 'traditional' media still reigns supreme if one's wish is to further one's social activism goals. Those who dismiss traditional media as outdated and past its prime are surely myopic, given the immense clout that respected publications, such as TIME, Newsweek, CNN, BBC, and Fox News, among the many present, have over the *hoi polloi* even in this day and age. An estimated 84% of citizens in developed countries worldwide have access to traditional media such as newspapers and television. Publications, such as TIME magazine and the New York Times, have editorial pages where eminent and esteemed persons of great erudition air their views regarding social issues. Given the immaculate reputation of such publications, coupled with the unbiased reporting, those on the receiving end are indeed greatly influenced by these articles. A recent TIME exposé on the plight of sweatshop workers in Asia raised a furore when many learnt about the ghastly and horrific working conditions many sweatshop workers toil under. Protests boycotting multinational corporations (MNCs), such as Nike and Reebok, sprung up around the world as social activist groups, spurred on by the articles they had read, lobbied for an improvement in the onerous working conditions workers in China, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, among many others, had to toil under. A similar exposé by traditional media worldwide about the highly publicised Foxconn suicides sparked serious soul-searching and reform on the part of Apple, catalysed in due part by lobby groups inspired by the plethora of news articles and coverage given to an issue that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Indeed, given the substantial clout that old and traditional media still possess in terms of sparking an interest in social activism, it would be unwise to conclude definitively that the tools of social media have reinvented social activism, for the empirical evidence worldwide does prove that they do hold considerable power.

While such vociferous and clamorous arguments against the idea that social media has reinvented social activism would seem, *prima facie*, to hold water, given that nothing much has changed about the way one conducts it, to blithely accept these claims at face value would do inimical detriment to the complexities of such a situation. Upon closer inspection, one finds a strong need to temper these parochial and myopic arguments with a degree of nuance and perspective.

The prevalence of social media around the world is astounding, with the number of people having access to social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook growing and burgeoning each day. The ubiquity of such platforms has even extended to mobile phone platforms, allowing the common man on the street unprecedented access to a plethora of views and issues. Traditional forms of media such as print and television do have their benefits, but it appears that the juggernaut, that is social media, seems to be rapidly overtaking and eclipsing its power as the go-to method to promote social activism. The one commonality between the Tahrir Square protests that unseated President Hosni Mubarak from power, the Occupy Wall Street protests, and the KONY 2012 saga, is that they all fed on the accessibility and omnipresence of social media. No powerful person to back your cause? No problem. No magazine willing to publish an article you wrote? No problem. With the click of a mouse, a flick of a finger or the press of a button, the common man on the street is able to air his grouches and views. In fact, when that sentiment is common to many around him, social media can serve as a catalyst for a revolution, as Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali found out, to their detriment. The iconic Occupy Wall Street protests worldwide more famously organised through the use of Facebook events, resulting in hundreds of thousands of protestors with nothing in common but a Facebook event invite, gathering to show their displeasure. Even KONY 2012, a catchy byword today for the mind-boggling effects of social activism, thrived on the numerous re-tweets and mentions it got on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, sparking interest in an issue the world had barely even heard of before. Indeed, the accessibility and ubiquity of social media to the common man on the street is juxtaposed with the (relative) inaccessibility of traditional media. In fact, celebrities too are jumping on the bandwagon, with many, upon recognising the revolutionary effect of social media, are turning to such platforms to garner support for their causes. For example, Ellen DeGeneres, as mentioned earlier, possesses a Twitter account, as do George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and many other Hollywood A-listers. The telling sign of so many of the rich and famous turning to such platforms is a sheer testament to the revolutionising effect that social media has had on social activism.

The effectiveness of social media too, can be argued as being greater than that of traditional forms of media. Such publications often go through rounds of vetting and editing so as to ensure that the article or news piece does not diverge too far from the publication's official stand. In the process, many gut-wrenching events are turned into cold and unemotional statistics and numbers that rarely exert appreciable effects on people already numb to the overload of information surrounding them. Social media, on the other hand, lacks this rigorous vetting process, and as such, human emotions such as fear, pain, and hatred that transcend international boundaries and nationalities can be broadcast worldwide, appealing to the visceral emotions that each and every human being is genetically programmed to feel. Videos taken of riot police brutality in the Mubarak regime's crackdown on protestors shocked many with the raw gore and bloodshed in ways that rational news headlines devoid of emotion would never be able to accomplish. Tweets by anguished Syrians fleeing from strife in war-torn Syria carry with them the common human emotion of fear that all will be able to identify with in ways that a newspaper report never can. In fact, such a raw, first-hand view afforded to many as a result of the prevalence of social media has made it possible to pluck at the emotions and heartstrings of people worldwide and allowed many to identify with those involved. The feeling that one has a shared human bond is better elucidated through the use of social media as compared to that of the relatively stoic 'old media', thus eliciting a stronger, and faster response – exactly the response desired by social activists. Indeed, the effectiveness of social media in allowing strangers to empathise with another fellow human being is what allows social media to trump traditional media for the years to come.

The prevalence of social media in use to further social activists' gains has made many sit up and gape in awe of its magical, almost spellbinding effects. Even though traditional old media forms do hold substantial power and clout, it is patently obvious for all to see that the emergence of social media has reinvented and revolutionised social activism in every facet given its ubiquity and efficacy. Social activism is now, in many ways, intricately associated with social media, and for good reason – it gives power, finally, to the people.

***Marker's comments:***

***Good essay structure, balanced, clearly written with a unique approach. Good job!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 19

To what extent should schools use examinations to evaluate students?

Lee Whee Sian Dylan 12A01B

The extent to which schools should use examinations to evaluate students really depends on what is intended to be evaluated. Traditionally, examinations take the form of rigorous, three-hour papers where two, four or six years' worth of teaching material will be assessed in a written and sometimes oral form. This is a tried and tested means of evaluating students for their subject-based learning in school. In fact, examinations can also be a test of a student's skills, such as consistency and mental discipline. However, the evaluation of students should and must not be limited merely to the assessment of subject-based learning, but learning as a whole, which includes practical application of content, teamwork, and presentation skills. This is where the concept of continued assessment, which arguably, more holistically evaluates students based on their learning over a longer time frame, can be said to be more useful than examinations only.

As far as testing a student for his or her subject-based learning is concerned, it cannot be doubted that examinations have fulfilled this purpose very well. In a society where there is a stronger desire to be meritocratic, where opportunities are equal even though the outcome might not be, standardised examinations can be seen as a rather fair means of assessing the student population that has studied the same material. Given that examinations can be said to be as fair as reasonably possible, they are accurate evaluations of a student's subject-based ability as it tests for both speed and accuracy in the application of whatever they have learnt at school. For instance, this is best represented in Mathematics, where students have to solve sums of increasing complexity, using materials across sub-topics in the subject, accurately, and quickly, as there are many questions to be completed in a short time given. In Literature, students have to analyse a passage and tease out the nuances of certain words and phrases, and then write an essay of sufficient depth, sensitivity to language and empathy in order to score well. Through such rigour in the actual examination process, it must be admitted that examinations are effective and fair in evaluating students on their subject-based knowledge and skills, the tangible aspect of what they spend the first decade or more of their lives learning in the classroom.

More than evaluating just the actual process of solving sums and writing essays, however, what examinations do is that they reflect the process of preparing for these examinations themselves, highlighting and evaluating a student's 'soft-skills', such as consistency and the mental discipline that comes with that, as well as the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn concepts previously taught and now taught at a higher level. In essence, examinations evaluate learning and effort that goes on behind the scenes. There are, arguably, students extremely adept at memorising facts, dates, formulas, names and quotes only a day or even the night before the examination and yet end up scoring better than most. This is, however, probably only the minority, and they possibly will not be as adaptable with this knowledge as someone else who has diligently read his or her notes over the course of a year. All this boils down to the fact that examinations are versatile in that application is more crucial than regurgitation. In History, a slight tweak in the wording of a question can warrant a complete reorganisation of information to answer, for instance, 'Who ended the Cold War?' versus 'What ended the Cold War?' Therefore, examinations indirectly evaluate students' consistency and discipline to carry out their work through the course of the years. Examinations are hence an effective evaluation of a student's learning.

Moreover, examinations tend to simulate real life in that they are probably the only chance in a year that a student will get to be evaluated on the above discussed subject-based learning and on consistency and discipline. Examinations can be argued to be an assessment of how well a student sits for a paper within the time given, rather than a holistic assessment of a student's true learning. This is similar to real life, where one opportunity is all we get to create a new product or to gain a company a customer with high purchasing power.

However, it is crucial to distinguish this from the real purpose of evaluating students. A school is where learning is conducted, and such learning need not simply be the imbibing of knowledge into one's head and the relatively 'practical' skills such as evaluation and inference that come with subject-based learning. That is far too narrow a scope for learning to be qualified. Learning can and must include people-skills too, presentation of ideas, going beyond the penning down of theory to the application of it. These, examinations cannot do fully – not with only one shot granted to students. These require a more continued assessment that spans a longer time period, to assess other forms of learning that purely examinations alone can never achieve.

The ability of examinations used by schools in evaluating learning in terms of teamwork and people-skills is limited. Teamwork is crucial today, where one cannot expect, realistically, to organise a business out of one's backyard like a hermit and rely solely on oneself to survive. One needs people, and the way one interacts with people beyond pen and paper is an extremely valuable evaluation of one's learning. For instance, secondary schools in various countries, be it in America or Singapore, or even in the Kingdom of Bhutan, all incorporate teamwork into their assessment criteria, with students having to work in groups to solve problems together, to carry out scientific study, to conduct joint research on problems and write reports and make presentations on it. Project Work in Singapore is an examinable subject which somewhat successfully incorporates the concept of having to work with randomly assigned team mates with the intended rigour of a year-long research. These are all assessments of one's people skills, where if one does not work as a team player, the entire team's work will be compromised, and this will be reflected in the final product. For instance, in staging *Gulliver's Travels* as a team of nine, if one member refuses to turn up or cooperate with the rest, there might be a shortage of characters for the play, or the sets might not be as great as they should be. These all show that in terms of evaluating teamwork and people skills, the extent to which examinations can assess them in a short three-hour context with absolute silence to be maintained, seems to be rather limited, as compared with longer term situations in which students are assessed, with regard to their learning on how to communicate and relate to fellow humans.

Examinations might not be the most effective in terms of evaluating students beyond answering questions on a particular topic. In terms of assessing learning based on application of theory, technical institutes and polytechnics can be said to be better, as they test not only theoretical knowledge, but how to transform theory into actual products. In mainstream schools, one can learn Economics. In the Pathlight School, however, students get the chance to create board games on spending money wisely, which require application of economic concepts. Such methods of assessment are put in place to ensure that students have indeed learnt to apply learning beyond abstract concepts. Hence, where practical application of learning is concerned, examinations might not be the best means of evaluating students.

With the creation of products comes the presentation of ideas. Examinations do not adequately evaluate students on their presentation skills. Despite the fact that there might be oral examinations where students have to read passages aloud and answer certain questions based on the passage, it is more often than not, a poor evaluation of one's true presentation ability. Presentations go beyond rote memorisation of certain key phrases used to answer an examiner's stereotypical, standard questions. Presentations include persuasion in one's use of language, one's posture when one speaks, one's eye contact and smile, one's voice projection and ability to convince. These are all skills which cannot be assessed in a five-minute session with two examiners. Rather, this evaluation has to be conducted over the course of possibly three terms or more, with trained teachers to evaluate these students on learning beyond the subject. This calls for continued assessment as a far more representative way of evaluating students for their learning in this aspect.

Ultimately, examinations must not be relegated to the periphery of schools' assessment criteria. Examinations provide schools with a fair tool which can be extremely effective in evaluating students based on the rigour of their learning, be it during or before the test, as well as how well they can condition themselves to perform within a pressure-cooker situation of three hours, where speed and accuracy are crucial. However, what examinations can neglect is the tangible evaluation of what

is needed even more in today's society, where the ability to connect and present, the ability to not just talk but perform and show, and the ability to withstand scrutiny over not just three hours but throughout a more extended length of time. This shows that examinations are limited in its evaluation of students' learning in these aspects. Arguably too, one's ability in galvanising a team towards completing a given task is far more holistic a representation of both content mastery and soft-skills, rather than simply the evaluation of content mastery in a written test. Therefore, in a world where consistency and rigour are valued, examinations are useful evaluative tools for schools to use, but the use of this tool must be scaled back to make room for more continued assessments, which can maintain the rigour of assessment if used well, and can evaluate students more thoroughly over a longer period of time for aspects of learning that examinations can almost never do.

**Marker's comments:**

***Mature, analytical and convincing. You have approached this GP exam with such poise and confidence that you would seem to me a strong candidate for a very good grade! I have enjoyed your perspectives and evaluation of examinations!***

# General Paper Year 6 Class Assignment

essay 20

Consider the view that efficient government is more important than democracy.

Wong Kwang Ik | 12S06E

Ever since democracy with universal suffrage became the norm for governments in the twentieth century, this system of governance has received praise for the unprecedented extent in which it allows the voice of ordinary citizens to be heard. A democratic government is a great proponent of equality in society, as well as the extension of the will of the people. These attributes have led to some declaring democracy as the most ideal political system. However, others have drawn attention to democracy's flaws, notably the inefficiency inherent in the electoral process and the accompanying problems of clumsy inaction, which casts a cloud over democracy's successes. This is reinforced by the opinion that a government focused on efficiency, though it suffers from other problems of its own, may in fact prove to be more effective than a democratic one. I feel that the conditions in which a nation exists largely determine what form of government will best fulfill its aim of maximising the welfare of the people.

That democracy results in inefficiency is clearly seen in many instances where matters have been put to a vote. For example, the many referendums in the direct democracy of Switzerland over trivial issues such as placement of a town hall have slowed down government action – a needless hindrance that could have been circumvented with a swift unilateral decision. With more people involved in the decision-making process, the slower it is for the process of voting, counting and recounting of votes. The more common representative democracy, however, merely requires the same tedious job to be done every few years. In times of crisis, where decisions need to be made urgently, this time lag is unacceptable. In the Greco-Persian War, democratic Athens was engaged in a heated debate on whether to engage the Persians at the narrow strait of Salamis or the nearer open waters of Peloponnesus. The debate was far from its conclusion, when the Greek admiral, seeing the imminent threat to his state, decided to take the Greek fleet to a decisive battle at Salamis, saving Athens from certain conquest by the Persian Empire. Had he allowed the democratic process to reach its conclusion, it seems likely that the ships of Persia would have landed on Greek shores long before a decision was made. Clearly, democratic processes lack the rapid response to crises that characterises an efficient government. It can be concluded that the fewer the number of people involved in making a decision, the more efficient a government is. Aristocracy and monarchy, systems of government that concentrate power in a small number of individuals, are examples of such governments.

Even outside times of crisis, a democratic government may be a poor choice. The nature of universal suffrage may guarantee that every citizen's view is heard, but in situations where the opinion of the average citizen is flawed and incorrect, this is far from a good thing. Democracy effectively says that one man's ignorance is worth another's knowledge, and in societies where (as is the norm) the ignorant massively outnumber the knowledgeable, the undesirable effect is that the best solution to tackling a problem is discarded in favour of flawed "conventional knowledge". One such case is the vote on inter-racial marriage in the USA in the 1960s. Many ethicists and anthropologists came forward to present a reasoned case for permitting blacks to marry whites, but for the better part of the decade were shouted down by uneducated knuckle-draggers who misquoted religious texts to mask their bigotry – an opposition that, unfortunately, in many states comprised the majority of voters. In contrast, the governments of countries such as South Africa, The Netherlands and Singapore eschewed the voting process and simply presented a direct pronouncement, avoiding years of bitter and fruitless bickering. In these countries, democracy, rightly, was given no say in the issue.

That said, the nature of an efficient government in which power is concentrated in a small number of people is that the process of succession is not transparent, nor does it guarantee continued efficiency. Many of the great rulers in the past have chosen poor successors, decisions that eventually led to the kingdom's fall. Caesar Augustus, considered one of Rome's greatest rulers, left no son, thus leaving



his odious step-son Caligula with the claim to the throne. Genghis Khan made the opposite mistake, leaving several offspring to tussle over his empire. It seems that while these governments achieve great things in times of crises, they cannot last in peacetime. Notably, while King Henry V of England decreed that a king should be a skillful man-at-arms, his descendant Henry VIII promptly squandered the nation's reserves on fruitless wars and tournaments. The man, or men, in power will always seek to ensure that their progeny remain in power, and as such will opt for the thoroughly poor option of dynastic succession. In contrast, succession in a democracy takes place within the rigidly confined and transparent bounds of the electoral process which, slow and flawed as it is, at least provides a measure of legitimacy to the ruler.

Furthermore, the decisions made by an efficient government are not always correct. A government such as a monarchy generally lacks the automatic input of the people's wishes on which democracy is built. As such, there is a great risk of a 'disconnect' between the perceived needs of the people and their actual needs. While a monarchy or a totalitarian state may be able to make good decisions in the political or economic sphere, the strength of such decisions is likely to be lacking in the social sphere, where action based on bad information may cause the situation to worsen. The Indian rebellion is one such example – when a rumour spread that the fat of sacred cows was being used to grease muskets belonging to the Indian regiments, the British commanders dismissed not only the truth of the rumour but also its importance, claiming that the source of the grease was of no importance. No doubt they saw their statement as underscoring the sheer insignificance of the rumour, an attempt to minimise its effect – yet the result was to spark a backlash that cost hundreds of lives. In contrast, the USA's response to the opposing calls for and against homosexual marriage has been to leave the matter to the ballot box, an approach which emphasises the primacy of the welfare of the majority. Should homosexual marriage be banned as it has been in North Carolina, there can be no complaints about bigotry – the decision arises from voters, not the government.

In conclusion, the statement that efficient government is more important than democracy is a fatuous one if the conditions of a state are not considered. At times, a state will need a Wellington or a Churchill to rescue it from dire crisis; then democracy must be elbowed aside. When stability returns though, the war heroes should back out of the limelight and allow democracy to do what it does best – the job of running a nation's day-to-day matters where a fast decision is less important than a correct one.

**Marker's comments:**

***An interesting and well sustained discussion. Very succinct and yet adequately nuanced in your approach. Good interesting and original examples.***

***There is a strong personal voice here, yet the essay is very balanced in perspective.***

***Well done!***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 5 Common Test (2012)

essay 21

'All knowledge should be built on a foundation of indisputable beliefs.' Discuss.

Joy Chia Jing Xian : 13S06N

The structure of knowledge leaves any knowledge open to sceptical attack. In response to such epistemological doubt, philosophers have attempted to ground all knowledge on a foundation of indisputable, indubitable beliefs. However, is the foundationalist approach the ultimate answer to scepticism and is it truly the best model for the construction of knowledge? This essay will discuss the merits and limitations of foundationalism while exploring other non-foundationalist models of construction of all knowledge.

The propositional structure of knowledge leaves it vulnerable to sceptical attack. Any justification must be qualified by appealing to further justification. Given that the regress of justification may extend indefinitely, leaving all our knowledge open to scepticism, philosophers have appealed to the possibility of a bedrock of foundational beliefs to put an end to the problem of infinite regress. They reasoned that the existence of self-justifying beliefs would allow such beliefs to act as an end point for the regress of justification and hence serve as certain bedrock for a superstructure of other beliefs. This epistemological approach is foundationalism. However rifts in the foundationalist movement produced two opposing foundationalist approaches: rationalism and empiricism.

Rationalism holds that the indubitable beliefs we should base our knowledge on should arise purely from reason since our senses deceive us. The movement was spearheaded by Descartes, who dubbed such rational beliefs to be "clear and distinct ideas". Rationalism appeals to the indubitable nature of *a priori* truths which can be discovered by thought alone. Most of these truths are analytic, for example the statement "all bachelors are unmarried men". Since the predicate is contained in the subject, it is impossible to doubt such knowledge claims without contradiction. Hence just by thinking, one should be able to ascertain the truth of such statements. From this bedrock of necessarily true rational beliefs, the rationalist maintains that one might be able to form a superstructure of other beliefs.

However, despite the appeal of knowledge we can obtain by thought alone, rationalism greatly limits our scope of knowledge. The approach hinges on the often analytic nature of such *a priori* truths. One can gain knowledge by mere thought and analysis of the statement and its definition. However, this approach fails us when we attempt to gain knowledge of contingent truths. In these cases, the subject does not contain the predicate, so it is possible to doubt the statement without contradiction. Rationalism is able to tell me for certain that all bachelors are unmarried men, but it cannot tell me about the colour of the bachelor's shirt since nothing in the definition or nature of a bachelor dictates the colour of the shirt he must wear. It is entirely possible that the bachelor is wearing a yellow shirt or a striped shirt, since individually there is no contradiction in either of the statements. It seems impossible to establish such contingent truths (especially of the world external to the mind) by thought alone, since without empirical investigation it would be impossible for the mind to formulate knowledge of the external world. Rationalism greatly limits our knowledge of the natural sciences and aesthetics, since these involve contingent truths about the world external to the mind. No amount of thought should tell me that a rock will certainly fall when dropped, since nothing in the nature of definition of a rock dictates that it will obey the laws of gravity. It is conceivable that even the laws of physics could be otherwise.

It seems, then, that rationalism leads us to a dead end where we can have no knowledge of contingent truths of the external world. Hence, empiricists argue that the indubitable beliefs we should base our knowledge on should be empirical rather than rational knowledge. This approach, known as empiricism, is based on the incorrigibility of immediate sensa. Though it may be a hologram or illusion, it seems impossible to doubt that I perceive what appear to be a vase of flowers. Although the source of my perceptions may be doubted, the immediate perceptions that present themselves to

me cannot. Hence the empiricist claims that we can base all knowledge on a bedrock of incorrigible *sensa*, from which we construct all superstructure beliefs. The appeal of empiricism is that through our sense perceptions of the world, we can claim to have knowledge of contingent truths in a way a rationalist cannot. Hence empiricism allows us to have knowledge of natural science and the external world through empirical investigation.

However, the empirical approach is also limited as a model of knowledge construction. Closer inspection of empiricism reveals that superstructural beliefs based on sense data fail to have the same certainty as the immediate sense. This is because any claim of knowledge based on *sensa* involves not only the immediate *sensa*, but goes beyond the immediacy of perception to involve propositional claims about the sense as well. The justification of such claims and the propositional nature of the claims leave the superstructure of beliefs open to skeptical attack. Hence, we again fall into the trap of solipsism, since all we can be certain of is our perceptions. We cannot make any meaningful claim or even speak of them due to the possibility of misdescribing it or the possibility of sense deception.

Furthermore, even if we are to mitigate our extreme philosophical doubt and avoid solipsism, empiricism limits our knowledge in fields where there are no empirically observable facts. If empirical knowledge is to be the bedrock of all our knowledge, it would be impossible to formulate knowledge of physics and many theoretical sciences. It seems impossible to empirically experience something as small as an atom, so I cannot empirically establish anything involving atomic chemistry. Also, knowledge of aesthetics would be limited too. We may empirically experience beautiful things, but it seems impossible to empirically experience Beauty itself.

It seems that the justified, certain knowledge based on a foundation of indisputable beliefs comes at the expense of our scope of knowledge. There is also the question of what type of indisputable beliefs should form the bedrock of all our knowledge: knowledge based on reason, or empirical knowledge? Furthermore, some may contend the existence of such indisputable beliefs. For example, even my immediate *sensa*, incorrigible though they may seem, can be doubted or influenced by other beliefs. I may be convinced that I have a toothache and the toothache may be incorrigible to me. However, should a doctor present sophisticated scientific data and evidence to show me that what I am actually experiencing is a headache, I might be induced to change my mind. I might even start to feel the pain differently. It seems then that even our “foundational” beliefs can be influenced by other beliefs. Given this observation, some may doubt the existence of indisputable beliefs on which to build our knowledge foundation. It seems then that a foundation of indisputable beliefs, apart from greatly limiting our knowledge, may actually be impossible.

Hence, to overcome such crippling limitations, we might then appeal to non-foundational approaches to epistemology. Coherentism rejects the idea that knowledge is to be founded on a bedrock of indisputable beliefs. Instead of justifying a belief with self-justifying foundational beliefs, the coherentist concedes that regress of justification may indeed extend indefinitely, but a sufficient degree of certainty can be reached by checking the coherence of a knowledge claim to a pre-existing set of beliefs. That is to say that a new belief is justified if it does not contradict my other existing beliefs, and if it supports (and is likewise supported by) these other beliefs. The claim that large fire-breathing dragons living in wardrobes contradicts my beliefs of all the wardrobes I have encountered. The claim that large fire-breathing dragons on a moon in the Milky Way does not actively contradict my beliefs, but it does not cohere well either since I have no beliefs to support that claim. Hence it is unlikely that I could accept either claim based on coherentism.

It is worth noting that the nature of coherentism justifies a belief through its relation to other beliefs. However, it is impossible to reconcile two contradicting belief systems based on coherentism alone since independently, both systems cohere.

Another non-foundationalist approach to constructing knowledge would be reliabilism. Reliabilism asserts that, so long as a belief is obtained through reliable method, it is justified as knowledge. Its justification may very well be external to the mind. A sea captain may have no idea about how a

compass functions, but he is nonetheless justified in knowing that it is a useful tool for navigating his ship since he learned of it through reliable means.

Here we see that despite conceding that we cannot be absolutely certain about knowledge, non-foundationalist models of construction of our knowledge provide us with a much larger scope of knowledge, especially of the external world. Even if we are to mitigate our scepticism to avoid the trap of solipsism, foundationalist rationalism and empiricism greatly limit our knowledge of the external world, or of concepts with no possible empirical data respectively. The price of foundationalism's certainty is a very limited scope of knowledge. If we are to base knowledge on a bedrock of indisputable beliefs, we would end up not knowing very much at all. Hence it is misguided to hold that all knowledge should be built on a foundation of indisputable beliefs, especially since even the existence of such beliefs is questionable. If we are to discard the notion of a foundation of indisputable beliefs and instead turn to non-foundationalist models of epistemology, we would have a much more pragmatic approach to knowledge construction to provide us with knowledge necessary to function normally in our daily lives.

***Marker's comments:***

***Very well written piece of work, Joy!***

***You have your concepts and theories learnt well and have managed to relate these to the question in a clear and relevant manner. A little more elaboration on the coherentist and reliabilist ideas would have made these perfect.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 5 Common Test (2012)

## essay 22

'Justified true beliefs.' How suitable is this as a definition of knowledge?

Yap Choon Kiat Luther : 13S07C

Knowledge is often thought of as any justified true belief, and this definition of knowledge entails that the conditions of justification, truth, and belief are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a proposition to be considered knowledge. However, some challenges to this definition of knowledge have arisen to argue that some of the conditions are unnecessary, or that there are other conditions which are required for knowledge, but they are generally unsuccessful. Overall, where the common use of the word 'knowledge' is concerned, 'justified true beliefs' is still a suitable definition.

It is important to first establish that 'knowledge' in this essay would refer to propositional knowledge or knowledge by description. Bertrand Russell, in his *Problems of Philosophy*, suggests that there is knowledge by acquaintance, and knowledge by description. Knowledge by acquaintance is achieved when one experiences the world and is acquainted with similarities in experiences. For instance, I know that an object is called a chair when it resembles the things I have encountered in the past that are called chairs. Knowledge by description is phrased in the form 'X is Y', where only X is Y, and this is used to relate our knowledge by acquaintance. As such, assuming that I have never seen a chair before, one could describe a chair as something that creates some form of elevation from the ground, etc. and I would have knowledge by description from my previous acquaintances of what 'elevation' and 'ground' means. Since knowledge by acquaintance is mainly conceptual and cannot be expressed as a proposition, unlike knowledge by description, and only a proposition can be evaluated in justification and truth, we shall proceed on the assumption that 'knowledge' refers to knowledge by description.

Some people would argue that justification is not a necessary condition for knowledge, but it is generally absurd to believe that. In *Theaetetus*, Plato argues that if a juror makes a decision based on hearsay or if he is racist, he is unjustified to make a verdict and hence does not have knowledge of the case. Suppose I claim that green monkeys can fly. I might genuinely believe that and it may be true, but few would consider that I 'know' that green monkeys can fly since I do not have any justification of that claim or have seen a green monkey before. As such, justification is necessary for knowledge.

It can also be argued that truth is a necessary condition for knowledge, where a justified belief is insufficient. For instance, a caveman could believe that the Earth is flat based on the fact that he does not slide along its surface as he would if the Earth were a sphere. Despite him being justified subjectively, we would not consider such a caveman to have knowledge that the world is flat, since that belief is not true. Hence, it appears that there must be an external criterion that must exist and hold true for knowledge to be possible. Therefore, truth is a necessary condition for knowledge.

There are two arguments for the possibility that 'belief' is not a necessary condition for knowledge – the first is the separable view. It is argued that belief is a certain disposition or state of mind, while knowledge influences actions, so they need not be linked to each other. Suppose I am at a quiz show and am asked "In which year did Singapore's separation from Malaysia take place?" At that moment, I could doubt that the incident took place in 1965, because I could believe that the history textbooks have been forged, and all the history teachers could have been told a common propaganda. Nonetheless, I answer "1965". It appears that I have knowledge about the incident, yet I did not believe. However, the fact that I answered "1965" already proves that I have a certain disposition or belief in that answer. Hence, where knowledge exists, I already have a slight inclination to believe it, so knowledge and belief cannot be separable.

The second argument is that knowledge and belief are incompatible – that is, if there is knowledge, there cannot be belief; if there is belief, there cannot be knowledge. The reason provided is that knowledge is infallible, while beliefs are fallible. However, the fact that I believe in a certain proposition

like Singapore becoming independent in 1965 does not invalidate it as knowledge. Hence, they cannot be incompatible. More accurately, knowledge should be thought of as going beyond belief, rather than excluding belief altogether.

As such, it appears that the conditions of truth, justification and belief are individually necessary for knowledge, so people who refute this definition must show that such conditions are not jointly sufficient.

It might be argued that subjective certainty is sufficient for knowledge, but it falls short where a correspondent truth is concerned. Needless to say, where a proposition is subjectively certain, it fulfills the condition of justification and belief, since one must have good reasons to be 'certain' about such beliefs. Where truth is concerned, it can only be coherently and pragmatically true. It is coherently true because it fits in with the rest of the beliefs of the thinker and no contradictions are made. For instance, I know that it is true that my teacher is wearing a blue shirt because it fits with the rest of my beliefs of what is 'blue' and that my senses are reliable. William James posits that "truth is made", elucidating the belief of a pragmatist - since it is useful to belief that my teacher's shirt is blue, it must be true. As such, it appears that a subjectively certain proposition might be knowledge.

However, subjective certainty falls short where a correspondent or objective truth is concerned. Suppose Shannon has been brought up in a horrible family who makes her think that honesty is not a virtue, since it would only disadvantage oneself – for Shannon, then, it is coherently true that honesty is not a virtue. However, a Christian may hold the maxim that it is wrong to lie, so it would be coherently true for him that honesty is a virtue. By the Principle of non-contradiction, it is impossible that honesty is and is not a virtue at the same time. Hence, truth should not be based on subjective truths, but on objective grounds and common beliefs, which is that honesty is a virtue in this case. Hence, Shannon has subjective certainty but does not have knowledge, so subjective certainty is insufficient for knowledge.

Subjective certainty is also unnecessary for knowledge. Going back to the quiz show, I may be very sceptical about Singapore being separated from Malaysia in 1965, so I do not have subjective certainty. My opponent, however, does not doubt the fact at all and immediately answers "1965". In this case, it is commonly believed that both of us have knowledge, despite differing subjectivity certainty. Hence, subjective certainty is not a necessary condition for knowledge and justified true belief would suffice.

It can also be argued that knowing that one knows is not necessary for knowledge – that is, I do not need to know that I know something in order to know it. This is commonly proven by *argumentum ad absurdum*. Suppose I need to know that I know something in order to know it, and that I know X. For the statement to be known, it must be that I know "I know X". To have knowledge of this, it follows that I know [I know "I know X"]. This would tend towards infinity and it seems impossible to know anything. Since knowledge is possible, it must be that I do not need to know that I know something in order to know it.

Finally, there is the Gettier problem which suggests that a justified true belief is insufficient for knowledge. Suppose I walked along the corridor yesterday and saw a clock which read: 2pm. I would then make a conclusion that it was in fact 2pm at that time. Unknown to me, the clock stopped two days ago at 2pm, and the time at which I saw the clock was really 2pm. As such, it appears that I have a justified true belief that the time was 2pm, since it was true, and I am justified by looking at the clock. However, few people would consider me having knowledge that it was 2pm. Hence, Gettier suggests that an additional criterion of knowledge is required: reliability. For a proposition to be reliable, it cannot be disproven in light of further evidence. Hence, when I know that the clock is working and make cross references to other time-keeping devices, I would finally have knowledge of the time. Therefore, it appears that knowledge should be reliable, on top of being a justified true belief.

However, this requirement of knowledge is too strict since much of what we claim to know can no longer be considered knowledge. If reliability is a requirement, then each time I want to know the time, I must check the mechanism of the clock to make sure it is working and I must refer to other watches and clocks, which would make the acquisition of a simple piece of knowledge tedious. Furthermore, all the instances in the past when I claimed I knew the time just by looking at one clock would no longer be considered knowledge. Hence, we would not know much of what we think we know. Since this definition is too strict, it seems that a justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge.

In conclusion, the conditions of justification, truth and belief are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for knowledge. Though there are detractors, Wittgenstein posits that we should pay more attention to how the word 'knowledge' is used in ordinary language to find its definition, since words only gain meaning when there is a social agreement on them. Since the use of 'knowledge' most commonly entails "justified true beliefs", it can be considered a suitable definition of knowledge.

**Marker's comments:**

***Excellent piece of work, Luther. You have adequately mastered the concepts involved and reproduced it to utmost precision. A couple of gaps here and there, but these did not hinder your arguments. A couple more examples would have made this perfect.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

## Long Passage

### *History's Response to the Postmodern Challenge*

Postmodern theorists have challenged the way in which historians do their work. If Enlightenment ideas about reason, objectivity, and the possibility of progress have no validity; and historical accounts differ hardly from fiction; then historians have to face the unwelcome prospect of losing the truth-affirming part of their discipline. Without appropriate techniques of verification and authentication, without a knowable past to write about; history could not stand as a legitimate body of knowledge.

Good historians have always known that their narratives employ literary techniques. Telling a coherent story based on evidence requires the exercise of imaginative faculties, which is also demanded of fiction writers. However, historians have habitually assumed that their reliance on documents and other artifacts – primary sources – sets them apart by providing a link with an actual, knowable past. It no longer exists, but it did once. Primary sources are not identical with the past but provide some means for obtaining ideas about it. Historians in this respect resemble paleontologists, who try to construct historical images of life forms in the natural world through the use of fossils and imagination.

Postmodern challenges radiate from highly skeptical forms of philosophical thought, linguistics, and literary criticism. In some measure, “the linguistic turn” represents disenchantment with and mistrust of Western scientific and rationalistic worldviews, typically perceived by postmodernists as justification for the use and abuse of power and authority. For postmodernist dissenters, the very idea of objectivity poses a problem. For them, no observer can ever form statements about anything without the influence of bias, prejudice, self-interest, and personal preference. For them, notions of objectivity in history became doubly objectionable, because there is no object to behold. What we call the past is a construct of pure imagination.

For the postmodernist, language is conceived of as a self-contained system of signs and symbols, referring to reflexively to themselves but to nothing outside in physical reality. As historiographer Georg G Iggers explains, “The historian is always the prisoner of the world within which he thinks, and his thoughts and perceptions are conditioned by the categories of the language in which he operates.” No escape is possible. The “texts” with which historians work are creations of language, referring to nothing outside. This idea, crucial for postmodernists, applies to both primary and secondary sources. Such texts possess no unambiguous meaning and can be read in many ways. When applied to the study of history, postmodernist claims mean that “in the final analysis every historical work is a literary work which has to be judged by categories of literary criticism.”

By removing the distinction between history and literature and fact and fiction, it eliminates one of the essential parts of Western thought since Aristotle. Hayden White has pointed out and lamented “the reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are more invented than found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.” Similarly, Robert Berkhofer observed, “Because normal historians try to reconcile variant interpretations by reference to facts rather than by arguments over the nature of narratives as such, they must presume in practice that factuality possessed some sort of coercive reality.” By denying factuality, “contemporary literary theory defies the very intellectual foundations of current historical practice.”

Most traditional historians, however, regard the distinction between truth and falsehood as fundamental. They understand that most of their writing takes on narrative form and probably would insist in response to the postmodernist challenge that it possesses a special truth-seeking purpose, intended to recapture parts of a past that really existed. As Roger Chartier explains, “This reference to a reality pre-existing the historical text and situated outside of it, of which the text has the function of producing an intelligible account... is what constitutes history and keeps it different from fable or falsification.”



Few historians today would accept notions of absolute scientific objectivity or embrace as a goal the rendering of the past exactly as it was. Moreover, many would concede valid points to the postmodernist position. For a start, cultural assumptions and constructs do shape human behavior in countless ways, and the history of the world outside Europe and the United States should probably not be told or understood solely in Western terms. Yet history and fiction are not the same, and historians who abandon the distinction do so at their own risk. Was the Holocaust during the Second World War a real or an imagined event? The claim that it was imagined would probably appeal to Holocaust deniers but would impress most historians as profoundly false and immoral. To them, the Holocaust will appear as the most documented atrocity in world history and therefore requires belief. In the end, the evidence still counts for something.

(Adapted from *History and Historians: A Historiographical Introduction* by Mark T. Gilderhus)

***The writer makes claims about the nature and construction of knowledge in History. Discuss and evaluate the author's claims, using your own understanding of the nature and construction of historical knowledge as well as the ideas raised by the author.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 1 (2012)

## essay 23

The writer makes claims about the nature and construction of knowledge in History. Discuss and evaluate the author's claims, using your own understanding of the nature and construction of historical knowledge as well as the ideas raised by the author.

Yeow Pei Zhuang 12S03N

The writer makes claims about the nature and construction of historical knowledge by considering the post-modernist position towards history, and then rebutting some of its key assertions with reference to contemporary historical practice. Through this, he eventually concludes that some of the post-modernist's points about the subjectivity of history must be conceded, but at the same time, qualifies this assertion and rejects the nihilistic claim that history is merely a product of human imagination. The author focuses on three main post-modernist criticisms of history: firstly, that a great part of history is fictional and "requires the exercise of imaginative faculties", thus having no "truth" to speak of; secondly, that "bias, prejudice, self-interest and personal preference" are unavoidable in the study of historical sources, and that history is thus not objective; and lastly, that historical texts are "conditioned by the categories of language in which [the historian] operates". He then goes on to show that these three assertions are not as damaging as they *prima facie* seem, and that history ultimately can retain some measure of objectivity.

The writer first tackles the post-modernist claim that historical accounts are essentially fiction. He acknowledges the role of the imagination in creating history; yet, he qualifies that historians differ from writers of literary fiction in that they refer to primary sources such as documents and other artifacts to guide them in their examination of the past. He draws an analogy to paleontology, saying that much like paleontologists who use fossil evidence to guide their imagination of the past, historians too have an obligation to the evidence to use it in their reconstruction of the past.

He is quite right in making such a distinction; the naive view that history involves the blind collection of facts about the past is untenable. Facts of the past are derived from artifacts and other documents, and represent some form of the past which had indeed existed in some point in time. However, historians go beyond blind collection to posit relationships about these facts-- this requires use of the imaginative faculty. Post-modernists conflate the notions of historical fact and historical interpretation when they say that historical accounts are similar to fiction-- historical interpretations are indeed open to imagination, and as Hayden White would argue, are essentially fiction, but the historical facts themselves are not.

In fact, Hayden White goes on to acknowledge this distinction by referring to history as the "re-emplotting of historical events within a framework". The various re-emplotments of the French Revolution as a tragedy by Tocqueville, or as a Romance by Michelet, demonstrate the use of fiction as a means of understanding the past, but they do not deny that the French Revolution occurred in an objective sense-- one may imagine fictitious links between events, but these events must be real and independent of what we think of them. The French Revolution itself was not imagined, and it is this reference to events that definitely happened in the past that ground historical knowledge.

The post-modernist may very well reply, events in the past may have existed, but there is no objective way in which we can grasp them. Indeed, "bias, prejudice, self-interest, and personal preference" play a huge role in the determination of how we view "historical facts". To quote Nietzsche, "there are no facts, only interpretations", and thus, our bedrock of events that really happened in the past is once again called into question. In addition, the very notion of a concrete past is meaningless, for we have no way of accessing it-- it has passed and all we have are traces of it, selected by the biases and prejudices of the recorders. In other words, we cannot make reference to an "objective past", because there is "no object to behold".

The writer concedes this point to the post-modernist. "Cultural assumption and constructs do shape human behaviour in countless ways," he acknowledges. There is an unavoidable element of subjectivity in our interpretation of the past which we cannot counter. What we take as historical facts today are actually the product of countless layers of selection and judgment as "significant", and this

in itself is subjective. Take for example the case of Stresemann, the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic. Texts about his achievements and contributions towards the Republic's foreign relations focus mainly on his work with the Western world, because it was deemed by his secretary, as well as subsequent editors, to be of "[greater] interest to an English audience". However, examination of his archives revealed a greater engagement towards Soviet relations, which was conveniently played down because negotiations between the parties did not amount to much. This represents a conscious selection of facts to be preserved, based on the bias that Western readers are more concerned about events regarding themselves. Furthermore, the selection of facts goes back even further to when Stresemann himself was compiling his archives: he made a conscious decision to record some facts, but leave out others. This reflects personal preference, yet again demonstrating the element of subjectivity in history.

However, just because there is some element of subjectivity present in the writing of history, it does not mean that history is wholly subjective. Likewise, it does not follow that simply because my version of history is "starred with lacunae", to quote Carr, it does not exist in an objective sense. Subjectivity in our lives is inevitable; we necessarily experience our world through subjective preferences. This is not a criticism that applies solely to history. Yet, the flexibility accorded to me in subjectivity is not all-encompassing; you and I may perceive a table differently, but I cannot simply stamp my foot and insist petulantly that the table does not exist, or that it is in fact an elephant. Even in subjectivity, there resides an element of objectivity that we cannot deny, even if it be incomplete. For the case of Stresemann, though subjectivity resulted in certain omissions of Soviet relations, there is some objective truth that we have access to-- that Western relations were conducted and that they had certain impacts. Instead of simply sweeping away all knowledge claims as "meaningless" because they are incomplete, we should instead strive to become sensitive to such biases and prejudices, and perhaps from analysing these, gain an even more objective version of the past. "Study the historian to understand his history," said Carr, and by examining the implications of certain biases we observe, we can come to a more nuanced and objective view of the past.

Finally, the post-modernist claims that historians are "prisoners" of the "language in which [they] operate". Language used to describe historical events carry significance and meaning by themselves, and are essentially self-contained systems. The influence of post-structuralist thought is evident in the statement that historical texts are "creations of language, referring to nothing outside". Because of this, historical texts possess no "unambiguous meaning" and can be "read in many ways". In positing a multiplicity of accounts, post-modernists aim to completely remove the notion of an objective interpretation of the past.

Again, the author refutes this by reiterating that "history and fiction are not the same". He is right in saying so: grounding in historical truth, which is a characteristic element of historical texts, preclude certain interpretations of them. A multiplicity of interpretations is not the same thing as an infinity of possible explanations. For example, there is no way I can coherently interpret "the Holocaust did not occur" from its converse, "the Holocaust occurred during the 1930s and 1940s". Multiple interpretations may present themselves, especially when we run into the area of interpreting relationships between events, but once we come up against facts, it becomes significantly harder to argue for any number of possible interpretations, as they can easily be confirmed or refuted by comparison against facts and evidence. In short, the evidence counts for more than the post-modernist would have us believe.

However, one point that the author does not address satisfactorily is the influence of language on our interpretation of history. The post-modernists are correct in noting that words carry inherent meaning, though they may not be subject to individual interpretation. Terms like "proletariat" or "bourgeoisie" carry historical meaning and significance by their very connotations. In our modern world, removed from the context of the past, they may have very different connotations. Thus we have Hayden White's argument that history should be read as a metaphor for the understanding of the past; a "refamiliarisation" of the unfamiliar separated from us by the span of years and culture. The ambiguity of language serves only to heighten the need for the historian, and not diminish his usefulness; the histories he writes, with their fictive elements, are instrumental in familiarising us with

an unfamiliar past. The employment of historical events in a certain manner allows us to understand the past in a way that is accessible to us.

In conclusion, the author considers the post-modernist point-of-view and engages it well, demonstrating through practical examples why they are not as damaging as they purport to be. He accepts certain claims made but softens them to provide a balanced position in a clear and coherent fashion. For that reason, I accept his conclusions.

**Marker's comments:**

***Very concise and effective reconstruction in one paragraph. Incredibly well sustained and cogent evaluation of the passage that utilises your readings very well. Arguments also delivered with finesse.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 24

'Ethical Reasoning boils down to justifying rather than prescribing decisions.' Discuss with reference to the nature of knowledge in Ethics.

Cheryl Foo Yunn Shee 12A01A

'The hand of compassion moves faster than the calculus of reason.' With regards to Ethics, an area of knowledge where emotions and moral sense are intrinsically coupled to, this statement rings true. Normative ethics such as Divine Command Theory (DCT), utilitarianism, Kantian deontological ethics and virtue ethics are then relegated more as a means to justify our actions rather than to prescribe them.

The DCT suggests that ethical decisions be made based on what an omnipotent and all virtuous divine being says about them. For example, homosexuality is ethically wrong to Christians because the Bible, the word of God condemns such behavior. The problem with DCT is illustrated by Euthyphro's dilemma, where the following dialectic is presented: is an act good because God says so or does God say so because it is good? The objectivity of an ethics based on the divine word is put to question, and if the latter half of the statement is true, it seems that there is a morality independent of the DCT normative ethical theory. What God does himself then is not to prescribe the goodness of the act, but to formalise it. Furthermore, with the use of DCT alone, it seems to suggest that those who do not follow the word of God, will not be inclined to do good, ethical things. That is clearly counter-intuitive, as we do not need to presuppose a God or believe in one to be moral. This suggests that there is a morality that lies beyond the word of God that we are intuitively in tune with, one that religion merely formalises. The 10 commandments with their imperative 'Thou shalt not's only seem prescriptive because it is written to be so. However, without the 10 commandments, it is likely that murder will still be considered horrific, that it will still be morally wrong to kill. We merely use the Bible to justify certain actions or against certain actions, in hope that the law of God, or a divine being can provide sufficient explanation for our natural distaste for it.

Utilitarianism and consequentialism are part of teleological ethics where the outcomes of an act are considered to be most significant in determining if an act is morally right or wrong. Utilitarianism defines a moral act as one which provides the greatest amount of happiness while consequentialism defines a moral act as one where the outcome is most beneficial. However there are some contradictions that do not sit well with regard to these normative theories. For example, in law a failed attempt at murder is punished less severely than a successful attempt. This is consistent with consequentialism, however, surely the motive to kill, whether the outcome is ultimately successful or not is enough to warrant the act as morally wrong and be equally punished? Teleological ethics similarly provides us with a justification out of things, and people seldom use it to direct their actions. If it was prescriptive, everybody might think it is morally right to tell lies because more people might be happier not knowing the truth. However, an innate sense tells us that lying is wrong.

Kantian ethics states that it is morally right if it is our duty to do something. While there are technical problems in deciding which duty takes precedence over another, for example duty to provide for your very poor family or a duty not to steal, the main problem of such a theory lies in the coldness of its rational function. For example, we would like to think it is more virtuous and moral if a husband takes care of his dying wife out of love rather than out of duty to the marriage. Reasoning and rationalising what our duty is and which duty to take composes a large part of this ethical theory, and the moral sense that is so inherent in ethical decision making is forgone. However, in the reality of the situation, it is the 'hand of compassion' that compels you to act and while at the specific moment you are incapable of understanding why, reflection on the moral decision brings in these normative theories to help explain why you did and helps us get closer to understanding the innate moral sense we have.

The existence of an innate moral sense is evident in the ambiguous virtue ethics. Virtue ethics prescribe us to act in a way that makes you a good person. However, the good action that is predicated on the good person begs the question. It seems as if we already know what makes a good person.

To use such a normative theory to direct a good act is circular and therefore cannot be prescriptive. To engage in a single ethical theory to prescribe our actions might lead to some contradictory results. For example, while utilitarianism might justify lying, deontological ethics will condemn it. The mutual incompatibility of the theories suggests that it will be very hard for all of them to work at once and prescribe our actions. Furthermore, if we used one theory for a situation and another theory to prescribe another action, the inconsistency already reveals that each theory is used to justify our natural inclinations as morally right or wrong. Nietzsche said that normative ethical theory was the 'desire of the heart made abstract.' In morality, conscience, the moral sense of right and wrong plays a more than significant role, and hence, if these normative theories were in fact prescriptive, and we had to follow them to determine a right or wrong act before acting, the rational function of our minds takes on a superior position to the intuitive and innate sense of moral goodness we seem to have.

The normative theories can have contradictory outcomes of moral right and wrong depending on which one is used in what situation and hence cannot be prescriptive. We wind up not knowing which one to use, and what action to take if we allow it to be prescriptive. The intuition of a moral right and wrong compels us to act or not to act and only after acting do we try to make sense of the act and how it was morally right or wrong. This is when normative ethics come to play, justifying our actions according to how we want to see it.

Ethics continues to be a very complex area and it is indefinite how much our rationality takes part in our moral decision (at the instant of the act). The conscience and the bodily knowledge of staying away from what seems wrong and doing what seems right dictate a large part of the way we act and why we fear certain acts. While one cannot be anymore precise than the subject allows it, especially with one that hinges on the shady and imperceptible feelings of 'conscience', normative ethical theories are important as a navigational tool to understand why we act the way we do.

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

essay 25

Discuss the nature of evidence in either or both these areas of knowledge: i) History, ii) Science.

Yeow Pei Zhuang 12S03N

History is a Social Science, while Science is an Empirical Science. It would seem obvious to all that the two disciplines have vastly different natures, and thus probably have very different requirements for their evidence. However, closer examination will show that the nature of evidence is not as polarised as we would prima facie think, and that ultimately, each discipline is shaped by its evidence, while at the same time, shapes the evidence it requires.

Firstly, the role of evidence in both History and Science is essentially identical: it aims to provide support for the theories, but generally takes a backseat to the actual theories themselves. Just as scientists reject the stereotypical view of the mad scientist cooped up in his lab, continuously transferring chemicals from one test-tube to another with no other apparent purpose, historians reject the notion of History as the “blind fetishism of facts”. Both disciplines collect evidence not as an end in itself, but as a means of supporting an end which is a theory to explain some things about our world. However, due to the nature of each discipline, the way it collects evidence and the types of evidence used in each discipline vary.

For History, the evidence it has is finite, and incomplete. The historian is concerned with the past, and at the risk of making a tautology, the past has passed and cannot be re-experienced. Evidence and records of the past are limited to whatever people remember or happened to record in some form; gaps that exist cannot be filled up. If no one remembered what a street hawker in London was doing at exactly 8:47am, on 24th June 1867, and no records of it exist, there is no way for the historian today to find out by means of reconstruction, or further investigation. There is a hole in History-- in this case, an insignificant one, but a hole nonetheless. If the street hawker had actually sold a bun to a hungry orphan who would later lead a revolution, the now-significant hole would still not be patchable, leading to what Carr calls a history “starred with lacunae”.

For Science, evidence is derived from experimentation, making it theoretically infinite. Given an unlimited amount of resources, an experiment can be carried out any number of times, until the scientist gets the results and evidence that he requires to make a conclusion. If you didn't note the exact temperature of the chemical exactly 4 mins and 23 seconds after it was heated, no problem: just repeat the experiment and note it this time! Unlike History, experiments are carried out in the present, and can be replicated any time, any number of times. This seems to give the scientist a much larger body of evidence to work with.

However, it must be qualified that in practical Science, absolute replicability cannot be ensured – a beam of sunlight hitting a precise spot on the test-tube might heat the mixture 1°C higher than it should have been. In that respect, it is much like history: experimental data particular to an experiment cannot be retrieved once it is over. Furthermore, there are limits to the observations that we can make in Science. The resolving power of our microscopes still prevents us from observing the tiny building blocks of matter– atoms– much less sub-atomic particles like electrons. Our state of technology limits our observations in Science, making it more finite and less complete than originally thought.

Next, the question of bias: bias in historical evidence is unavoidable; all history is essentially recorded from the point-of-view of someone. In introducing perspective, we introduce bias. An account of the Cultural Revolution would differ if it was told from the point-of-view of a peasant, or from that of a high-ranking official in the Chinese Communist Party. Each would have experienced a different part of the Revolution, and would have a different part of the story to tell. This subjectivity is an inherent part of History.

In Science, however, evidence is supposed to be objective and unbiased. If there are 3 spikes on the back of a newly-discovered beetle, this evidence stays the same regardless of whoever is observing

the beetle. In Science, effort is consciously made to eliminate the subjectivity of the observer, and ideally all observations should cohere with an objective truth.

The reason for this difference is the nature of the theories that History and Science try to use evidence to support. History is less amenable to generalisation, and tries to use the evidence to postulate relationships between past events to explain how certain events led to others with great historical significance. History focuses on understanding the past, rather than generalising to the future. In contrast, Science tries to form general theories to explain observed phenomena, and predict future occurrences of such phenomena. It uses induction to predict that future events will occur, and for that reason, requires a large quantity of similar observations for its inductive arguments to hold water. Thus, Science aspires towards objective reality, which is supposed to be the same for all experiencing it, to support its arguments, while History aims to gather as many subjective accounts as possible for a more complete picture of the whole event, allowing for more comprehensive links and relationships to be inferred. This indirectly translates into the better “understanding” that historians seek.

It may seem that both disciplines are moulding the kind of evidence they require to prove their theories. This is true on both a local and a global scale: in the latter, the discipline is shaped by its evidence; and in the former, the discipline also shapes its evidence. Historian Edward Carr used the analogy of fishing to describe the act of searching for historical evidence: what type of fish you catch is partly determined by chance, but also by the area of the ocean you fish in and the type of bait you use. The latter two factors are, in a turn of circularity, determined by the type of fish you want to catch. Historians interviewing Auschwitz survivors would gain very different kinds of evidence from those interviewing ex-Nazis, but where you go and which group you interview is partly determined by what sort of evidence you want to get.

Despite its outward proclamations in favour of objectivity, Science operates in a similar fashion. Observations from experiments are given meaning from pre-existing theories that scientists have about the world; they are interpreted within a framework of beliefs that stem from previous observations and theories in that area. An apple falling from a tree would constitute evidence for gravity only if one has theories about the nature of gravity and seeks evidence to confirm it. Otherwise, an apple falling from a tree would be just that – an apple falling from a tree.

Otherwise known as Verificationism, the above method of evidence collection was the dominant paradigm behind scientific inquiry for a long time before Karl Popper proposed Falsificationism in 1970. Under Verificationism, scientists purposefully sought out observations to confirm their theories, and the more times a theory was confirmed, the more likely it was to be true. However, when Popper proposed Falsificationism, this changed the way Science sought out evidence. Instead of seeking evidence that confirmed the theory, evidence was sought to discredit the theory – the main idea being that deductive knowledge that not all As are Bs is stronger than inductive knowledge that since many As have been Bs, it is likely that all As are Bs.

However, this was not taken up in practice. After finding evidence that disagreed with their theories, scientists did not immediately discard their falsified theories like they were expected to. In discovering the irregularities in Uranus’ orbit, scientists postulated the existence of another planet influencing it – and thus discovered Neptune. The problem of underdetermination in scientific theories basically states that the evidence available is open to a multiplicity of interpretations: in the case of Uranus, any number of competing and mutually incompatible hypotheses could have explained it, from mechanical error to giant invisible teapots pulling Uranus out of orbit. Thus, there is no way to decide which interpretation is the right one, but an arbitrary link on the part of the scientist.

The problem of underdetermination exists in History as well. Unlike conventional wisdom, the facts of History do not “speak for themselves”, but speak only when the Historian calls upon them. Hayden White describes this phenomenon in his essay *The Historical Text as Literary Artefact*, where he claims that the different relationships drawn between the same evidence can lead to different,



incompatible, and equally valid histories. He cites the reemplotments of the French Revolution as Romance and Tragedy by Michelet and Tocqueville respectively – same evidence, but different story, and none the less valid for that.

In both Science and History, evidence is open to a multiplicity of interpretations – perhaps more so for History where the focus on the relationships between events rather than the events themselves is more pronounced. However, this gives both disciplines a source of power and creative renewal. Because evidence does not speak for itself, the scientist and the historian are free to make them sing the sort of tunes they want, within reasonable limits of coherence and harmony. Just as singers have a pitch range they must conform to, but are free to sing any note within that range, the evidence in both Science and History allow the scientist and historian to arrange many possible theories that would explain the evidence. The presence of numerous coherent theories provides a constant source of renewal for the discipline; if one theory is shown to have failed, another equally coherent one is at the ready to take over. In that sense, the evidence shapes the discipline too.

Concluding, it is evident that though scientific and historical evidence share some differences, they are more similar than initially believed. However, the different demands of the two disciplines shape the nature of the evidence, and the reverse is also true. Both disciplines are thus constantly changing and in flux, demonstrating the complicated relationship between evidence and the discipline.

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

## Long Passage

### *Art Criticism and the Pleasure Principle*

A threatened culture sector insists on the ennobling, moral power of art – but that isn't what keeps me coming back to the greats.

Walter Pater was one of the most honest critics to ever have lived. In his book *The Renaissance*, this Victorian scholar says something subtly disturbing to many people who love the arts. The purpose of criticism, he argues, is to identify and understand the particular types of pleasure that works of art can give us.

Pleasure! This is something few critics have ever been prepared to be so open about. Art, in a philistine world, is forever fighting its corner. Arts administrators resisting cuts feel obliged to insist on the deeper value of art, its use to society, and its ennobling purposes. Artists themselves, when interviewed, also want to come across as serious people doing something of immense political and cultural importance. Only rarely does an artist reject the idea of social and spiritual purpose – as Bob Dylan does in the 1967 film *Don't Look Back*, when he sneers at journalists asking him to explain his “message”.

Pater was art's bravest whistle-blower. He said frankly that works of art exist to give us pleasure, just like wines, or divans, or tobacco, or whatever else filled the archetypal Victorian aesthete's boudoir.

It's time for me to come clean, too. The reason I write about art is because it gives me so much pleasure. I delight in art. It is a drink, a feast. And this is the true reason why, much of the time, I choose to stress the great paintings and sculptures of history. This isn't some clichéd juxtaposing of figurative art and conceptualism – just a recognition that if you are looking at and writing about art every day you may as well explore the headiest flavours, the richest recipes. If you were a professional food critic, would you want to write about crisps – or haute cuisine? Great paintings that have stood the trust of time are like wines that have matured for centuries.

If the most profound pleasures are afforded by classic works such as those by Titian, however, new art too looks very different to the aesthete. Forget, for a moment, all the chatter about social purpose and serious meaning. Look at today's art from the point of view of pleasure. What looks best? Well, you'll get something like the eclectic mix of contemporary artists whose works I most enjoy. This mix would range from the cocksure concoctions of Damien Hirst to the sexuality of Lucian Freud, with many other aesthetic pleasures to be had along the way, and indeed these are pleasures, not duties.

Art that feels like a duty is probably bad art. But most of the art industry is geared towards foisting that kind of art on us. Bad art changes over the centuries far less than we think. Today's theory-heavy video installations are often modern equivalents of pompous and moralising Victorian paintings. It's the joyous, uninhibited art that truly matters – and this is what keeps me hooked.

***The report makes claims about art and criticism. Discuss and evaluate these claims, using your own understanding of the nature of knowledge in aesthetics and the arts as well as the ideas raised by the author.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 (2012)

## essay 26

The report makes claims about art and criticism. Discuss and evaluate these claims using your own understanding of the nature of knowledge in aesthetics and the arts as well as the ideas raised by the author.

Tan Jia Qi Rachel 12S03S

The author asserts that while the art community often emphasises “the deeper value of art, its use to society and its ennobling purposes”, the reason art appeals to him is pleasure, which he sees as an understandable position to take. He concludes this by suggesting that the art “foisted” on us by the art industry is bad art and tries to show how his position can be credible.

The author begins by referring to Walter Pater, who said that the purpose of art criticism is “to identify and understand the particular types of pleasure that works of art can give us”. The author points out that this is a position not often taken or expressed by people such as artists and art critics. The author then clearly states that he agrees with Pater and uses an analogy to elaborate. This is also the reason, he explains, for his emphasis on great works of art from the past. He compares art critics to food critics, and says that food critics would naturally prefer to “explore the headiest flavours, the richest recipes”, and suggests that art criticism is no different. However, this analogy fails to be effective as art and food are fundamentally different fields with differing purposes. Food does not have the same claim to “deeper value” that art often has, or at least, tries to make. Charitably, we may argue that fine food is all about the pleasure it brings to the person savouring it, a claim similar to the one the author makes about art, but then to use fine food as an example would be to assume what the author is trying to show. Moreover, art is arguably more complex in that “the headiest flavours” may not necessarily translate into works that give us more pleasure. It is not difficult to see how a work with great cultural significance, for example, would be an understandable choice for an art critic as well. The analogy thus fails to add value to his argument as it ignores the objections of other art critics. The author’s argument would be made more convincing if he showed why the claim that art is about “deeper value” is less significant, rather than attempt to show that the tendency to pleasure is natural. He fails to do the latter convincingly as the pleasure one derives from food is arguably very different from the one one derives from art.

In fact, a key flaw in the author’s argument is that he fails to explicitly define what he means by pleasure. This is also not something Pater does, as he asks us to consider the “particular types of pleasure that works of art can give us.” The author does not engage with the quote and deal with the different types of pleasure, but rather, sees it as one entity with one meaning. The distinction between types of pleasure art can bring us can be important, as Kant points out.

To Kant, beauty is something that brings us pleasure of the intellect and not pleasure of the sense. That is, when one experiences this pleasure Kant refers to as disinterested, one feels no inclination to possess it, but rather, one’s mind is centred on the appreciation of the beauty within the work of art. There are many implications to this distinction (which in turn affects the author’s argument as he fails to distinguish between them). To focus on the pleasure of the senses would both be concept-laden and highly subjective. For example, the sour taste of this lemon juice may not bring me pleasure. On the other hand, Kant’s idea of pleasure of the intellect is one that he suggests is both more objective and more related to art and beauty. The pleasure Kant refers to as significant ought to be experienced in the same way by every person, as the viewer is supposed to be disinterested. That is, the viewer ought not to bring in any concepts or personal prejudices. That, coupled with the fact that Kant asserts humans share the ability to sense this pleasure brought about by beauty that works in the same way in every individual, supports his claim that this sensation of pleasure ought to be common to all who perceive the work of art.

This is key to the author’s argument as it lends objectivity to an “art” he centres around pleasure. For if pleasure is subjective and I can derive pleasure from any object that claims to be art, then how can we ever draw the line between art and other man-made objects? Therefore, by clarifying what he means by pleasure, the author’s argument could be clearer and more focused. Notably, by adopting

Kant's take on pleasure, the author could still retain some objectivity in art which is doubtlessly important to an art critic. If anything can be called art, then what exactly does "art" criticism study?

Above, I claimed that the author's argument would be more effective if he dealt with the opposing view more thoroughly. All the author does with the view that art is of greater value to society is to label the resulting type of art "bad art". This would seem a tad too dismissive as this view definitely has its merits. The purpose of art is important, for it allows us to differentiate between good art and bad art. The basis upon which the author does this is unclear, although it is implied that since he claims the main contribution of art is that it brings pleasure, art that does not fulfill this purpose but instead "feels like a duty" is probably "bad art". However, to say that art which carries deeper meaning or societal implications must necessarily "feel like a duty" would be to commit the fallacy of a false dilemma. Hence, merely by saying that art that "feels like a duty is bad art", the author makes an unclear statement that adds little to his overall argument.

The proposition that art is valuable because of its use to society and its ennobling purposes is one worth considering, as the author does not do. Art is traditionally thought of as a means of putting forth moral values. For example, in Picasso's *Guernica*, the sheer destruction and terror depicted tells of a story with a moral behind it. It tells us of some of the possible consequences of violence, which may hopefully deter us from committing similar acts. *Guernica*'s status as a work of art is unquestionable, but the pleasure it brings is less certain. For one, there is the issue with the use of pleasure, as discussed above. More importantly, this is a "great painting that [has] stood the trust of time", as the author puts it. The author argues that pleasure is what keeps him returning to the classics without realising that some of these paintings are the greatest examples of art with morals.

Perhaps the author does not directly commit the fallacy of a false dilemma in this instance; he does not explicitly claim that we need to choose between pleasure and other deeper meanings art can hold. However, he does say that it is "joyous, uninhibited art that truly matters", which is a claim that he cannot justifiably make without examining how art that does not fit into that description pales in comparison. Rather, he suggests that it is a natural inclination to want to critique art that brings pleasure. Even if we accept this claim, there is a leap from this to his assertion that this is what "truly matters", as the latter is a claim about what should be the case, which may not be the same as one's natural inclinations.

Therefore, while this author's position could be tenable, his arguments are made weaker due to the above points.

#### **Marker's comments:**

***This is thorough and critically astute. It is a pity you did not take into account the writer's somewhat ironic stance and tone.***

# Editorial

**Sharon Chan**

**Eunice Low**

**Mohamed Ali Faisal**

**Grace Ong**

**Janissa Soh**

**Elaine Tan**

**Victor Yang**



