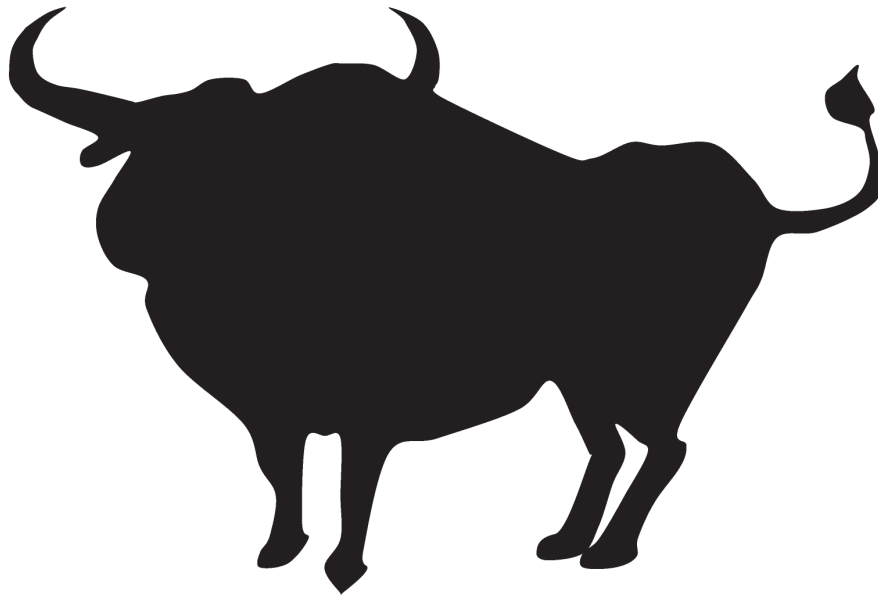


KS Bull 2017

Issue 1



Raffles Institution

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CONTENTS

2016 Year 6 GP Prelim

1	'Governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts of today.' Discuss. Lee Yuan 16S06E	4
2	'Governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts of today.' Discuss. Freda Mah Cheng Yee 16S03B	9
3	Does competitive sport always contribute to greater harmony and understanding? Melvin Loy Meng Tiang 16S06D	13
4	Examine the extent to which one country's intervention in another country's problems is justified. Leong Zhiming 16S03L	17
5	'In the modern world, religion divides rather than it unites.' Discuss. Angela Tham 16S03D	22
6	Paper 2 – Passage	26
7	Paper 2 – AQ Response Chong Ya Wen Michele 16S06B	28
8	Paper 2 – AQ Response Sanjna Nilesh Nerurkar 16S06P	30

2016 Year 5 KI Promo

9	'Mathematics is just a game played according to certain rules; it is ultimately meaningless.' How far do you agree? Tan Xin Hwee 17A13A	32
10	'Mathematics is just a game played according to certain rules; it is ultimately meaningless.' How far do you agree? Nistala Rishi 17S03N	36
11	Paper 2, Section A – Passage	41
12	Paper 2, Section A – Response Joey Lee Jia Yi 17S03L	43

13	Paper 2, Section A – Response	46
	Zhou Xiao Jian 17S03N	

2017 Year 6 GP CT 1

14	Consider the consequences if all art museums and art galleries in your country were closed down.	49
	Feng Yu Chen 17A01D	
15	‘The fight for gender equality is far from over; in fact, it has just begun.’ Discuss.	53
	Chloe Young 17S03N	
16	‘Migration should be encouraged in today’s world.’ Discuss.	57
	Yeo Jiong Han 17S06K	
17	‘Video games do much more than entertain.’ How far is this true today?	61
	Vanessa Chuang Zhen Xuan 17S06C	

2016 Year 5 GP Promo

18	How far do you agree that freedom has been destructive for society?	65
	Kavya Sankari Sundar 17S03D	
19	How far should technological developments be regulated?	70
	Anna Cheang Xin Hui 17S07D	
20	Paper 2 – Passage	75
21	Paper 2 – AQ Response	78
	Clara Keng Hui Lin 17S06E	

2016 KI Year 5 CT 1

22	Critically assess the view that we cannot be sure of anything.	80
	Tan Xin Hwee 17A13A	
23	Critically assess the view that we cannot be sure of anything.	85
	Nistala Rishi 17S03N	
	Editorial Team	90

'Governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts of today.' Discuss.

Even though the modern era has seen fewer major skirmishes on the level of the world wars, conflicts about in our ever-divisive environment today. As the world becomes more globalised, disagreements have emerged through the fault lines of our society, pitting races against each other, as is the case in Myanmar, with the majority Burmese community turning on the Rohingyas. This has exposed fundamental differences between ideologies and beliefs that threaten to descend into bedlam, such as the left-right slit that has risen to prominence in the United States. Indeed, it can be seen that governments today are mostly helpless in dealing with our fundamental differences, and have no means of addressing society's disagreements and conflicts. Our leaders and bureaucracies are remnants of a past time, and no longer have the ability to adapt to the rapidly-changing environment of today's world. Unless governments can break out of their current, rigid structures and emerge with a new place in the people's psyche, governments will remain helpless in the face of our modern disagreements.

It must, first and foremost, be conceded that the government remains one of the most powerful institutions on this planet. The government of a country is essentially the puppet-master behind the workings of the state, as most leaders can bend national activity and opinion to their will. The United States federal government, for instance, has relatively limited powers compared to institutions such as the state assemblies which govern individual states, but it is still able to harness the full might and will of the American people to destructive effect, as demonstrated in its repeated annihilation of its enemies in World Wars I and II. The military-industrial complex has been a key tool in major governments' toolboxes, one which has the power to end military conflicts once and for all. In more recent terms, this has emerged in the United States' manipulation of global events – it was able to stop the Israelis' offensive in the Arab-Israeli War of 1973¹, and could respond to the Iraqis' invasion of

¹ Teacher's comment: This was in fact the Yom Kippur War, which ended in a stalemate

Kuwait with devastating effect. Evidently, governments have an overbearing capacity to harness the resources of a nation towards a common cause, one of which has been the resolution of armed conflict around the world. Moreover, governments have a unique legitimacy that most other institutions do not, mostly arising due to the fact that a vast majority of national leaders today were democratically elected. These enable governments to quell disagreement or stifle violence where they are unwarranted, as did the German government when it (momentarily) stopped the quibbling amongst European states on the issue of the refugee crisis. Even the world's richest men cannot claim to have a plurality of national support and might: if governments are powerless today, who else can be more powerful? Therefore, the government's might appears to render it power to stop or shape the conflicts the world is experiencing today.

It has also been said that governments have in fact become more powerful with respect to dealing with our disagreements and skirmishes, as countries now have the ability to band together to solve international problems or to direct the power of many states towards a conflict in a country. The United Nations, comprising governments from all over the world, has used peacekeeping forces to maintain order and restore peace in conflict-ridden regions such as Sub-Saharan Africa. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, on the other hand, a regional intergovernmental body, has helped mediate international disagreements in the South China Sea. By uniting around a common cause, governments have a force multiplier that maximises their power in dealing with today's unique transnational problems. With the full weight of international support, governments have become ever more able in resolving or ameliorating the effects of our modern conflicts. Thus, it seems as though governments have developed new, effective tools to address our current issues.

However, such a view is overly optimistic, as governments in fact have no means of addressing current conflicts in an adequate manner. Today's conflicts do not solely exist in the national realm; there are conflicts brewing in our fundamental social fabric as well. Conflicts such as inter-racial violence experienced between black and radical white supremacist groups have experienced a resurgence after a lull in the late 20th century, while the rich-

poor divide has led to tensions between the so-called “1%” and the remaining working-class populations all over the world, erupting into the worldwide “Occupy” movement that remains strong today, even after almost half a decade. These conflicts strike at the very heart of society, and they arise due to a multitude of reasons that governments have no means of tackling in full: changing demographics, as can be seen in the United States, where for the first time in its history there were more “minority” newborns than white ones; changing societal norms, brought about by the use of the internet, which has allowed fringe groups to band together and exert a collective influence on society’s direction; and changing economic conditions, with automation and technology robbing many blue-collar workers of their livelihoods and exacerbating the already-intractable problem of inequality. The government has little control over these changes, for they lie outside its conventional interests of national security, economic growth and self-preservation. In effect, governments today lie in a paradigm of their own, increasingly disconnected from the events their constituents experience. Great Britain, for instance, has found itself caught unawares by the Brexit vote, with well-heeled members of the elite (most notably on Downing Street) predicting a solid Remain victory even on the night of the referendum, deluded by the pleasant illusion that the people were not troubled by the events in Europe. Clearly, governments have been unprepared for such groundbreaking developments, causing them to be utterly ill-equipped to deal with the conflicts that matter today. In particular, governments have found themselves flailing at the sight of core social issues, for they are unexpected beasts which cannot be tamed by financial instruments nor the state’s military apparatus.

Furthermore, the conflicts of today are often asymmetrical, particularly in the realm of violent conflict, and the government has found itself to be even more inept at dealing with the shapeshifting enemy. The perpetrators of deadly conflict and the people who stoke racial or socioeconomic tensions behind a wall of anonymity are unseen culprits, and dealing with these armed conflicts or disputes in the socioeconomic realm requires governments to deal with the root cause behind them. Yet it appears that governments do not know how; Boko Haram has been going on bloody rampages in Nigeria, yet the Nigerian government helmed by a former military leader is still attempting to deal with the social and political fallout from the abduction of the Chibok girls almost

three years ago. ISIS thrived on a groundswell of local support, and terrorised the West² until it decided to establish itself as a state with territories that could be conquered with conventional military forces. This provides for a damning assessment of government power, for even the most powerful governments in the world, united in spirit, have been unable to defeat a tiny, but shrewd, enemy. In fact, it can be said that it is precisely the overwhelming might these governments wield that make them powerless to asymmetric conflict – by being too heavy-handed in their resolution of such conflicts, governments worsen the problem by inspiring more rebels and inciting further tensions in society. Governments do not understand the conflicts they are dealing with, which renders them helpless even with the might of a state's resources behind them.

Ultimately, governments are often powerless to deal with the conflicts of today because the governments themselves are the root cause of these conflicts. For instance, dissent in Hong Kong and conflict between Hong Kongers and mainlanders was born out of the ineptitude of the Hong Kong Chief Executive, and there is little the government can do to quell the tensions but to hope for the best. In other words, the xenophobia and hatred that created current social conflicts were purposefully cultivated for the governments' own political means, just that these social developments got out of hand. In Myanmar, for instance, much of the violence on the Rohingyas is sanctioned by the majority Buddhist government, inspiring monks such as the 'Burmese bin Laden' to turn on their own fellow countrymen. Now that the conflict between the stateless Rohingyas and the Burmese has gone past the tipping point, there is little that the junta could or the government can do to resolve these tensions in society. The governments that perpetrated these conflicts cannot stop these negative social developments without appearing hypocritical, and even if they do attempt to quell these enmities in a bid to deal with the conflict they lose their trustworthiness in the eyes of the people, and in effect lose their ability to act even if they have the humane will to do so. The government is thus stuck in a Catch-22 situation, rendering national leaders helpless and leaving them to the mercy of the public. Addressing the social developments or tensions behind national or cross-border conflict is essential in dealing with the conflicts today,

² *Teacher's comment: Large swathes of the Middle East would be more accurate*

but when the government has been a direct cause of the conflict, inadvertently or purposefully, there is nothing it can do to relieve the conflict and stop the madness.

In conclusion, governments are increasingly appearing to be helpless at dealing with our current conflicts, and with good reason – they are sorely ill-equipped to deal with the conflicts that our world faces today. Indeed there is little any one body or organisation can do to deal with our conflicts – even the national peace quartet from Tunisia that won the Nobel Peace Prize could only maintain the harmony for so long – and the best we can do at this point in time is to prepare for the worst and hope for the best. Our world today is a messy one, giving rise to the most chaotic conflicts in human memory; our governments need to begin the long, arduous, and painful transition if they wish to have some semblance of control and a modicum of power in addressing the conflicts of our modern world.

Teacher's Comments:

Good work! This is a well-considered and well-argued essay. Appropriate use of illustrations. Overall, fully relevant in terms of breadth and depth.

'Governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts of today.' Discuss.

With increasing interconnectivity in a shrinking global village, the world today is fraught with conflicts that extend beyond a country's borders, characterised by an unnerving sense of uncertainty and volatility. With the threat of religious fundamentalism, growing social inequality in the aftermath of rapid globalisation and international disputes abounding across the globe, it appears as though governments are increasingly losing influence and power in managing the conflicts of today. This is perhaps evident in the growing unhappiness of civilians with their incumbent rulers, leading to a spate of protests and even uprisings in extreme cases. However, to say that governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts of today would be to be too nihilistic a view, and suggests that people or other organisations instead should be held accountable to deal with the conflicts of today. Certainly, while conflicts may seem to overheat at times, it is undeniable that governments possess the resources, influence and legitimacy to tackle the problems of today. Hence, although some conflicts may be beyond the reach of governments, most are still within the power of the governments to manage and control.

Indeed governments may seem to be powerless in the face of conflicts that cannot be controlled within their own borders, particularly ideological threats that plant seeds of discord within and beyond the country. The rise of religious extremism and the encroaching threat of terrorism in countries all over the world are testament to the transnational nature of conflicts today. Such threats can hardly be confined to a particular group or nation, and the very fact that it is faceless makes it almost impossible for governments to tackle the problem. The rise of ISIS, for example, was completely unanticipated, where the Islamic militia swept through Syria and captured great swathes of land within hours. In addition, the media and propaganda branch of ISIS simultaneously began a hashtag movement #AlleyesonISIS, featuring atrocities committed by the jihadist fighters so as to instil fear and a sense of inevitability among the people. Certainly ISIS's effective use of social media platform to recruit potential jihadists from all around the world and to spread the utopian vision of an

Islamic caliphate has rendered governments powerless in controlling the spread of terrorism. Despite increased security measures being implemented, the unpredictable nature of terrorist and lone wolf attacks often make such efforts ineffective or even futile. In the face of religious zeal and fervour, governments are unable to wield decisive and conclusive power for fear the proactive measures may add fuel to the fire, leading to more atrocities and resulting in a stronger backlash. Thus, in the face of borderless and ideological conflicts, governments may seem to be powerless in controlling the spread of extremism and in effectively protecting their citizens.

However, while governments are limited in their power to curb ideological conflicts within their borders, the power of international and inter-governmental efforts holds much more promise and potential. The formation of international peacekeeping organisations such as the United Nations (UN) offers the possibility of tackling the threat of terrorism on a war footing, with the expertise and cooperation of nations all around the world. The UN Security Council recently announced a unanimous agreement by all its nations to eliminate terrorism, giving hope to many who have suffered the atrocities of extremist groups. The US, Russia and several countries have joined arms in conducting air raids and drone strikes in the Middle East, destroying vast swathes of terrorist territory as well as their oil source from which they fund their attacks and the organisation itself. The interconnected nature of surveillance technologies across the globe has allowed governments to track movements of potential terrorists, and even predict their attacks using highly sophisticated software so as to prevent them from happening. The sharing of resources and information between governments has granted them power to eradicate threats and nip them in the bud before any harm can be inflicted. The communication and ties between countries help to build rapport and support, providing aid and reinforcements to weaker countries when required. Thus it is evident that despite the fact that individual governments may be powerless to control such a far-reaching and uncontrollable conflict, the cooperation and unity of governments across the world accrues great power and influence in tackling such problems.

In addition, it is undeniable that governments have the resources and executive power to deal with conflicts arising from social inequalities. Especially in developed countries, where globalisation has brought about seemingly

stratospheric economic progress, the increasing unhappiness of the people due to unequal social mobility and economic opportunities has become a pressing concern for governments. Coupled with the threat of global 'Silver Tsunami' due to increasing ageing population, governments are often hard-pressed for solutions to manage the conflicting needs of the people. Yet they are certainly far from powerless in coping with such conflicts, with the ability to allocate resources effectively, and providing opportunities for the vulnerable in society. This is evident in the welfare and subsidy schemes implemented by governments so as to give the poor in society a leg-up and allow them to attain a decent standard of living. For example, the Singapore government introduced heavily subsidised pre-schools run by the Ministry of Education so as to allow the lower-income families to send their children to pre-school without having to pay exorbitant fees. The Obamacare scheme in the US was also praised for its efforts to provide access to affordable healthcare to the poor and vulnerable in society. When the housing market gets overheated, the Singapore government readily steps in to cool housing prices to ensure that housing remains affordable. Such efforts on the part of governments have proven effective in alleviating the socioeconomic tensions within society, preventing unhappiness from brewing and fomenting discord among the people. By constantly keeping in touch with the citizens, and judiciously distributing resources according to the needs of the people, it is unlikely that governments are powerless to deal with the conflicts arising from inequality today.

Furthermore governments have the legislative power to influence and shape the psyche of their people, hence allowing them to manage the conflicts of today effectively. Besides implementing laws to curb incendiary behaviours, governments also have the soft power to nudge people into having greater civic-consciousness. The conflicts of today are the products of technological boom as well as rise in industrialism, ranging from online anti-social behaviours to environmental destruction. Across the range of conflicts, governments have shown the power to enforce social norms and protect social harmony through the implementation of laws. For example, the Singapore government's move to criminalise cyber-bullying and hacking seeks to abolish online anti-social behaviours and to promote a safe and secure environment for web users. Conflicts arising from cyber-bullying are thus clamped down on harshly, eradicating such provocative and divisive events from repeating. Such laws aim

to emphasise the government's stand on certain issues that may destabilise or threaten the harmony of society, hence serving as a warning to potential offenders. The imposition of fines or even jail sentences on individuals or corporations who do not comply with acceptable standards, such as mistreating their workers or compromising the quality of their products which result in great unrest and unhappiness among the populace, are also measures to penalise and deter. Thus, the conflicts of today, while numerous, are still within the power of the governments, who have the legitimacy and right to enforce laws and ensure moral standards are upheld.

Certainly, one must also consider the strength of the government when assessing its power to deal with the conflicts of today. To be able to deal with greater conflicts and concerns of the people, the government itself must be competent and efficient. The amount of power the government possesses largely depends on the effectiveness of the ruler as well as the institutions and other agencies put in place to ensure transparency, efficiency and incorruptibility.³ Thus it would be too sweeping a generalisation to comment on whether governments are powerless or not in dealing with the conflicts of today, as governance often encompasses the unique cultural and political context of the country, as well as the competency and the nature of its leader. Nonetheless, given the pressure of the international community, most governments have the power to deal with the conflicts of today.

In conclusion, governments certainly wield power and control over most of the conflicts in today's world. Though the nature of some of these conflicts may limit the amount of power governments have at times, the promise of international cooperation and collaboration effectively grant hope to governments all over the world in at least managing the effects of such conflicts.

Teacher's comments:

Insightful response: a balanced discussion. Knowledge of content are shown. Evaluation of issues dealt with. The area to work on will be the illustrations. Topic is not specific to Singapore. Language: Excellent; minor errors which did not hamper fluency of your essay!

³ *Teacher's comment: Valid point, but supporting details would have made this more convincing.*

Does competitive sport always contribute to greater harmony and understanding?

The recently concluded 2016 Rio Olympic Games once again proved the ability of competitive sports to bridge vast cultural differences between diverse groups of people from around the world, with iconic displays of international friendship such as two North and South Korean gymnasts taking a selfie together. Indeed, it is scenes like this that perpetuate society's long-standing belief in the uniting power of sports. Yet, behind the glitz and glamour of the Olympics, I believe that competitive sports, events in which professional athletes strive to defeat their opponents and emerge as champions, does not always bring about increased integration and reconciliation around the world, due to its susceptibility to political exploitation, its tendency to breed over-competitiveness, and its modern ability to exacerbate inequality.

Proponents of the uniting power of sports often cite the ostensibly non-political nature of sports. Throughout history, major sporting events have managed to unite groups of people embroiled in conflict, even temporarily. For example, during the 2002 FIFA World Cup, amidst heightening political tensions and conflict, South Korea and Japan managed to put aside their differences in order to collaborate for the sake of a successful World Cup⁴, with the competition eventually helping the two Asian powerhouses forge a new path of international diplomacy and co-operation. More recently, opposing factions in the civil war in Ivory Coast switched their guns for television remote controls, with a ceasefire called to allow the country to support the national football team in the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. In such cases, it is seen that the passion and interest in sports is universal, existing in every person, regardless of race, religion or creed. It is precisely this universal appeal

⁴ Teacher's comments: Some evidence supporting the claim of 'heightened political tensions' would have made more convincing e.g. mentioning the 2001 textbook controversy: the Japanese government approved for use in schools a textbook which downplayed Japan's wartime atrocities, angering South Korea – which suffered Japanese invasion in WWII – leading to scaled back cultural and military contacts between the two.

of sports that seems to allow people with vast cultural differences, and even people engaged in fierce conflict, to look past their differences and find a common interest among them. This common interest contributes to increased global integration by reducing people's perception of the differences between them. Therefore, it is argued that the universal appeal of competitive sports allows it to be an effective catalyst for change in this increasingly divided world of ours.

However, it is my belief that such an argument is over-simplistic and neglects the complexity and politically-influenced nature of modern sports. There is no doubt that modern sports has greatly evolved and transformed from the time of the ancient Greeks. Today, modern sports training requires advanced facilities and extensive resources.⁵ For example, the US Swimming team invested millions in a computational fluid dynamics software to allow swimmers to analyse their stroke angles and minimise water resistance. Today, the team comprises many of the world's top swimmers. Such facilities often require high capital outlay that can only be provided by governments and, indeed, the inextricable relationship between government funding and competitive sports has thwarted the originally pure intentions of sports. As much as it is a celebration of human physical ability, sports is now being exploited by governments as a political tool. During the 2010 Youth Olympic Games in Singapore, for instance, the Iranian government forced its athlete to withdraw from the taekwondo finals because the Iranian government did not recognise the existence of Israel, the country represented by his opponent. More recently, in the 2016 Rio Olympics, an Egyptian judoka refused to shake the hands of his Israeli opponent for reasons pertaining to his nationality. As seen in these examples, the increasing political influence in sports today has corrupted the noble intentions of sports, and it can contribute to the heightening tensions between countries worldwide. In this respect, the universal appeal of sports has in fact exacerbated its negative influence, with the politically-antagonising actions in competitive sports being witnessed by millions around the world. Therefore, the fact that modern competitive sports are no longer non-political necessarily means that the uniting forces of sports are not as strong as they used to be.

⁵ *Teacher's comment: This is a rather weak elaboration of the topic sentence and needs to more clearly answer the question. A possible reworking of this: "For one, the large amount of funds poured into sports training – for advanced facilities and extensive resources – means there is lots more to lose than just a game."*

Moreover, the competitive nature of sports has bred over-competitiveness and excessive individualism among athletes. Far from being the celebration of the physical prowess of the human race that sports used to be, today, professional, competitive athletes are overly fixated on winning and finding a reasonable personal justification for the many hours of training they have endured. Such an overly competitive mentality has given rise to rampant unsportsmanlike behaviour in recent times. For example, French captain Thierry Henry admitted to committing an intentional handball foul during the 2009 World Cup playoff finals that led to the goal that killed Ireland's chances of qualifying for the World Cup. This excessive fixation on winning has developed an "every man for himself" attitude, with sportsmen willing to do anything to win.⁶ Such attitudes mean that sports today is more of a dividing force than one of unity, since athletes will only be concerned with their self-interest, and be less considerate of others. Similarly, the universal appeal of sports means that sporting fans worldwide risk inherit such mentalities, cultivating a global climate of selfishness and over-fixation on personal interests. Clearly, sports helps to perpetuate a culture of selfishness.

Lastly, modern competitive sports does not allow for greater harmony because it exacerbates inequality. This can be attributed to the culture of celebrity athletes in today's world. The world's top sporting stars often earn exorbitantly high wages for their contributions in the sporting arena. For example, Cristiano Ronaldo commands a post-tax wage of over US\$370,000 a week. Often, sports stars even earn money outside of their sport. For example, Tiger Woods has earned a staggering 100 million dollars just from endorsing Nike products alone. While the intangible social benefits of star athletes can be debated, the fact is that these competitive sports stars do not contribute much tangibly and directly to society, be it in the form of creating employment, educating children or protecting the disadvantaged. Therefore, dedicating such large sums of money to athletes cannot be justified and can be considered an excessive over allocation of society's scarce resources to them. Such a trend exacerbates social inequality, with huge profits not just concentrated in the hands of giant corporations, but also in the hands of sports stars. This income inequality will only cause greater social unrest, with the disadvantaged and needy receiving fewer resources, and therefore, the celebrity culture of

⁶ Teacher's comment: This is a sweeping claim that is difficult to corroborate.

competitive sports will not result in greater integration, but worsen and exacerbate economic differences.

In closing, modern competitive sports is definitely not the uniting force it once used to be, yet the reasons for this lie not in the inherent nature of sports but the modern evolution of it. Therefore, it would be appropriate for international governments and sporting bodies to review the flaws in the modern system of sports, to eliminate the negative influences of modern sport while harnessing its pure and noble abilities to unite the human race, and allow sports to once again become a powerful tool in the advancement of our civilisation.

Teacher's comments:

This is a thoughtful, critical and well-executed piece of work. Many of the arguments are nuanced and quite sophisticated, with your command of the relevant details and specifics concerning competitive sports being quite impressive.

One point you could have made is to acknowledge that, given that the original imperative of competitive sports is profit making, it is unreasonable to expect it to always contribute to increasing harmony and unity.

Also, some assertions in the penultimate paragraph – sports stars not contributing “tangibly”; the claim of “social unrest” resulting from sponsorship deals – could do with tempering for better balance.

Language use is varied, often sophisticated, in a clear personal voice.

Examine the extent to which one country's intervention in another country's problem is justified.

The inexorable forces of globalisation have swept the global community. For better or for worse, the world is increasingly interconnected and integrated in terms of our economy, politics, and people. This has engendered a situation where one country's internal affairs can easily create spillover effects that will affect other countries. Furthermore, many countries have taken it upon themselves to intervene in other countries' affairs, be it militarily, politically or via provision of foreign aid. A cursory examination of the issue may lead one to conclude that, indeed, foreign intervention may be desirable and hence justified as it provides salvation for a country confronted by difficult circumstances. However, lessons from the past and present have led me to take a more pessimistic view of the situation: I believe that foreign intervention in another country's problems is largely unjustified, especially in view of how such "intervention" is carried out today – often with hegemonic, self-interested and regrettably vicious intentions. The only exception would be when countries truly attempt to intervene with altruistic motives, but such instances are few and far between.

Before we overly condemn foreign intervention as utterly unjustified, I would first like to qualify that, to some extent, it can be warranted should intervention be based on moral and altruistic grounds. This view may seem highly idealistic taking into account the realpolitik nature of foreign policies practised by many countries, but such examples of noble intervention exist. For instance, in the aftermath of the devastating Cyclone Nargis experienced by Myanmar, the country was thrown into turmoil as infrastructure was destroyed, large populations were displaced from their homes, and the government was plunged into a tumultuous state. As a symbol of goodwill, ASEAN nations took it upon themselves to intervene in the situation, sending aid and manpower to Myanmar to help ameliorate the crisis. Slowly but surely, the country began to get back on its feet, undoubtedly with the assistance of its neighbouring counterparts. What was interesting was that, following this, the Myanmar military junta was more open to hold talks with ASEAN leaders, and was also more willing to acquiesce to the demands of ASEAN. Arguably, this was a step in the right direction towards building bridges with a previously

isolated country and helping to put Myanmar on the path towards free and democratic elections. Admittedly, when foreign intervention is carried out with goodwill and no hidden agenda whatsoever, then the aid provided will be channelled towards areas where the recipient country is truly deficient in and more likely be effective in remedying its problems. Furthermore, in a global context, such actions create mutual trust and goodwill between countries, which is paramount in establishing regional stability. Therefore, in such a context of intervention being provided based on moral motivations, I would concede that foreign intervention is justified and, in fact, highly welcomed.

In the same vein, others may argue that foreign intervention is justified as it provides salvation to a country that is unable to help itself, and in so doing, prevents negative spillover effects in the region. In certain situations, be it natural disasters or wars, weaker and poorer nations may be immobilised and weighed down, their governments unable to undertake the proper measures to alleviate the problems. For instance, during the Gulf War in the 1990s, when Saddam Hussein's Iraq first invaded Kuwait and overran the country, the Kuwaitis were left shocked, helpless and oppressed. And with a weak military force, they could do nothing but wait helplessly for help from foreign neighbours. Threatened by Saddam's expansionist agendas and afraid that they too would be targets of his aggression, Kuwait's Middle-Eastern neighbours, with help from the US, decided to intervene, driving Iraqi forces back to its border and liberating Kuwait. Ostensibly, it seems that countries subject to unfortunate "black swan" events have no power whatsoever to defend themselves from incoming threats. Moreover, it is highly possible that the sea of negative repercussions they experience can easily flood over to other countries, especially in view of the increasing interconnectedness of economies and socio-political affairs of countries. By virtue of safeguarding their own natural welfare and existence, some argue that it is hence necessary for countries to intervene in others' problems.

However, I believe that based on interventionist actions adopted by many countries historically, it is regrettably to conclude that many simply use "intervention" as a false pretext for their own hegemonic ambitions, often at the expense of the nations they attempt to interfere with, making such intervention largely unjustified. In all honesty, if Kuwait was not of strategic use to the US and her Middle-Eastern allies, would they have intervened at all? Probably not. Would Kuwait have been left to her condemned fate under

Saddam Hussein's regime? Quite possibly. Sadly, global politics tends to follow a system of Machiavellian realpolitik, where actions taken by nations are largely underpinned by pragmatism and the need to protect national self-interests, even if that means bringing harm unto another. Time and again, we have witnessed how nations intervene in another's affairs, only to let them burn to the ground when they are no longer of any significance. Fast-forward a decade from the Kuwaiti invasion, and we have the US invasion of Saddam's Iraq, this time under the pretext of Iraq owning chemical weapons and employing them against civilians. But when the invasion ended, no weapons were ever found, and many international theorists believe that the true intention of the American invasion was to safeguard oil in the Middle East, while the official line of chemical weapons was merely a duplicitous pretext. Furthermore, after ousting Saddam, the US military quickly withdrew its forces, leaving a power vacuum that caused a power struggle that swept the nation like a hurricane. Sectarian violence between the Sunnis and Shiites ensued, and this eventually led to the rise of extremist group ISIS. One would question, then: What good ever came out of that invasion besides fulfilling the US' own self-pursuits? In fact, it is all the more insidious that "foreign intervention" is used as a tool by power-hungry nations to masquerade their selfish agendas as justified and democratic, at the expense of the host country's welfare. Clearly, foreign intervention in such scenarios is highly undesirable.

Furthermore, nations often intervene in what they feel is the best way possible, but fail to realise that their method often fails to bear fruit and is hence unwarranted. For example, when nations intervene by providing aid to other countries, it often comes in the form of monetary and food aid, but these are often short-term solutions that fail to create sustainable solutions. The 2002 Monterrey Consensus, for instance, witnessed the developed world pledging to allocate 0.7% of its GNP to the Third World. Every year since, billions of dollars have been donated to African states⁷, but most of the aid fails to reach the most needy, because they end up lining the pockets of corrupt rulers. Moreover, however much aid eventually trickles down to the people often provide temporary relief, it does not solve the root cause of poverty. Low-skilled, uneducated labour, poor economic infrastructure, and corrupt political

⁷ *Teacher's comments: Some fact-checking is needed regarding the beneficiary countries of the Monterrey Consensus: aid is not just to struggling African countries, but also to "small island developing states and landlocked developing countries ODA [receiving Official Development Assistance]"(Source: World Bank)*

system are factors that have continued to plague these nations and perpetuate penury, and these are what foreign countries who intervene should aim to tackle instead. Yet, by providing only monetary and resource aid, they not only neglect to equip the people with skills to propel themselves out of their destitute plight, but also exacerbate the situation by creating a cycle of dependency on aid. Instead, nations have to realise that the right way to intervene is to provide social reform initiatives and economic restructuring guidance to lift countries out of their tragic state. But of course, most countries remain indifferent to this, providing aid simply to fulfil their moral obligations but not actually concerned with how their aid will benefit the people in the long run. It is this apathy and ignorance that causes countries to adopt incontrovertibly facile solutions in an attempt to solve infinitely more complex problems, and this is what makes their “intervention” so futile and unnecessary. To aggravate the situation, some countries even adopt policies that will jeopardise any benefits that their aid has provided. For example, the US donates about USD 32 billion a year to African states, but concurrently adopts protectionist measures by imposing high tariffs on African agricultural imports to protect local farmers, which is estimated to cost the African agricultural industry about USD 50 billion, more than the worth of aid provided. Sadly, when push comes to shove and a conflict of interest arises, nations will ultimately choose to protect themselves, rendering such aid ineffective.

Indeed, as much as the world hopes for foreign intervention to emanate from true, noble intents, we have to face the reality that in our pragmatic world, such instances are limited in number. Ultimately, the harsh truth is that foreign intervention today largely remains unjustified as it is often implemented ineffectively, or worse, used as leverage for hegemonic agendas. Perhaps this is the nature of real world politics, and instead of turning towards nations for help, the world should look towards the rising number of world non-governmental organisations. These NGOs, like the Red Cross, UNICEF and Amnesty International often possess a genuine interest in solving the internal problems of nations, and may be our best bet towards establishing a more integrated and less imbalanced global community.

Teacher's comments:

- **An often sophisticated, thoroughly cogent and persuasive effort. Fully relevant, logically and thoroughly elaborated and well substantiated with appropriate examples.**
- **The third paragraph needs to be tweaked to answer the question of justifiable intervention more directly; as it stands, it is more example / information-driven than argument-driven.**
- **The crux of the last point and how it ultimately relates back to the question is an area of improvement I would identify. Very lucid language, showing great range of vocabulary and expressions.**
- **Good structuring and organisation of information. Impactful introduction and conclusion enhanced coherence.**

In the modern world, religion divides rather than it unites. Discuss.

“God may not be dead, but he sure leaves a lot of people dead.” This popular aphorism by a sociology professor in response to Nietzsche’s magnum opus, “God is dead” proffers some insight into the common view that religion necessarily results in society becoming balkanized along religious fault-lines, more than it unites people in the macrocosm of society. Since our primitive predecessors have been able to fathom the notion of the divine, human civilization has shown the tendency to organize itself into sub-groups who ascribe to the same ritualistic beliefs to show adoration and adulation to their individual god (or gods in the case of certain religions). But as a result, this categorization has also created the notion of “us” against “others”. From the Crusades of the Roman Catholic Church to the massacre of thousands of protestants on Bloody Sunday in Northern Ireland and the modern day tensions between the Sunni, Shite and Kurdish denominations that have stymied the resolution of the Syrian civil war, it would seem that religion indeed divides people on a massive scale, more than it has the potential to bring people together in peace and harmony. But such a deterministic view is iconoclastic and philistine, and would be a benighted oversight of how such divisions can be resolved, and a blatant irreverence to the potential that religion can unite people in the face of growing modern diversity brought about by the forces of globalization.

Prima facie, it would appear as though religion only results in bigotry and prejudice, where pious believers congregate and pit themselves against other who do not share the same zealous faith. This may be especially so for the case of religious fundamentalist whose entire sense of self and purpose for existence revolve around subservience to their deity. The crisis in the Middle East is a glaring example of how seemingly irreconcilable differences in religious beliefs have led to widespread sectarian violence and rancour. The Islamic State, or more commonly referred to as ISIS, is an extreme case of how religion not only divides but instigates people to act on their hatred against non-believers, as adduced by the indiscriminate genocide of other religious minorities by the religious terrorists who use scripture in an unprecedented

manner to justify their barbaric murders in the name of establishing a Muslim caliphate and view themselves as the harbinger of the imminent Judgement Day.

While religion indeed seems to be the reason for the fragmentation in the Middle East, to place the blame of this division on religion would be to neglect the plethora of other factors that have contributed to this state of desolation. For this given example, it should be acknowledged that the issue is multi-factorial and the divide also encompasses other social and political complexities. Much of the discord can also be attributed to how the Sunni-majority in Syria has long been ruled by the oppressive Shite minority, which has refused to large swathes of the population freedom of religious expression and political emancipation. Under the Assad regime, innocent civilians have been exposed to chemical attack by the militia and it is more so the denial of political rights and excess to basic welfare that has culminated in the morbid retaliation by the disenfranchised factions, leading to the misconception that conflict and division is ostensibly religion in nature.

Furthermore, this is a largely isolated case that shows the extremes of religious division. Depending on how religious differences in a society are managed, religion could conversely bring about cohesion and stability. When accompanied by amiable and open dialogue, and the display of a willingness to compromise and respect those of all religions, religious differences can be tolerated to create a community of acceptance. While this may sound idealistic, it has been in fact realized in Lebanon with the unique form of confessionalism it practices in its government structure, where the President is always a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni and the Head of Defence a Druze. Although the country still has much progress to make, the fair representation of the various religions in its government ensures that the rights of each religion are vehemently safeguarded, therefore averting schismatic fall-out or a nation-state conflict and showing that instead of dividing, religion, when moderated by temperance and tolerance, can in fact create a framework of greater unity in spite of the inherent differences.

In addition, religion can be a force to strengthen relationships and cement diplomatic ties at the international level. The shared Muslim religion across the countries situated in close proximity to the Persian Gulf has untied the region and facilitated cross-border business transactions, leading to one of the most effective and well-coordinated economic cooperations - the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While the alliance is mostly motivated by prospects of

economic gains, due to the shared religious values and principles in business, the GCC has been able to bring about great prosperity of the partnering nations. Bahrain serves as the regional banking centre and follows strict Sharia Law. Since all the countries similarly observe the same rules, it has allowed filtrahs and scholars to obtain the necessary funds to finance their projects and business endeavours in these countries. What is even more remarkable is that Bahrain is Shiite dominated, while all other member-nations of the GCC comprise a Sunni majority. This astounding success serves as evidence that religion does in fact have a unifying effect in the modern world.

At the individual level, religion has a great power in linking believers across the world in fellowship and provides a sense of belonging to a larger entity. With nearly 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide, a million Catholics and Christians, and half a million more Buddhists and Hindus each, religion does indeed have of the ability to create an ineffable sense of brotherhood and connection. In this fast-paced world of rapid changes where people are growing ever tired of sprinting on the hedonic treadmill and in the context of crass materialism and avarice perpetuated by the media, religion imparts on its followers the lessons of altruism and exhorts them to care for the disadvantaged and marginalized segments of society, where otherwise they could lose themselves in the selfish culture of consumerism. The values of love, kindness and benevolence are embodied in the Christian commandment “love thy neighbour as thyself”, the Jewish Law of “heal the world”, and similarly in the Muslim injunction “look to charity as something you must do every day that the sun rises”. Given these invaluable teachings common across all religions and how religion offers opportunity for self-reflection in an atmosphere of sincere humility, accompanied by spiritual enlightenment and self-actualization, many individuals have come forward to contribute to society to create a more inclusive environment where all can be united despite the different socio-economic backgrounds. Such is displayed by the commendable service initiatives by faith-based charity organisations such as HOPE Worldwide, which encourage volunteerism and offers aid to all regardless of race, class, creed or religion.

Ultimately, in the modern world, religion, while still an integral part of human identity, does not define people to a full-stop. When moderated by morality and tolerance, religion need not necessarily divide disparate groups. In fact, such tensions can be mitigated with sound institutions and systems to

guarantee fair treatment, so religion need not be inimical to communal interest, but can indeed bring much great unity.

Teacher's Comments:

An excellent piece of work. Knowledge mastery shown here. Relevant and engaging discussions. Very good language skills.



2016 | Y6 | GP Prelim | Paper 2 | Passage

Carly Nyst examines the right to privacy and freedom of expression.

The Chinese government installs software that monitors and censors certain anti-government websites. Journalists and human rights defenders from Bahrain to Morocco have their phones tapped and their emails read by security services. Facebook takes down wall posts after States complain of “subversive material”. Google hands over user data to law enforcement authorities that include IP addresses, location data and records of communications. The US government conducts mass surveillance of foreign phone and internet users.

Each of these acts threatens both an individual’s freedom to express themselves, and their right to maintain a private life and private communications. In this way, privacy and free expression are two sides of the same coin, each an essential prerequisite to the survival of the other. To freely form and impart one’s political, religious or ethical beliefs, one needs an autonomous, private space free from interference from the State, private sector or other citizens. Equally, infringements on the right to privacy – physical or online surveillance, monitoring of communications or activities, State intrusion into private, family or home affairs – prevent an individual from exercising their freedom of expression.

Such considerations are important, for in the modern world, almost every act online is an act of expression. Participating in an online chat, networking with friends and colleagues, surfing websites, reading news and downloading files -- these are all acts of imparting or accessing information. In online interactivity, there is content generated and stored, some of which is publicly available, most of which is amongst select individuals and groups. Yet each of these acts also generates transactional information, and can be monitored by unintended parties. In turn, nearly every act of expression is now observable to communications providers, and in turn, the State.

This scrutiny is without precedent. We could previously communicate with our friends and colleagues without it being known to anyone else. We could move around cities, countries and continents and meet with whomever we wished without it being known. We could follow and join groups and movements without having to disclose identities. The ability to act without being observed was innate to the act of expression and we benefited from privacy as we expressed ourselves by living our personal, political and professional lives. Most importantly, we believed that these were rights worth protecting, enshrining in constitutions and promoting through advocacy and protecting in law.

The protection of free expression is now generally considered a common good. Some States speak out in favour of its protection and admonish those who do not support it in the modern era, and in particular for the internet. No State, however, promotes the right to privacy. Now, when States speak often of promoting free speech and the importance of facilitating access to and use of the internet and new technologies, they rarely admit the implications of new technologies for the right to privacy. They support free expression in the modern context while ignoring the right to privacy that has so long enabled and supported free expression.

The failure of the international community to develop stronger support for the right to privacy may be due to the challenges in defining the content and contours of this right. It is undeniable that privacy does face a changing environment. New forms of data generation, storage, processing and surveillance have made it far from a static concept; its content and confines are being contested in never-ending games between individuals, governments and corporations; our own notions of privacy vary greatly across historical periods, cultures and places.

Understanding and protecting privacy is also challenged by the constant evolution of technologies that transform the way we think about the private and public spheres. Technological change alters our relationships and interactions with governments and the corporate sector. It also changes how we think about the realisation and protection of human rights. In order to enjoy privacy of communications individuals must be able to exchange information and ideas in a space beyond the reach of the State, the private sector and other members of society. As technologies increase the reach of the State, place power in the hands of the private sector and create new societies and citizenries online, privacy protection is increasingly crucial.

However, even as the right to privacy is viewed by citizens as their safeguard from the State, it is viewed by the State as a barrier to control, an impediment to power. Privacy is at the heart of the most basic understandings of human dignity – the ability to make autonomous choices about our lives and relationships, without outside interference or intimidation, is central to who we are as human beings. Yet by the State that seeks to control its populace, it is viewed as an impediment, and is conceptualised as hampering security, development, and modernisation. Thus, individuals are forced to choose between starkly contrasting values: on one side there is dignity, freedom and individual rights. On the other, convenience, control and national security. All of these are false choices, pitting technology as a means for evil and privacy, the preserve of darker forces in society.

The idea that we must choose between privacy and security has too often pervaded the political and economic discourses, creating false dichotomies and spurring over-simplified arguments about the roles of technologies. The discussion reveals no consideration of the values and priorities tied up in privacy and security, no reference to the potentials of technology and no indication of the other choices that exist. It has instead cast security and privacy as competing concepts, rather than mutually reinforcing values.

Technologies have blurred the line between public and private thought and expression; courts across the globe are confounded by questions about how to characterise social media musings and blogs, how to think about data like location, IP addresses and cookies. Today, more than ever, privacy and free expression are interlinked; an infringement upon one can be both the cause and consequence of an infringement upon the other. This is likewise so in the case of communications surveillance. The things an individual says to another person, their intimate feelings and opinions: each of these pieces of information is incredibly sensitive and personal. They have long been considered the preserve of an individual's private life, yet they are now exposed to infiltration by the State without the need for consent or exceptional justification.

Carly Nyst discusses issues related to freedom of expression and the right to privacy. How far would you agree with her views, relating your arguments to your own society?

Nyst argues that “to freely form and impart one’s beliefs, one needs an autonomous, private space free from interference from the state, private sector or other citizens” (lines 11-12). By this, Nyst means that for an individual to fully exercise their freedom of expression in terms of their values and how they live their lives, there cannot be an infringement on their right to privacy. I can understand where Nyst is coming from because there must be a certain amount of respect and liberty given to an individual to make their own decisions without their privacy being violated by other parties. However, I also believe that her statement is rather extreme, failing to see that society and the government do play a large role in influencing our beliefs and principles. In Singapore, I believe that the government does provide space for individuals to express themselves, but also draws the boundary through legislation. This can be seen through the Sedition Act and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, where offensive comments made with regard to race and religion is punishable by law. This is especially important in our multi-racial, multi-religious society where the fabric of society is very much dependent on the diverse group of people living together in harmony. While society is generally open to citizens expressing their views, it will not be tolerated when their remarks cause harm and fuel possible tensions between different groups of people. It is precisely because of Singapore’s strong belief in respecting each other’s culture and religion that allows each person, “regardless of race or religion” as outlined by our National Pledge, to exercise their faith and practise their traditions in a safe environment. Therefore, I believe that the space given to an individual cannot be completely “private” and “free from interference”. On the other hand, an individual can still exercise freedom of expression within these confines, as long as they do not go against the status quo.

In addition, Nyst emphasises that “the state that seeks to contain its populace” (lines 61-62), sees the right to privacy as an “impediment to power”. By this, Nyst means that governments feel the need to infringe on their citizen’s

privacy to ensure that they are able to establish control over the population. There is some truth to her words as corrupt governments who seek to consolidate power and wealth among themselves are generally afraid of their citizen's extreme views that may destabilise their government. However, I believe that this is only an exception, and most governments around the world care about their citizen's needs and see the importance of maintaining the right to privacy to gain favour from the population. This is also apparent in Singapore where the government is aware of the challenges that come with meeting the needs of an increasingly educated and outspoken populace. Social media and globalisation have exposed citizens to more Western views of freedom of expression and the right to privacy and have given them a platform to voice their opinions. This would suggest that the state has to carefully deal with issues of privacy. Given the rising threat of terrorism around the world, the Singapore government has stepped up security measures by increasing the number of security cameras around the island and by tracking the search history and messages of suspicious individuals. These measures could be said to be an infringement on privacy, and opposed by some, but with the greater national interests at stake, a certain amount of individual right needs to be given to the government, trusting that they have the nation's best interest at heart. Hence, it is unfair to say that the State seeks to control the population. It is perhaps necessary for a certain amount of the right to privacy to be given up by citizens to ensure the security of the nation.

Teacher's comments:

This is a thoughtful response that demonstrates good understanding of Singapore. Attempts to provide a nuanced response too.

Carly Nyst discusses issues related to freedom of expression and the right to privacy. How far would you agree with her views, relating your arguments to your own society?

Nyst states the the protection of freedom of expression is generally deemed to be a common good. She makes an observation that in today's modern society, more governments are supporting greater freedom of expression and even chiding those unsupportive of it. While such an observation resonates more with Western societies like the USA or France which encouraged the liberty to express thoughts even in the wake of the Charlie Hebdo tragedy, such an observation is less applicable to my society, Singapore. Although Singapore is a first-world developed nation, the government still remains conservative and, sometimes, unreceptive to the notion of freedom of expression. Perhaps, this is attributed to the multi-racial and multi-cultural society we live in where hateful remarks may potentially upset social stability by hurting religious sentiments. This has led to the creation of somewhat arcane policies like the Sedition Act which hinders the freedom of expression by giving governments free rein to persecute anyone who makes potentially divisive or derogatory remarks. The presence of such outdated policies in a developed country bears testament to Singapore's stance on limiting freedom of expression, a stance informed by the complex fabric of society.

Nyst also posits that technology has altered our perceptions about the realisation and protection of human rights. This claim is echoed in Singaporean society. In the past 10 years, Singapore's web penetration rates soared from 62% to 93% today, with more than 82% of Singaporeans engaged on a social media platform, according the Infocomm Development Authority. This has facilitated greater interactions on online platforms between individuals from all walks of life. In doing so, more citizens are growing increasingly aware of their rights. The creation of online forums such as Hardware Zone and The Online Citizen have helped draw attention to the importance of the fulfilment of certain inalienable rights such as the freedom of expression. For example, Roy Ngerng, a popular blogger, brought to light a popular censorship practice by the Media Development Authority which required him to obtain a license once his blog

reached a viewership of 35 000 users. He then highlighted the struggles he faced in obtaining the license due to the controversial nature of his blog. This drew the attention of many online users who developed greater awareness of the restriction of freedom of expression in Singapore which was often masked by the government but brought to light by the Internet. However, one must acknowledge the role of other factors in contributing to this decline in apathy over the years. As Singapore has achieved tremendous economic progress over the years, it is also possible that this greater awareness of rights is not necessarily due to technology but a general willingness to pursue the non-material aspects of life such as the fulfilment of basic rights given that material needs have been sufficiently met.

In addition, Nyst also claims that the state views the right to privacy as an obstacle to security, development and modernisation. There is value in this argument as allowing individuals to communicate without surveillance by the government can create potential security threats. Such a threat was exemplified in Singapore where when a 17-year old was detained under the Internal Security Act for links to the extremist organisation, ISIS. The boy was radicalised through social media platforms which are were not closely monitored in Singapore for younger age groups. As such, this right to privacy resulted in potential security threats for Singapore.

In conclusion, I would agree largely with Nyst's arguments as they are applicable to my Singaporean society.

Teacher's Comments:

There is consistently sensible evaluation and analysis. Illustrations are also generally appropriately employed. More engagement with Nyst's reasoning will make this response even stronger.

'Mathematics is just a game played according to certain rules; it is ultimately meaningless.' How far do you agree?

From the very beginning of a child's educational journey, he is taught methods and formulas for deriving answers to seemingly pointless or simply bizarre mathematical questions. 'What is the point of finding the perimeter of a rhombus?', one might ask. Or, "Why do I have to calculate the value of x ?" Or even, "what is x ?". It is evident that Mathematics does seem to hold no meaning in itself, being just an enterprise of knowledge that really is simply a game played according to certain rules. Yet this formalist viewpoint is untenable in reality for it runs contrary to the nature of knowledge construction by humans not only in Mathematics, but also in other related areas of knowledge such as science.

Those who believe Maths to be meaningless are not entirely mistaken. Mathematical activities that seem to have no corresponding physical reality are abundant in mathematical calculations – the square root of 2 is not an observable value, and neither are imaginary numbers, or negative numbers. The prevalence of abstract quantities, especially in the recent evolution of pure Mathematics, reasonably puzzles the common man, who sees no value in such made-up concepts. The studies of pure Mathematics seem directionless and aimless in themselves, and are more often than not merely fanciful whims of the mathematician considering the various possibilities that could arise in tweaking one step of the equation, or another. In addition, Mathematics seems to be subject to the changing tastes and preferences of the community that engages in the activity. Theorems, such as the nine-point-theorem, that once captivated numerous mathematicians have faded into the background as newer, fresher and more exciting problems arise. Criteria for what constitutes an interesting problem or an elegant proof change constantly. In this way, theories may not be discarded for no longer holding true, but can easily be deemed as unimportant and forgotten easily. This greatly undermines the meaning that Mathematics holds.

Yet, while such views do raise certain questions about the value of Mathematics, it fails to account for Mathematics' focus on universal categories of human thought. Mathematics deals with ideas that are far too naturally ingrained in our perceptions to simply be an abstract product for entertainment. The human sense and understanding of numbers is an innate and irreducible mode of perception – children immediately recognize pairs and threesomes. Just like how we cannot but see the world in colour, we naturally identify quantities in all perceptions. Examples from history also illustrate this. Almost every single human civilization known has developed a language or medium for communicating numerical quantities. While conceptions of numbers may not always be uniform, such as the concept of zero only being invented much later in mankind's history, the integral nature of mathematical concept cannot be denied. According to Kant's categories of the human mind, human beings naturally adopt a mathematical lens when viewing the world. Being thus instinctive and natural, the view of Mathematics as a game created without meaning seems incompatible to human experience.

In fact, in examining the origins of Mathematics, we see that Maths itself was conceived for a purpose that goes beyond satisfying game players. Mathematics is not only inspired by the reality that we exist in, but also enables us to understand this reality. Seemingly pointless formulas of differentiation and integration actually originated from the need to calculate rates of change of everyday moving objects. The coordinate plane stemmed from a need to characterize space effectively and efficiently. Mathematics was therefore not created as a game but as a means to interact with reality.

Furthermore, as Eugene Wigner once said, Mathematics has an “unreasonable effectiveness” in characterizing and explaining phenomena of the natural world. Newton found that planets move around the sun in perfect elliptical orbits that correspond to the intersection of a plane and a cone. Planets move around the sun under the influence of a force that is exactly the inverse of the square of the distance between the sun and the planet. Even pure mathematics, which seems to have no correlation to physical reality, has been found at times to fit explanations in physics like a glove. According to the indispensability argument, if we are to believe in the reality of scientific phenomena in everyday reality, we need to believe in the Mathematics that facilitates their explanation.

Mathematics shares such an unquestionable relationship with science that its value cannot be questioned – Mathematics enables us to interpret the real world. The answers that are found in mathematical problems are not meaningless; they hold in themselves the explanations to scientific phenomena. Mathematics is not a game, but an enterprise of knowledge geared towards constructing knowledge about the real world and seeking truths that we as humans hold as important. This is further supported by the fact that Mathematics seems to naturally arise in nature. Musical harmonies occur in simple mathematical ratios, flowers are patterned by the Fibonacci sequence, and even beauty can be attributed to the mathematical golden ratio. Are these coincidences? The prevalence and regularity of these instances in nature suggest not. How then, can Mathematics be a game created by man?

The greatest objection to such a view, perhaps, is that Mathematics cannot be reduced to a set of formal rules. Godel's incompleteness theorem proves that no sufficiently expressive mathematical system can be both complete and consistent at the same time, thus rejecting the possibility that Mathematics is simply a game played according to certain rules. In view of this, in order to argue that Mathematics is meaningless, one cannot undermine the inherent importance of Mathematics, but only the certainty it accords.

Mathematics has always been heralded as the pinnacle area of knowledge for its seeming indubitability. Indeed, the notion that $1+1=2$ could be false seems ridiculous. Yet, the axiom-theorem structure that may hold as the pillar of certainty may not be sufficient. While theorems are deductively derived, the certainty of Maths can be undermined by demonstrating the axioms to be false. For instance, Euclidean geometry relies on the axiom that the shortest distance between two points is a line, but Riemannian geometry states that it is a curve. This raises questions about which axiom are true and whether axioms themselves are always certain. Yet both sets of mathematical systems built upon these axioms have proven to be useful in formulating scientific theories such as Newton's laws of gravitation and Einstein's theory of relativity.

Before concluding, to address the objection raised earlier about the lack of meaning in abstract mathematical entities, one can look to constructionist models of Mathematics, where many abstract theorems have been rejected as

meaningless or obsolete. Some extreme proponents have even promoted the viability of using only natural numbers in Mathematics, or even just the number 1 in all calculations. While such an enterprise of Maths is undeniably more engaged with and rooted in physical reality, proofs by this method are usually much longer and much more complex than proofs applying abstract entities. As argued earlier, Mathematics is useful and meaningful for various reasons. Yet even is one clings to the opinion that Maths is meaningless, one need not reject the value of Maths.

Therefore, Mathematics may appear to be largely detached from human experience but is in reality not. While much of pure Maths today does originate purely from mathematician's interests and even, as some may argue, boredom, Mathematics holds far too much power in its ability to connect us to the natural world, to be meaningless. The nature of Mathematics in itself is purposeful and meaningful, and will continue to be for years to come.

Teacher's Comments:

Excellent piece here, Xin Hwee! You elegantly and beautifully interwove the big picture with all the finer details of Maths, and in such a concise manner. Outstanding.

'Mathematics is just a game played according to certain rules; it is ultimately meaningless.' How far do you agree?

"All mathematical statements mean the same thing, namely nothing," is a famous quote uttered by the philosopher Wittgenstein. Both the quote alone and the question stem seem very provoking, since mathematics – one of the most pure forms of knowledge – is just reduced to a mere game, one without any purpose or sense! If so, then why do we bother with math at all? Strange as it may seem, I agree that math is a game played (by us) according to certain rules (namely, those of deductive reasoning), but I do not agree that Math is meaningless. Meaning is a quality endowed on something by us humans, and in this scenario we ought to consider the meaning of math via the reliability of the knowledge it generates and the utility of these claims in other fields. By both accounts, math is not meaningless.

Where did math come from? When did it begin? These are not questions that come to one's mind immediately upon thinking of this essay's question stem, but I believe that they play a crucial role in answering the question. Statements like $1+1=2$ are undoubtedly mathematical in nature, yet we have good evidence that human babies and even most animals have some comprehension of such mathematical statements related to primitive arithmetic. Do these living beings play this "game" of math too? Seemingly not, for our concept of a game is one of something that is created just for fun. It has been argued that the very act of separating objects into numerical, countable sets leads to benefits for all animals (e.g. identifying how many predators are chasing you). Primitive and contrite as all this might seem – it does give us an inkling of the applicability of math in the real world, and the idea that mathematics might have a deep neurological grounding in our brains. In that sense, at least, it would not seem to be merely a game.

Yet I do believe ultimately that mathematics is just a game. Why? For this, one must consider the growth of mathematics and the kinds of knowledge that are generated. Starting with primitive arithmetic, the Greeks stumbled upon irrational numbers and ultimately, in the last few hundred years,

mathematicians have come up with the idea of imaginary numbers. What on Earth is an imaginary number? I can count 5 apples, I can even visualise π to be the ratio of a circle's circumference and diameter. All that math seems to have meaning – a kind of truth that corresponds to what we can see in the world. But $\sqrt{-1}$ apples? Such a concept seems perplexing, at best. Yet, millions of students worldwide accept that the idea of imaginary numbers exists, and that it does make logical sense. According to a correspondent truth, $\sqrt{-1}$ cannot be directly observed, and so it is meaningless in that it does not seem to be able to be true. Yet this betrays a deep assumption, that math needs to directly apply to the real world. As long as we relax the idea that any mathematical object ought to have a real-life counterpart, we can progress with math. The cost though, is this – math develops into a game, one whose ideas are rational and deductively follow from one another.

Obviously, some philosophers have problems with this, but unfortunately for them, that is just how math is. Multi-dimensional spaces, sets of numbers smaller than every real number – these things are quite literally out of our world. Yet, there is a problem. If mathematics is just a game we play according to deductive logic, then what do we base our deductions on? After all, to deduce anything, you require something to deduce it from. According to modern mathematics, this deduction is done on the basis of certain basic axioms. For example, all of Euclidean geometry can be deduced from 5 postulates. These postulates seem to be self-evident and really, cannot be justified on the basis of anything else. Yet are they true? It is hard to give an explanation of why they ought to be true – and indeed they do not need to be true! Rejecting the parallel postulate is how the wonderful field of spherical and hyperbolic geometry was born. Now, some might ask “why can an axiom just be rejected?” to which the answer is “why not?” This practice is perfectly coherent with math being just a game. Indeed, if on the basis of some other power or reason, such as logic, some axioms definitely needed to be true, then we could not just reject our axioms as and when we like (at least not how we could do so within a game). But in math, we do reject axioms from time to time – indeed completely new fields are often discovered from relaxing an assumption of the existing field. Consider again the creation of irrational numbers. To some Greeks, these numbers are evil, they could not be written as the ratio of 2 normal numbers. Eventually the world just accepted the use of

those “weird, evil” numbers and moved on. Similarly, some of us find it difficult to accept that axioms can be revised and lead to the creation of new systems – but this is just a fact of math that makes most sense when we consider math to be just a game played according to deductive rules that we imposed upon it.

As always, there is an implication to this – that two seemingly contradictory statements can be true at the same time. “The sum of interior angles of a triangle is 180° ” and “the sum of interior angles of a triangle is 270° ” are statements that are equally true – even if they seem contradictory. We all know that $\sim[P \wedge \sim P]$, but isn’t the above a clear example of this? The first statement can be proven in Euclidean geometry, and the second in spherical geometry. How can this be? Perhaps a real world illustration would make it simpler – the former is true when your triangle is flat (on a plane) while the latter is true if your triangle is constructed on a sphere. The mistake is to say that both are triangles and so should have the same angle sum. They are fundamentally different because they are construed in different axiomatic systems, with different interpretations in the real world. Within an axiomatic system, the principle of non-contradiction certainly holds, but we must be careful to note that a mathematical object’s properties can only be understood within the context of the axiomatic theory itself. Another, perhaps more mind boggling example, is to consider “what is $1+2+3+4+\dots$ ” We would normally say that the sum is infinity, but mathematicians say that under certain assumptions (i.e. if you are in the right axiomatic system), the answer could be $-1/12$. Both axioms are equally valid, they just have different fundamental axiomatic interpretations of what a “sum” is.

This does seem to show that math is meaningless however, No statement can be true everywhere, only within an axiomatic system. Doesn’t this make math meaningless? If I can’t know what $1+1$ is, then what am I wasting my life on? The answer to this is that we can know the truth of certain axioms, just within a system itself. Math still has lots of meaning – it shows all the truths that necessarily follow from a set of simple axioms. 5 simple axioms and I can deduce all the truths about geometry in a plane. Apart from this applicability of math in itself, this idea of how truths can be deduced from a set of simple assumptions has many practical applications in science. For instance, if I assume that in a key step of a chemical reaction, there is only 1 reactant molecule,

then the rules of math allow me to deduce how the concentrations of reactant and product change over time. This assumption has no mathematical basis, but once I assume it, I can predict so many properties of my system. It is rather akin to math itself – the axioms have no real reason for being true, but once I assume them there is a whole world of knowledge waiting to be discovered. This defining feature of math appears time and again in science – how can one then say that math is meaningless?

Finally, I will briefly consider certainty in math. One main reason put forth for why math is meaningful, is that it is absolutely certain. From a set of axioms I can strictly deduce some necessary truths about the system. This is not strictly true, for there is no way I can know that the mathematical axiomatic system is consistent in itself. This means that within a system, one day I might find out that actually, both a statement and its negation are true. In such an inconsistent system, all statements in the language of the system can ultimately be proven true – so the system really is completely meaningless. Even though Gödel has shown that we cannot prove a system to be consistent, I still believe that we ought to consider the system consistent until proven otherwise. After all, just because something is not necessarily consistent does not mean that it is necessarily inconsistent, and given that knowledge in math is so vast and applicable everywhere, we should still consider it to be meaningful.

Ultimately, whether something has meaning or not is dependent on whether we want to assign it the status of having meaning. I believe that though math is a game, it is from playing the game that we can find out a lot about the world and so we should continue playing this game and try to deduce useful, and largely certain, information from it. So, math is a game we play, but as long as we play it according to how we want to do so, there will always be meaning for us to find.

Teacher's Comments:

Great piece here, Rishi, although rather (too) long and a tad long-winded. What you did well was to systematically prove that even though math is a game, it can and still is meaningful.

The explanation about how meaning can be derived even though we continually manipulate math could have been better done though. On the whole, excellent job.



The Role of Peer Review

Peer review has long been held to be the gold standard in determining the quality of any scholarly journal publication. Scientific journals catalogue the contributions, thoughts, and opinions of researchers, investigators, and experts in the field, and the prestige of a journal depends on the validity, usefulness, and quality of the articles published. The peer review process is essentially a quality control mechanism as it subjects research papers to independent scrutiny by other (anonymous) qualified experts before the journal editor makes a final publication decision.

Theoretically, peer review should help authors make their manuscript better. But in reality, the cutthroat attitude that pervades the system results in ludicrous rejections for personal reasons—if the reviewer feels that the paper threatens his or her own research or contradicts his or her beliefs, for example—or simply for convenience, since top journals get too many submissions and it's easier to just reject a paper than spend the time to improve it. Reviewers are also more likely to favour manuscripts that are clearly written, are creative, demonstrate positive results, and have interesting titles, and may more readily accept manuscripts from more prestigious institutions than those from lesser-known institutions.

Now, it is a well-known fact that, aside from its use in scientific journals, peer review is the process by which grants are allocated, academics are promoted, textbooks are written, and Nobel prizes are won. A publication that has been peer reviewed gains respectability and acceptance and is considered a relevant contribution to the field; peer review is a professional privilege and responsibility that directly impacts what is accepted as important to a body of knowledge. This is very important in Science, since nothing can be considered true unless verified by the scientific community. The certainty of Science rests largely on how well new theories and ideas fit in with the rest of the field. But if peer reviews aren't as credible a process as is often believed to be, we wouldn't know if what is published is really true!

Perhaps anonymous peer review should be abolished, because reviewers are biased by personal motives. Anonymity gives the reviewer latitude to say all sorts of nasty things, and allows for the infiltration of inevitable personal biases—against the scientific ideas presented or even the authors themselves—into a judgment that should be based entirely on scientific merit.

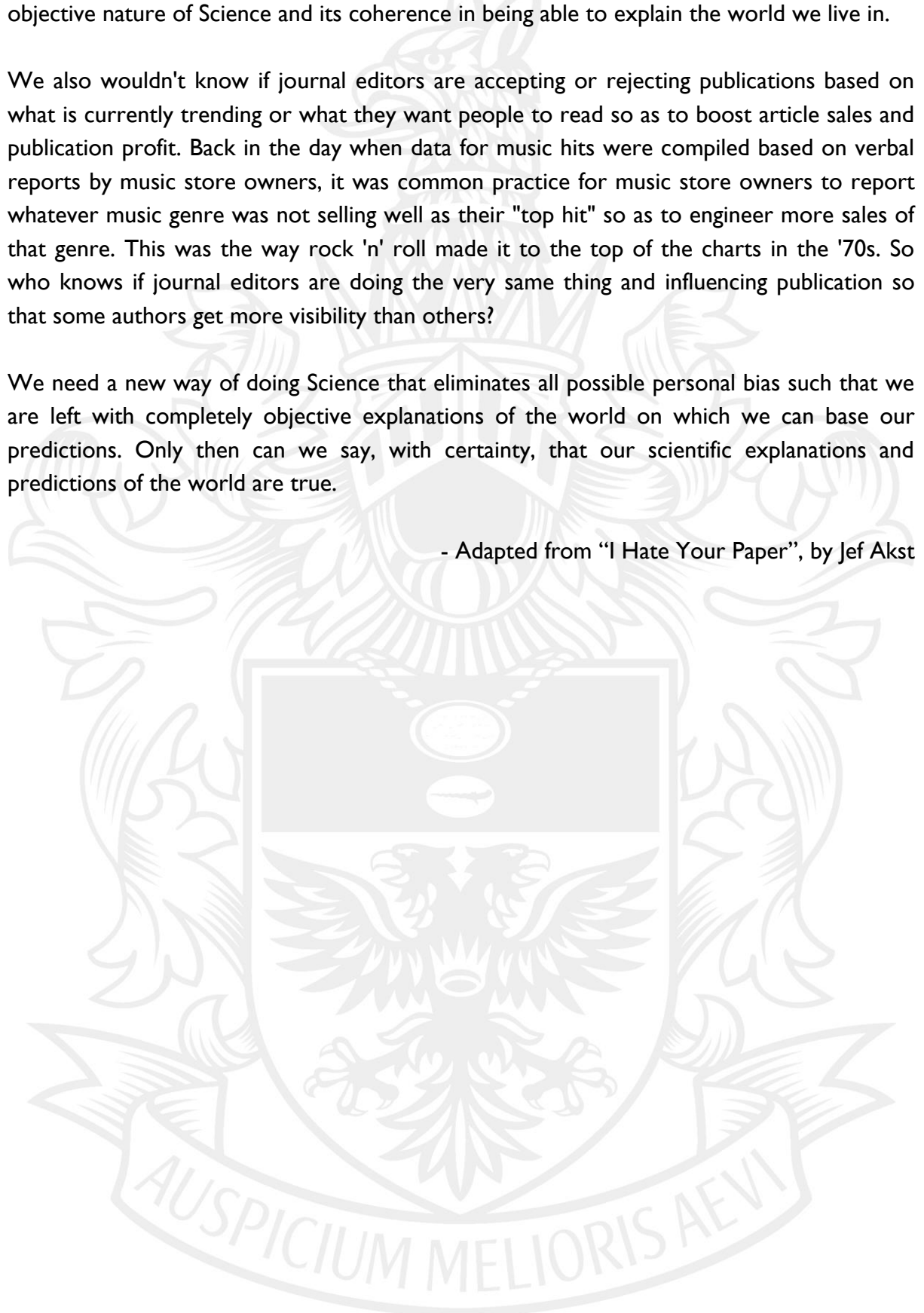
In addition, there are no agreed-upon, evidence-based guidelines as to what constitutes a qualified reviewer. Journal editors simply pick and choose whoever they think is suitable.

This arbitrariness in what has been called the gold-standard for evaluating and selecting quality scientific publication is disturbing, especially since we continually hail the value-free, objective nature of Science and its coherence in being able to explain the world we live in.

We also wouldn't know if journal editors are accepting or rejecting publications based on what is currently trending or what they want people to read so as to boost article sales and publication profit. Back in the day when data for music hits were compiled based on verbal reports by music store owners, it was common practice for music store owners to report whatever music genre was not selling well as their "top hit" so as to engineer more sales of that genre. This was the way rock 'n' roll made it to the top of the charts in the '70s. So who knows if journal editors are doing the very same thing and influencing publication so that some authors get more visibility than others?

We need a new way of doing Science that eliminates all possible personal bias such that we are left with completely objective explanations of the world on which we can base our predictions. Only then can we say, with certainty, that our scientific explanations and predictions of the world are true.

- Adapted from "I Hate Your Paper", by Jef Akst



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

The author claims that we need a new way of doing Science that eliminates all possible personal bias such that we are only left with completely objectives explanations of the world, on which we can base our predictions. He implies that our way of doing Science is contingent on the papers that are published on the scientific journals and comments that peer review used in determining which papers are to be published is a subjective matter which can produce unreliable theories that will not allow us to predict the world's phenomena. Only when Science is made value-free and objective can we then use it to achieve truth and certainty. In general, while there are certain premises that are true, I do not accept the author's argument.

I agree with the author that the selection process in an individual peer review can be biased since our decisions and perceptions are undergirded by our beliefs and individuals might have personal agendas. However, the author exaggerates this factor of personal bias and claims as if the paper is only reviewed by one other peer, or by numerous peers who all have the same bias and agenda against one paper or theory. This is not very plausible in actual fact as qualified experts that review the papers most likely will each have their own views about the paper that are different from one another. This inter-subjectivity suggests that their slight personal bias will most likely cancel out and not leave a significant impact. If one peer reviewer expresses extremely strong opinions, surely the other experts will enquire why and he/she must be able to provide credible arguments against the paper which are not just based on personal bias and 'nasty things'. The author severely underestimates the professionalism of scientists and the scientific community and extrapolates the impacts of personal bias on the construction of knowledge in Science.

Next, the author claims that nothing in Science is true unless verified by the scientific community. This claim appeals to the view that scientific truth is

mainly based on theory of coherence. This claim is false as scientific truth is not only dependent on how well the scientific theory fits in with the rest of the field, but also based on correspondence to reality and how well it work for predicting phenomena in the natural world. Supposing the theories that are published in the papers are biased to only fit what the “unqualified experts” view as true, even if the theories all fit in with one another in a coherent system, if the theories do not stand up to reproducibility or does not correspond to what is observed in reality in emergence of new observations, the theories will be proven to be false and will be considered to be removed naturally. Hence, the simplistic view that if scientific journals only admit what it wants, the whole certainty and truth of Science will be brought down cannot be granted. Instead, the discovery of true Science will be slowed down by biasness and possibly false theories but will not entirely render Science subjective and unreliable.

Plus, verification by scientific community does not only rest on peer reviews typed by experts. Verification in scientific community also includes conducting the same experiments repeatedly to ensure that the scientific theory is legitimate and reproducible. Hence, the peer review in scientific community is much more rigorous than described in the passage and should not be taken down by the author so easily.

In addition, the author claims that Science should be totally value-free and objective in order to predict what happens in the natural world. Though this may be the ideal situation, Science can never be totally value-free. Scientists at any point in time operate in a scientific paradigm which consists of a whole package of values, beliefs and methodologies of acquiring and analyzing data. These values and beliefs will always affect the scientists’ perceptions; this gives rise to theory-ladenness, a common critique of Science. As Paul Feyerabend stated, theories and observations can never be apart, and no observations can be made without certain warrants taken for granted. Even between scientific paradigms, incommensurability prevents different scientific paradigms from being compared on a single criterion. Due to the difference in language and methodological standards, they cannot be directly compared and the decision of which paradigm to shift to can be a subjective one. Hence, contrary to what the author believes, having completely objective explanations that are rid of all

personal bias is not possible. However, that does not mean that scientific knowledge cannot be guaranteed even without absolute certainty. As mentioned, scientific knowledge has been judged as useful up till now as it is able to predict natural phenomena to a precise and accurate extent, and therefore can be considered true even without 100% objectivity and certainty.

In conclusion, even though the main concern of the author – the subjectivity in certain processes of Science – is one that exists in the scientific world, the extent to which this subjectivity affects scientific knowledge is not as large as the author claims it to be due to rigorous checking in addition to more peer reviews that prevents personal bias to greatly affect the credibility of Science. In addition, Science can never be completely value-free due to operation in paradigms, but can still be granted truth by pragmatism.

Teacher's Comments:

Great analysis and evaluation here, Joey! There was clarity in what the issues were and how the author's points could withstand scrutiny (or not). However, there were a number of instances of missed opportunities to highlight the different facets of the author's argument and bring in more AO1 content (and examples, specifically) to make your entire response stronger and more nuanced. Overall, still a great response.

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

The author of the passage argues that we need a new way of doing Science that eliminates all possible personal bias to achieve objective scientific knowledge. The author first establishes the important role of the peer review system as a quality control mechanism in the publication of scientific articles. However, the peer review system in actual fact is plagued by bias and subjectivity. Peer reviewers may reject articles due to personal reasons as they may have vested interest in not granting an article due to the competitive nature of the field. The credibility of peer review is hence thrown into question since the criteria of judging articles are not simply their validity, usefulness and quality. To this, the author asserts that anonymity of the system is a problem since peer reviewers are not held accountable for their biased opinions. In addition, the arbitrary selection of peer reviewers by the journal editors also undermines the golden standard of value-freedom, objectivity and coherence in Science. Lastly, the journal editors can also be biased in accepting or rejecting publications. Since the current system of doing Science through the peer review system does not meet the criteria of being bias free or objective, we need a new way of doing Science to meet the criteria Science sets out to achieve.

The author is accurate in saying that the truth of scientific knowledge, at least as it appears, relies fundamentally on its acceptance by the scientific community. In addition, peer reviewers and journal editors, like all humans, are inherently subjective. The way they evaluate every article will rely on their preconceived notions, theories and beliefs. As such, there will always be room for doubt regarding the absolute objectivity of each peer reviewer and journal editor. However, it is crucial to note that the peer review system involves more than a single individual, but instead, multiple peer reviewers and journal editors who counterbalance each other's subjectivity, and result in a much more reliable ultimate valuation of the piece of journal. The check-and-balance nature of the

system can provide a high degree of inter-subjectivity whereby many evaluators can corroborate their opinions with one another and arrive at a consensus. Besides, the peer review system is not the only test of validity, usefulness and quality of the article; the truth of the article will be revealed over time. The wider scientific community may use the methodology detailed in the scientific article and attempt to reproduce it; the reproducibility of the research is the best test of reliability.

Furthermore, the anonymity of peer reviewers is unlikely the problem as to why full objectivity cannot be reached. It is possible that with transparency of the peer reviewers' identity, more factors come into play, such as when the peer reviewers cannot give an honest opinion of the article in fear of retaliation from the scientist behind the piece of work. The entire argument of the author hinges on the warrant that it is indeed possible to achieve absolute objectivity in Science, and the reason why we have yet to achieve it is due to the improper way of doing Science. However, I would like to contest this. As previously mentioned, humans are inherently shaped by our experiences and our environment. When we attempt to do Science, regardless of whether we are conducting experiments or evaluating existing scientific work, we are always theory-laden. For instance, when a biologist sees spots through the microscope, and recognizes that they are red-blood cells, he proceeds to test the effect of a drug on healthy somatic cells. In this process of recognition, he inevitably recalls other theories to aid him in his judgement. In addition, an article written in scientific language tries its best to convey unambiguous meaning. However, we can never be certain that other scientists will not interpret the writing differently, and made an alternative judgement about the value of the article apart from what they would have otherwise. As such, the author's warrant can be challenged. Perhaps the quest for absolute certainty and objectivity in Science is futile, for we may never arrive at such a destination. Yet, Science also never set out to be certain and completely objective to begin with. The purpose of Science is to yield laws and theories that have immense pragmatic application and prescriptive power. The barometer of scientific knowledge is its reliability and rigor. The current system of peer review, coupled with other mechanisms like corroboration with other fields of knowledge (such as Mathematics), and the coherence with existing pool of

knowledge, collectively ensure the rigor of Science. Hence, the author's claim that we need to revamp the current system of Science remains unwarranted.

Another flaw in the author's argument is the false analogy of comparing scientific journal editors to music sellers. The latter manipulates results of music popularity in an attempt to gain more profit. However, journal editors are fundamentally different as their role is to ensure the credibility of the journal by checking the quality of the articles it publishes. Publication of non-rigorous articles may undermine this on the long-run and even go against the goal of increasing journal sales since the journal is no longer a credible source of scientific knowledge.

In conclusion, the author's main conclusion should not be accepted even though he made good points about the fallibility of human in giving absolute objectivity. Absolute objectivity may not be attainable, or even a worthy pursuit to begin with. Therefore new ways of doing Science are not warranted.

Teacher's Comments:

Relatively good piece here, XiaoJian. The main points were covered with sufficient support, although a couple were lacking in detail. Reconstruction was a tad too long-winded, but the big picture view of the passage is right.

Consider the consequences if all art museums and art galleries in your country were closed down.

“All art is quite useless”, wrote Oscar Wilde in the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. One interpretation of this wild claim is that, perhaps, Wilde is commenting on the practicality of art, rather than the intrinsic value in art. Art, in particular paintings and visual arts, has been often associated with the upper class, catering to only a small minority who has had their basic needs satisfied. In Singapore’s pragmatic society, the expenditure of the Arts scene has always been scrutinized for fear of unnecessary spending. While arts education is generally agreed upon to be important, the funding of the many art museums and galleries in Singapore has been questioned as many deemed the art museums to be too costly and dispensable. However, should all the art museums and galleries close down, it will pose a huge setback to government’s effort in building a cultural identity.

From a pragmatist’s viewpoint, closing down all the art museums and galleries would lead to freeing up budget that can be spent on other social issues in need of dire attention. According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), the government’s expenditure on the arts from 2012 to 2014 amount to \$274 millions. Although not all of which can be credited to spending on art museums and galleries, it is not entirely far-fetched to say it takes up a significant portion of the \$274 millions. After all, museums such as the the Singapore Arts Museum (SAM) and the ArtScience Museum at Marina Bay do put up exhibitions rather regularly. These exhibitions involve paying for foreign artists and artworks to be displayed, with no guarantee of covering the costs from ticket sales. Furthermore, tickets to such exhibitions are mostly subsidized by the government to encourage attendance and hence every exhibition is costly, not to mention some exhibitions may be too niche and attract few visitors. The amount spent on all these activities can be quite staggering when once considers the fact that right now Singapore has more than 50 museums and galleries and most are putting up exhibitions every month or two. The belief that such spending is unnecessary is not unfounded as one of Singapore’s recently opened museum,

Singapore Pinacothèque de Paris, closed down due to low attendance. Hence, spendings on art museums may seem like unwise decisions for its lack of returns. In short, curating and maintaining art museums and galleries are costly, and these “splurgings” can be saved if all art museums and galleries were to close down.

On a cultural level, the closing down of all art museums and galleries in Singapore is akin to eroding the cultural and historical aspect of our society. Contrary to popular belief, art museums are not all about modern or abstract art, but can be relevant to society as well. The newly opened National Gallery Singapore (NGS) houses the largest collection of South-East Asian artworks, giving visitors a glimpse into the rich history of not only Singapore but the entire region of South-East Asia. The relatively older Peranakan Museum houses a vast collection of Peranakan paintings and art crafts. These works not only reflect the Peranakan culture that has helped shaped the the modern Singaporean culture but also allows visitor to gain a deeper appreciation for the history and the evolution of the said culture. Furthermore, paintings and artworks ought to be seen in person in order to have a truly authentic experience; browsing paintings from a laptop does not allow room for prolonged and detailed viewing. The only way for us Singaporeans to see these culturally and historically significant artworks is to have them housed in museums, and to close down these venues would be denying us the opportunity to learn about our culture in an intimate manner, ultimately perpetuating the notion that Singapore is a “cultural desert”.

The closing down of all arts museums and galleries would also discourage local artists in their crafts. Art is more than just a moment of self-indulgence of the artist, but it is also meant to be shared with other people. Russian writer Tolstoy believed that art needs to “evoke one’s feeling” and “transmit these feelings to others” and how can these artworks see daylight if there are no venues to host them. Public exhibitions are essential to an artist’s career, for it is the primary way to receive validation and fame. Famous paintings, such as Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* (O.J. version) which is often hailed as the symbol of Cubism and Modernism, did not generate discussion until they were put on a public exhibition. Similarly, for Singapore to nurture budding artists, it ought to provide venues to display their works. In fact, NGS is currently holding an

exhibition of Singaporeans-only artworks, many of which come from young artists in their early 30s. Hence, closing down art museums and galleries would effectively put local artists out of their career as it will deny them the opportunity to display their works in public.

Lastly, closing down art museums and galleries would be a huge blow to the effort in arts education to students and the general public. According to MCCY, museum attendance has steadily increased from 2 million in 2004 to 8 million in 2014, showing how museums have managed to reach out to more citizens, amongst which students would presumably make up a large proportion as museums such as SAM and NGS have often been made the destinations for school's Learning Journeys. Arts students are also seen frequenting art museums, seeking for inspirations from the artworks on display. The exhibitions in some museums also explores social issues, as seen from one of SAM's exhibition on refugees through an art installation of a boat made from used fabrics. These exhibitions and artworks do prompt the visitors to rethink and relook at certain issues, and leave the museum with a deeper understanding of the world around them. Museums and galleries have always been a vehicle for education not just on arts but also the themes and issues they raise. This education does not only apply to people who are interested in arts but should concern the general public as well. Hence, closing down art museums and galleries would be removing one key avenue of educating the public.

In conclusion, art museums and galleries serve to preserve history, promote culture and most importantly educate the minds of the people. Having that physical space is crucial to achieving the aforementioned functions for a visit to an art museum displaces us temporarily from our hectic lifestyle and allows us time to introspect and reflect. Although a more thorough evaluation of the existing museums would be beneficial, and possibly closing down one or two museums with obsolete content, art museums and art galleries need to stay in our society to help build the cultural identity that we as Singaporeans need.

Teacher's Comments:

Lucidly argued and well-structured essay. One area of improvement: you could have drawn more precisely on the content/nature of works our art museums and galleries have hosted to make some of your points."



**"The fight for gender equality is far from over;
in fact, it has just begun." Discuss.**

To many, 2016 seemed to be the year of feminism. Everyone from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, to Hollywood superstar, Emma Watson, was jumping on the feminism bandwagon. The Japanese government had passed policies that were aimed at eradicating the endemic sexism that existed in the Japanese workplace. However, the shock election of Donald Trump as the new President of the United States of America came as a rude reminder, that the cause of feminism and its fight for gender equality was far from over. If a man who boasted about "grabbing women by the pussy" could be elected as President, what did that say about the fight for gender equality? Nothing good. Therefore, while the fight for gender equality has made huge leaps of progress in recent years, I believe that there is still much to be done.

It is impossible to deny that huge leaps of progress have been made in recent years, in large part due to governments recognising the importance of engaging both genders equally, to bolster lacklustre economies. In the light of many developed countries, such as Japan, that have an increasingly ageing population, the importance of engaging every member of the population of working age has never been as prevalent as today. By promoting gender equality in the form of equal pay or less sexism in the workplace, governments can encourage more women to join the workforce, increasing the total working population, which helps bolster the economy. For example, one need only look at Japan which has long been a male-dominated society, where women were often expected to stay home and look after the household while men worked to support the family. However, just last year, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe passed policies that mandated educational workshops in Japanese offices to eradicate sexism and harassment, which is characteristic of many of the men from the older generation. This was part of his Abenomics push to bolster the Japanese economy that has been suffering blows from its increasingly elderly population and low birth rate. While the success of his plan has yet to be seen, this shows

that governments across the world have indeed realised the importance of gender equality, which has led to progress in recent years.⁸

The progress in gender equality is also in no small part due to the societal awakening brought about by social media. Many feminist movements are born in Western countries, perhaps due to more liberal perspectives. These movements may never have moved beyond their birthplaces if not for the speed and wide reach of social media. For example, the #HeForShe campaign spearheaded by outspoken feminist, Emma Watson, would not have the influence and awareness it did, if not for social media. There have been intense social media campaigns to raise awareness, by engaging prominent male actors, such as Ben Whishaw to post using the hashtag to show their support. The platform of social media also allowed the common man or woman to engage in the movement and show their support. This allowed the message of gender equality to spread far and wide, raising awareness of its importance among both members of society and their leaders. This has helped to drive progress in recent years as well.

However, it is evident that while progress has been made, there is still much left to be done. In apparent mockery of the feminist movement, there was the uprising of the Meninist movement that pushed their misogynistic views on various social media platforms such as Reddit. Rape threats to outspoken feminists are commonplace and authorities do not pursue these threats. There are a few reasons why I believe that there is still much to be done.

Firstly, the older generation often hold very conservative views about their cultures and the role of women in society. For example, many religious fundamentalists of Islam still believe that the female has no place in anywhere but the home and hearth. The Taliban did not allow girls to go to school and enacted harsh laws that restricted the freedoms of women. Even the Western world is not free from such problems. After the 2016 Presidential election, it was found that many of the 42% of women who voted for Trump, were from the older generation who believed that a return to more traditional values,

⁸ *Teacher's comments: This paragraph would have been more convincing if you had included clear indication that these developments represent a broader trend rather than a narrow Japanese phenomenon.*

was more decidedly “American”. These conservative views have prevented a lot of future progress as the older generation still occupy positions of power and can enforce their view on society through their policies, that may even breed new generations of conservative views. The older generation also are large in numbers and thus have larger voting power. The politicians who only care about re-election will pander to such viewpoints as it benefits them. Therefore, such conservative values continue to hinder a lot of progress.

Secondly, there is a mindset within society that women are less capable than men. This is a belief that has been reinforced through gender stereotypes that boys are traditionally better at thinking subjects, such as Mathematics and by a patriarchal society where having women in parliament or on a director’s chair is a victory to be celebrated rather than just the norm. In Saudi Arabia, women are not allowed to drive by themselves and often require someone to approve any major decisions they make or even a visit to the hospital. Is the woman really that incapable of making her own informed decisions? It does not help that often these women have been socialised to believe that it is normal and expected to be subservient to their fathers or spouses. A household survey carried out in India showed that 52% of Indian women felt that it was normal if their husbands beat them for going out without his prior approval. This mindset that women are not capable is one that is also holding back progress in gender equality and often is the root of a lot of gender equality.

Till now, a large part of my argument has focused on empowering women. However, in a recent speech my Emma Watson, she reiterated that feminism and gender equality were about equal rights for both males and females, not just bashing men and raising up women. This is an issue that has often been overlooked by activists and governments alike – the equality for males. While males do often have the advantage in our largely patriarchal society, they also face discrimination. For example, many males never seek treatment for mental illnesses as it is often viewed as not “manly”. The stereotypes that we hold not only affect women but also impose unhealthy standards on males. In the United Kingdom, the rate of suicide is 3 times higher for men than it is for women, many cases often linked to depression or eating disorders. There have been campaigns to raise awareness of male mental health, for example, Movember that has raised millions of dollars and widespread awareness for male health

issues. However, these campaigns often pale in comparison to huge UN-funded campaigns, such as the HeForShe campaign. Until we acknowledge that males also suffer from such unrealistic expectations and try to progress in equality of treatment for males, we may never truly achieved gender equality. Gender equality means neither males nor females should be superior to the other.

We as a society should examine the equality of gender equality, as often the more well-to-do classes benefit, like in India where many middle class women have seen liberties increase while those of the lower castes continue to be trapped in poverty and inequality. We must make sure that gender equality is not a commodity for the rich, but a right for all. We must also be wary of superficial gender equality. For example Rwanda boasts a 62% female parliament, however the women politicians interviewed are still expected to be subservient to their husbands at home. The difference between statistics and reality is one that we must be careful of as we advance the agenda of gender equality.

Ultimately, I feel that while great leaps of progress have been made in gender equality, there remains much to be done. Until we can overcome the underlying mindset and sexism as a society, the fight has only just begun.

Teacher's Comments:

This is a thoughtful and at time insightful piece that looks at discrimination against men and women. Yes, it's indeed true that men also suffer from gender discrimination and sometimes unrealistic expectations of them. Wide ranging examples provided.

AFI – You should also explain why the discriminatory practices are hard to overcome to show that the fight is indeed far from over instead of explaining that such practices still exist.

Language – Excellent. Ideas are articulated clearly and effectively. Very confident.

**'Migration should be encouraged in today's world.'
Discuss.**

The recent election of Donald Trump as the president of the United States and his repeated calls for the mass deportation of illegal immigrations have sent chills down the spine of liberals worldwide who deeply believe in the merits of migration. Six months ago, a significant proportion of the United Kingdom had just voted to leave the European Union, in a stunning repudiation of the right to free movement. Indeed, it is no longer possible to attribute anti-immigration sentiment to a minority of xenophobic and nationalistic voters. Rather, opposition towards migration today is rooted in much deeper anxieties regarding the detrimental social and economic effects of migration, and it is the author's belief that immigration must be curbed to address these woes.

It cannot be denied that migration can be a boon for both host and destination countries, for it not only furthers economic progress but also reduces the persistent inequalities in wealth and skills between developing and developed countries. In many developing countries, infrastructure and technological know-how remains severely lacking, serving as a deterrence to foreign investment and leading to a stagnant job market. Even for the fortunate ones who receive a decent education, the dearth of white collar jobs mean that they are frequently underemployed in jobs which do not put their skills to productive use. On the other hand, in the developed world, changing aspirations and improving educational attainment - accompanied by a rise in the number of university graduates - have contributed to a perennial shortage of workers in 3'D' (dirty, difficult and dangerous) jobs. It is not surprising that firms in labour intensive industries like the construction sector would welcome such as influx of migrants, which has the advantage of keeping wages competitive. Migrants are also better-off from seeking employment overseas as the comparatively higher purchasing power of foreign currency means that their wages, regarded as meagre in local terms, is often worth a small fortune back home. Most of all, these remittances often contribute to improving infrastructure and allowing their children to access better educational and

health services, helping individual families break out of the poverty cycle. In the long run, if the migrants make their return journey home, they may pass on the skills and knowledge gained to their home country, spurring economic development on a larger scale. For example, returning migrants from America are responsible for founding the equivalents of Silicon Valley in Taiwan, Mumbai and Shanghai. Even in more economically backward countries like the Philippines, remittances from domestic workers abroad continue to comprise double-digit percentages of GDP. On a global scale, such mass movements are no doubt beneficial as they help to counter unsustainable demographic trends. Most developed countries in the West face an aging population while developing countries are often overpopulated. Hence some would say that migration ought to be strongly encouraged.

However, the shambolic way that immigration is managed in many countries has caused popular sentiment to turn against it, despite its apparent economic benefits. In many cases, it has led to an exacerbation of economic and social problems, creating a strong case for discouraging migration.

Clearly, migration has worsened the plight of the less skilled in developed countries, while worsening the problem of brain drain in developing countries. In many developed countries, the influx of migrants has stiffened competition for employment among the lower-income, threatening the livelihoods of those who are unable to move up the skill ladder. Recently, the displacement of local Britons from their traditional employment by migrants from poorer Eastern European countries was a possible contributing factor to the Brexit vote. Even in developing countries where migration seems to be a remedy for economic growth, migration has often hindered economic progress in subtler ways. Poverty-stricken countries are deprived of much-needed talent when their best and brightest minds leave en masse in search of better work opportunities abroad. Presently, more Liberian doctors work in Chicago than in their home country. The loss of such valuable talent is highly pernicious, especially in today's knowledge-based economy where the value of educational qualifications has multiplied exponentially. Indeed, Liberia was caught wrong-footed when the Ebola epidemic struck in the 2010s, finding itself unable to mount an effective response with its limited number of trained medical personnel. Hence, immigration should be discouraged as it causes inequitable

and distorted growth, and may potentially worsen the prospects of low-income workers and less developed countries.

Moreover, migration has also increased social tensions in host countries and caused social fragmentation in destination countries. Migrants may not be aware of the cultural norms and appropriate standards of behaviour in host countries, fuelling misunderstandings and possible conflicts. This is exemplified by Singapore's 'curry' incident when a PRC immigrant complained about the smell of her Indian's neighbour cooking, prompting an outpouring of anti-immigrant vitriol online. In other societies, where authorities have not made an active effort to promote integration, migrants are more comfortable living with fellow migrants in homogeneous communities, leading highly segregated lives. The resulting social alienation can have severe effects. Recent terror attacks have cast a spotlight on Muslim immigrant ghettos in Europe, where migrants, largely disconnected from wider society, are susceptible to the influence of extremist ideology. Many lone-wolf terrorists such as Salah Abdeslam, who was responsible for the November 2015 bombings in France, have subsequently been identified as hailing from such ghettos. Furthermore, families are often separated as migrants are often too destitute to bring their family along, causing personal relationships to become estranged. In China, where rural-urban migration is a mass phenomenon, rural migrants may only meet their families infrequently during festive occasions like Chinese New Year. Among rural children, those brought up without the nurturing influence of their parents have been reported to show higher incidences of depressive disorders and delinquent behaviour. Hence, migration ought to be discouraged as it tends to be a divisive force with a negative bearing on the social fabric of a country.

Finally, while the humanitarian crises in today's world seem to demand an open-armed embrace of migration, the economic difficulties experienced by countries in this era of slow economic growth has made it unrealistic for migration to be pursued as a large-scale response. Indeed, the refugees from Syria have genuine need of food and shelter, and are equally deserving of the right to life. Yet as the economic pie gets increasing smaller for debt-hit countries like Greece, it is highly questionable whether host countries such as these would be able to support a decent standard of living for migrants.

Overcapacity and a shortage of food supplies at refugee camps in Greece have even led to the emergence of rampant crime and hunger problems. In other countries like the US, slowing growth has also made the population less receptive to the idea of accepting more refugees from war-torn countries. As the state arguably has a mandate to take care of its citizens first, it is indeed worth thinking whether significant resources should still be devoted to protecting involuntary migrants in this day and age.

Ultimately, many governments have been content to champion migration for economic gains, without deeply considering the accompanying side effects. A more rational immigration policy would consider the carrying capacity of the country's infrastructure, the interests of lower-income groups in society, as well as the effect of migration on social harmony. These trade-offs should make countries think twice before encouraging more migration. After all, there is a tightrope to walk between the expectations of migrants seeking a better life and the socio-economic needs of the populace. Unfortunately, most countries appear to have failed in maintaining this delicate balance. More migration would indeed be ill-advised.

Teacher's Comments:

Lucidly written and evaluative essay, though organization of ideas needs improvement. There are huge inexplicable blanks and partially cancelled paragraphs that disrupt the flow of ideas.

'Video games do much more than entertain.'
How far is this true today?

Nearly every member of the current generation of teenagers has played a video game, be it Super Mario 64 on a retro Nintendo Entertainment System, Dance-Dance Revolution in a bustling arcade, or Warcraft on a state-of-the-art, seventeen-inch Alienware laptop. Video games come in many forms and can be played on countless different platforms, but the common denominator is that they all seek to entertain their audiences through a digital medium, with various tasks to complete and, often, high scores to beat. Taking them at face value, it is easy to assume that they do little besides entertain — that the only purpose they serve is to allow their players to relax, let loose, and enjoy themselves. However, this could not be further from the truth, especially within the present context. Although video games are ostensibly an avenue for thrill-seeking and little more, they actually play a pivotal role in the development and spread of new technologies, are an important catalyst for social change, and serve as a medium for players to develop, explore, and express themselves.

Perhaps one significant reason why the general public may perceive video games to only have entertainment value is the way they tend to be marketed. In posters and television advertisements, video games are often depicted as fun, cool, and exciting — characteristics which resonate with the key demographic that gaming companies wish to attract, teenagers. In today's world, youths are often stressed-out, overworked, and in desperate need of a break from their educational and co-curricular commitments. Hence, they are naturally drawn towards a form of entertainment that seems exactly what it claims to be — a way to destress; nothing more and nothing less. Video games are now specifically designed to offer the maximum amount of fun in the minimum amount of time. One such game is Pokemon Go, which shook the gaming industry by racking up millions of downloads and grossing millions of dollars within the first few weeks of its release on the App Store. Its ground-breaking popularity and success can largely be attributed to one thing — its

entertainment value. Like all other video games, Pokemon Go was designed to allow players — in this case, self-appointed Pokemon Trainers — to have fun. There are few hidden motives here with regards to what game engineers wish to offer players. Fundamentally, a video game's purpose is to entertain players, and any other benefits that they might enjoy are often ancillary and accidental.

Nevertheless, the mere fact that video games are highly effective at entertaining their audiences does not exclude them from fulfilling other purposes in our society. As game manufacturers and engineers continually aspire towards creating the most fun, creative, or immersive games, they simultaneously drive the development and spread of new technologies that households can benefit greatly from. For example, in trying to compress the Pokemon Gold software into the minuscule 1MB afforded by its Game Boy cartridge, Nintendo engineers had to invent a new method of data storage – a discovery that later trickled down to the entire gaming industry. More recently, the development of gaming devices and consoles has seen new, highly innovative technologies reach consumers at an even quicker pace than before. Households can now purchase Microsoft's Xbox Kinect from retailers at about US\$500 a set, making motion control technology more accessible and affordable than ever before. Augmented reality headsets like the Oculus Rift have also been hitting the shelves, such that one can now experience a virtual reality rollercoaster or his favourite rock star's concert with incredible realism, all without leaving his living room⁹. This extraordinary spread of new technology would have been impossible without video games, as consumer demand drives manufacturers to continually refine new and upcoming forms of technology, bringing them to the market more quickly and affordably. Hence, video games — empowered and driven by the hundreds of millions of dollars spent on them annually — provide the incentive for the constant improvement and refinement of technology, and consequently do more than just entertain.

Next, video games also serve as an important force for social change, as they encode many messages that can have an extensive impact on future generations. Since video games are played so widely and frequently by people from all walks of life, the principles that they encompass can act as catalysts to

⁹ Teacher's comment: It would have strengthened our argument here had you highlighted how such new technology pioneered by video games

alter the mindsets of their audiences. For example, the original Mario games only allowed players to take on the avatar of Mario in their adventures to rescue Princess Peach from the enemy, King Bowser. This perpetuated the “damsel-in-distress” stereotype of women being weak and unable to fend for themselves, which was not only unfairly sexist, but also deprived female gamers of the opportunity to pick an avatar that they identified with. However, this trope has since been subverted in the more recent Super Princess Peach video game, where, in a contemporary role-reversal, Princess Peach was tasked with saving Mario from King Bowser. This has helped to reinforce the message that girls, too, can defeat evil villains, and that being a hero is not an exclusively male appointment. Progressive video games like these might not revolutionise the world, but the small cultural shifts that they do create should not be discounted. They challenge the status quo, and remind players that they have the capacity to be protagonists of their own lives, regardless of their gender, age, or race. Hence, video games can be seen as microcosms of society, as the messages they embody allow their audiences to be empowered, making them an important catalyst for social change.

Finally, video games also serve as a medium through which players can develop, explore, and express themselves. Video games are highly immersive, evidenced in how players refer to their avatars in the first-person, with the common complaints of “I died!” as opposed to “the character died”. This strong link formed between the player and his character allows him to live vicariously through his character, and gives video games an enormous capacity to create empathy. A win for his character is a win for him, as he escapes into the virtual world of his game. In addition, video games allow players to develop fine motor skills as they tug on their joysticks during a game of FIFA 17, improve their situational awareness and strategising skills as they discuss Call of Duty Tactics, and promote cooperation and healthy competition between rival teams in a game of League of Legends. Versatility, ingenuity, and dexterity — these skills all have a place in our competitive global society, and are especially relevant for when gamers seek employment in the future. Because video games place players in active rather than passive positions, they allow players to express themselves in a world that differs from ours, and provide a conducive environment for players to hone and improve their skills — all while enjoying their daily dose of recreation.

In conclusion, the fundamental purpose of video games is to allow players to enjoy themselves, but this does not mean they cannot fulfil other purposes. Entertainment and the fulfilment of other roles are not a perfect binary, and they are certainly not mutually exclusive. A video game entertains, but it can also result in the development of new technologies, serve as a medium for players to improve themselves, and catalyse change in our society. As it turns out, a simple game of 'Mario' could mean a whole lot more than fun.

Marker's comments:

A generally good piece here. Fully relevant points addressed the question head-on. Good topic sentences and clear explanations for the most part.

However, some explanations were lacking, especially in paragraphs where you tended to combine ideas and perhaps forgot to elaborate before moving on. Illustrations are wide-ranging. Engagement of the context ('today') was present, but not stellar.

Organisation of ideas is good. Good linguistic ability. Sound English. Good job overall.

How far do you agree that freedom has been destructive for society?

Any country that celebrates Independence Day is a country that has fought for its sovereignty in one way or another. These countries sought to be free from the rule of another country, to have control over themselves and to be autonomous. This reflects, on a very large scale, the innate desire for humans to be autonomous as well. Humans, while being creatures that display better cooperation and teamwork skills than most other species, ultimately need and crave the power to be independent. Freedom indeed has been a very major part of human history. Freedom is something that has been taken away, exploited, enforced and used as a scapegoat throughout the course of our existence. While it is an omnipresent concept in our societies, it has had both positive and negative impacts on us. The extent to which these impacts have affected us is always, and forever will be, up for debate. The argument over 'how much freedom is too much freedom' is one that will never cease. However, I believe that while there are several occasions when freedom has caused insurmountable anguish and destruction, ultimately freedom has helped society progress and grow and has benefited us all.

There are many different kinds of freedom. One of them is the freedom of speech. This is something that many people are extremely passionate about and believe is a basic human right. For instance, American society has always heralded their embrace of free speech.¹⁰ However, free speech can have very detrimental impacts on society due to humans being inherently selfish beings: people do not necessarily consider the impact of their words on the larger society. When given the freedom to speak their mind, more often than not controversial topics are brought up or oppressive personal views are expressed and in the process, feelings are hurt and conflict ensues. Sometimes even safety of the people involved is threatened. For instance, in Singapore the

¹⁰ *Teacher's Comments: A laudable attempt here to acknowledge an opposing viewpoint before launching into the focus of your paragraph (that freedom of expression is detrimental to societal harmony). For the sake of paragraph unity however, it is advisable to address these opposing viewpoints / ideas in separate paragraphs.*

infamous Anton Casey incident taught Singaporeans how large an impact their words can have. After being incessantly shamed and bullied online for saying some controversial things about Singapore society, Anton Casey started receiving death threats. Eventually, he was forced to flee the country for his own safety. While it can be argued that Singaporeans were simply expressing themselves freely, this is a prime example of how people do not know how not to abuse this right given to them. Instead of using the freedom to speak what is on their mind for the betterment of society, they use it to harm one another. As such, we can see how freedom can be detrimental and destructive for society.

Another reason why freedom is detrimental to society is that humans are volatile and unpredictable. Humans therefore cannot be trusted to utilise their autonomy responsibly. Ultimately humans, given the freedom, the right to do what they want without regulation can lead to the destabilising of society. People, being unpredictable, act on their instincts and this can result in devastation. An example that exemplifies this phenomenon would be that of the Sandy Hook Elementary shootings. A man murdered several children and a few teachers from the elementary school by shooting them before shooting himself just as the police arrived. This incident tore apart many of the children's families and broke the world's heart. Several countries offered their condolences to America in that dark time. However, everyone knew that the reason that such a tragedy had occurred in the first place was due to the unregulated ownership of guns in America. The freedom that Americans possess to own a gun has proved, time and time again, to be extremely destructive for society. Shootings have become commonplace in their society. The freedom to own a gun gives Americans the ability to exercise control over it, to whatever degree they choose to. The unpredictability and fallibility of the human mind results in many guns landing in the wrong hands and being used for wrong purposes. Chaos and tragedy ensues. Hence, it is evident how freedom for humans to be able to act on their impulses can be extremely harmful to society.

However, freedom has also been very constructive and beneficial to society. The freedom of expression allows humans to express themselves through many mediums. This freedom has led to the creation of masterpieces in the

form of literary works, symphonies, paintings and so much more. The need to express oneself is a very fundamental and crucial one for humans and has been since the beginning of our existence. This right to release our thoughts and emotions has led to the creation of an arts culture and arts scene that thrives. As art is subjective and a coping mechanism for many, it should be unregulated. This freedom allows artists to create beautiful, diverse works and when a community allows for this to happen, cultural appreciation is sure to follow. In Singapore, the local arts scene is very diverse and appreciates all races and cultures equally. A visit to the Singapore Art Museum will reveal art works created by local artists of many different ethnicities, their art being influenced by their heritage. This appreciation of all the different art forms, from shadow puppetry to *bharatnatyam* encourages people to be not just tolerant of one another's cultures but to go one step beyond and appreciate it as well. The freedom for artists of all backgrounds to express themselves is what presents such an opportunity for appreciation and learning in the first place. Without the right to create and be creative, society would without a doubt be a much less accepting and vibrant place. Hence, the freedom to express and create, which allows for the creation of art, is vital and undeniably constructive for society's welfare.

On top of this, freedom also results in greater awareness amongst people. Specifically, it is the freedom of speech that does so. While it was previously mentioned that freedom of speech is what allows for hate and negativity to fester, it must also be acknowledged that the freedom of speech is very productive. Freedom to speak one's mind allows for political discourse. This tends to happen mostly online in this day and age. People of differing political views tend to discuss their perspectives and opinions on open platforms, such as Facebook, allowing non-participants of the discourse to engage in their own way by simply reading. Through discourse and intellectual argument, valid points from both perspectives are aired. Through this, all participants become more educated and more aware of the situation at hand. While some opinions may be less acceptable, the right to express them allows other to know that that opinion is wrong as well. The French philosopher Voltaire once said, "I do not agree with what you have to say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." The freedom to express controversial and unusual opinions makes society more informed. This right to discuss politics makes for a more

informed voting process and therefore a more effective democracy, something that defines many societies. Hence, freedom of speech, in spite of its shortcomings is a necessary evil and is something that benefits society on the whole.

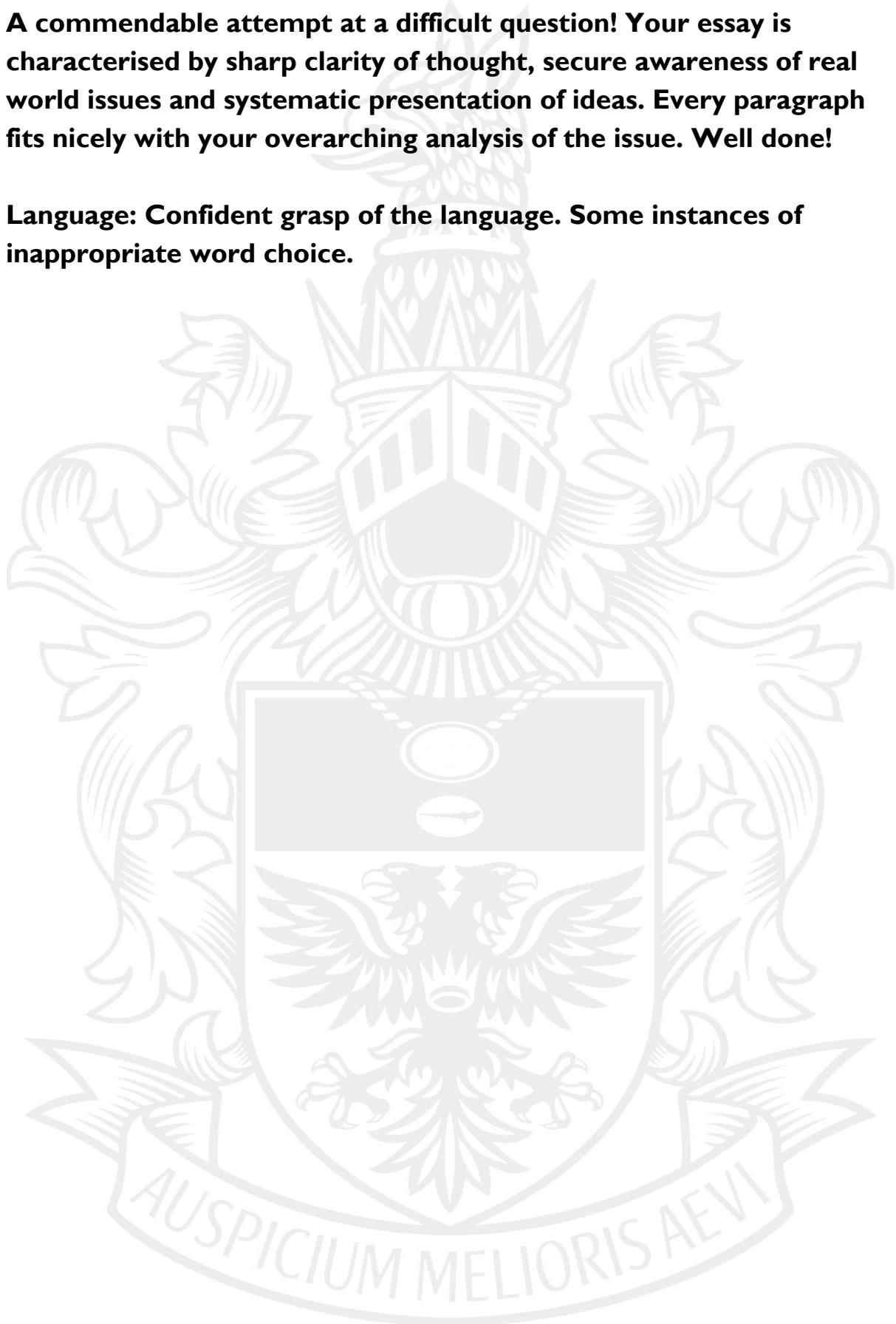
Lastly, freedom has led to many societal advancements. One key area that freedom has helped greatly is that of the women's rights movement. Women, having always been oppressed and discriminated against due to the mindset that they are worth less than their male counterparts, are now starting to be considered more as equals. And this can be attributed to their increasing level of freedom to do what they want. In the past, women were not allowed to vote or expose their skin or speak up for themselves for fear of being assaulted or even jailed. However, in recent times, women have been granted the ability to do all these and much more. For instance, countries all over the world are slowly allowing the legislation of abortion. This surgical practice allows pregnant women a choice. In doing so, they exercise their basic right as humans to be autonomous. Through greater freedom in such ways, women are able to make more decisions for themselves instead of relying on men to do it for them and hence, the feminist movement that aims to equalise all humans is greatly aided. It is therefore evident that freedom brings about equality, which is undoubtedly important for society to progress and is therefore not always destructive.

Overall, freedom, as mentioned, has both positive and negative impacts on society. I believe that freedom is a basic right of humans. People should be allowed to govern themselves but only to a certain extent. Too much freedom can go horribly awry and so can too little. Countries like America where they pride themselves on having freedom can have negative consequences such as mass shootings. On the other hand, countries such as Syria, where Bashar al-Assad and his regime are oppressive and controlling, form rebellions and eventually civil wars. Thus, we can see that freedom must be moderated. Through appropriate regulation, societies can thrive and flourish to achieve their maximum potential. Hence, I agree that freedom, while it has been destructive for societies in certain ways, can be extremely beneficial to the world when moderated.

Teacher's Comments:

A commendable attempt at a difficult question! Your essay is characterised by sharp clarity of thought, secure awareness of real world issues and systematic presentation of ideas. Every paragraph fits nicely with your overarching analysis of the issue. Well done!

Language: Confident grasp of the language. Some instances of inappropriate word choice.



How far should technological developments be regulated?

Technology and its resultant developments are becoming increasingly prevalent in our modern lives today, and along with it, so have the calls for stricter regulations to be imposed on it. There is definitely a place for these regulations, especially for technological developments, which have the potential to be harmful and can be used for exploitative purposes. Regulations would provide a clear boundary of what is right or wrong. However, the dynamic nature of technological developments is such that excessive legislation would not only impede progress but also discourage firms or individuals from pursuing it. Hence, technological developments should be regulated, but only to a limited extent.

Technological developments have a main and original purpose, to improve the lives and welfare of mankind. When it loses its purpose however, it has the potential to become exploitative instead, hence such developments would have to be regulated by the government or relevant bodies of authority, to prevent a loss of welfare for those involved. The lucrative nature of the technological industry is a tempting one, and may prompt firms to make use of technology to increase their profits, sometimes at the expense of the welfare of the good's consumers or even producers. Commercial surrogacy is a prime example of this. This multi-million dollar industry, especially rampant in countries like India or Thailand, makes use of in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and poor surrogate mothers to produce babies for rich couples who are unable or unwilling to conceive themselves. These surrogate mothers are often illiterate and unaware about the health risks of renting out their wombs and they are exploited by the firms in the industry as they receive little compensation for their services, despite having to bear all the risks. In the process, babies born out of this surrogacy are also treated as commodities which may be abandoned if born with defects, raising severe questions about the sanctity of human life and other ethical issues. While the development of IVF has enabled many infertile couples to have children the unregulated use of it created exploitative industries such as commercial surrogacy, hence regulations are needed to protect the welfare of those involved and to ensure that the technology serves a good and useful purpose.

Regulations, particularly those imposed by the government, are essential because they provide clear boundaries of right and wrong, which is especially important in the world of technology, where new breakthroughs and applications are developed so quickly. Regulations need to be implemented to ensure that the uses and developments of the technology are safe and beneficial, instead of harmful, for the general public and the common men. Take the case of military drones in the US for example. While they are an efficient way to carry out surveillance and to kill, if necessary, there is also a danger that soldiers will become desensitised to enemy killings, since they are so far removed from the act and its aftereffects. This could lead to increased danger for innocent civilians, such as those who were killed in the drone strikes carried out at Syria and Afghanistan. It is precisely the lax regulation by the US government regarding the use of drones that has led to many questions about the boundaries or lack thereof this drone usage should be subjected to. The need for regulations is also highlighted in the production and sale of genetically modified food, which on its own is a technological development that offers a solution to eradicating poverty and hunger in the world. In reality however, the farmers in charge of this food production are charged excessively for their seeds by firms like Monsanto. These firms create and sell seeds that promise high yield and are more weather-resistant, but which can only be used for a single year. Farmers are thus forced to keep purchasing new seeds that would negatively affect their welfare. Regulations should therefore be imposed strictly to protect the welfare of all mankind against these potentially harmful technological developments and practices, as well as to ensure that the technology is used for good.

On the other hand, while regulations are definitely necessary in exploitative technological developments, overly strict regulations might not be able to better protect those who are exploited. In fact, they may end up exacerbating the problem and making it worse, if governmental regulations force these harmful activities and practices to go underground, away from the radar of the government. Problems might have been resolved on the surface but in reality, these regulations could lead to an even greater exploitation of those involved. In the case of commercial surrogacy, India is currently implementing a blanket ban over these practices but this is unlikely to protect the welfare of surrogate mothers, who may be treated even more unfairly now that the industry is illegal. It would thus be harder for the government to track these industries and to

protect the surrogate mothers if such strict regulations were imposed. The same also goes for stem cell therapy, which at the moment is illegal in the United States as well as many countries but still continues to thrive due to its promise of cures to diseases such as diabetes, cancer and heart disease. The clinics use stem cell technology on desperate patients with incurable diseases but this could cause patients to develop negative side effects like tumours, hence severely harming their welfare. Despite legislative measures put in place to prevent such practices, these clinics still exist and conduct business through illegal means, with patients travelling to other less-regulated countries for the treatment. This not only shows the futility of some legislative regulations but also shows that if implemented too strictly, it will just be even more difficult for the government to protect the welfare of the population.

In addition, overly strict regulations imposed on technological development might deter firms or individuals from creating these developments, there on leading to a state of stagnation, which would not be beneficial for a country's global competitiveness. This deterrence could also prevent the development of useful technology that could potentially increase the standard of living for mankind. Singapore recognises this, and thus has surprisingly liberal legislature and regulations with regard to the development of technology locally, in spite of its conservative society. This has thus enabled Singapore to attract various foreign talent from prestigious research institutes all over the world to come to Singapore and work here for our own biotechnology industry. The cluster of research institutes in Biopolis have not only boosted our industry but also led to great discoveries¹¹ with regard to pharmaceutical drugs and disease treatments, thus allowing Singapore to be at the forefront of this technological industry. Rather than implementing excessive regulations to prevent possible harmful effects of the technology, society has to adapt to the developments and learn how to utilise it to increase societal welfare. Amazon exemplifies this in their use of commercial drones. While the unregulated use of drones in the military is dangerous, the use of drones for delivery would not only increase the efficiency of work processes for Amazon but the speed at which customers would get their products as well, hence increasing the satisfaction of both the producers

¹¹ *Teacher's comments: The basis of this claim could be made clearer – what is one such 'great discovery'? E.g. 2016 discovery of a macromolecule that could help prevent fatal virus infections.*

and consumers. From this, it can be shown that if utilised in the correct context and for the right purpose, technological developments would not be harmful and thus excessive regulations would not be beneficial. Regulations should also be set depending on the purpose and function of the technological development, rather than on the product of this development itself.

Finally, technological developments should not be excessively regulated despite their potentially harmful side effects because there are sometimes necessary evils, which are outweighed by the great benefits these developments can bring. To overly restrict them would mean losing out on these rewards, which would not be good for society as a whole. For example, the use of nuclear power and weapons is severely regulated by governments because of the potential harm they could cause if used carelessly or irresponsibly. However, nuclear power could also be used to reduce or solve many environmental problems such as the depletion of fossil fuels and the global warming caused by the use of coal, since it is an alternative and renewable source of energy. As such, it might not always be the most beneficial for society to place strict regulations on the use of nuclear power, since it could create a greener world for us all. This can be seen through the production of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as well. While it may result in a loss of welfare for poorer farmers or other producers who are exploited in the process, it will ultimately increase the supply of food available. Those living in poverty would thus be able to buy more food and at lower prices. In this light, the benefits of GMO production outweigh the potential risks or side effects that may occur; hence GMO production should not be regulated so strictly.

In conclusion, while regulation is definitely necessary to ensure that technology is used for noble purposes and does not harm the welfare of the people, it should not be regulated to a large extent as this would likely impede future developments and cause society to lose out on even greater benefits that technology can bring.

Teacher's Comments:

Anna, this is a thoughtful response with a consistent focus on the question and relevant points raised throughout. The explanations and

examples given are also consistent, but your anti-thesis arguments can better evaluate why regulations seem to effectively address the risks in science. Language is clear throughout with only minor sentence structure errors, though this lacks the personal voice of a Band 1 response.



2016 | Y5 | GP Promo | Paper 2 Passage

Julian Baggini writes about our pre-occupation with nostalgia.

For the French writer Marcel Proust, the elixir of memory might have been a *petite madeleine**, but that wouldn't work on British-bred me. What I needed was a can of Heinz cream of mushroom soup and a packet of Sainsbury's cheese and onion crisps. As I gathered these and other long-neglected childhood foodstuffs from the supermarket shelves, I thought surely one sniff, one taste would be enough to take me right back.

That's the stuff of nostalgia. We are sometimes surprised to discover the impact of old familiar things on our moods and emotions. The whiff of crackers from our childhood times can make us inexplicably misty-eyed with a longing that can also extend to places. A visit to a previously unknown, old family street corner or even an old cemetery can make us giddy or melancholic; walking along the sidewalk, we feel the dent of earlier footsteps, of histories and memories infused with our senses. Even if the memories provoked by smell and sight are not more vivid or specific, they are more emotional and evocative. There is therefore a difference between the statements 'That's exactly how I remember it' and 'That's exactly as it was'. Nostalgia thus goes beyond the dry recollection of historical details and retrieves the emotional essence of what has happened.

Today, we see how nostalgia interacts with events that governments find important. History, the interplay of happenings that helps us interpret events, allows for social and national consciousness necessary to resurrect flailing loyalties and perpetuate their narratives. Nation states hence need the 'reality' that history brings to legitimise their existence. Nostalgia, however is the sweet savouring found in our collective past – like bridges, monuments, open fields, shops or toys that bring us together, and enables our sweet memories where we once laughed, cried and more importantly, lived. A wise politician realises the need to marry the 'facts' of what we remember with the intimate and the familiar.

Like it or not, nostalgia attends to us. It recognises the intense meanings we attach to home, childhood, family, ancestry and place. It breathes into our farewells and returns and soothes us in the weathering of our continuity and change, and our inevitable losses. After all, nostalgia is really a manifestation of our all-too-human predilection for longing – more specifically, our longing for connection. Food therefore often forms a powerful part of the emotional narrative of our lives which is, in many ways, more important than the historical one. Immigrants will often adopt the language of their host nation, and even start thinking in it, but they will not give up the food traditions of the old country. This is precisely what nostalgia does as it preserves a link of where they came from, in order to keep a clear sense of who they still are.

It is also possible that we carry a sense of memories of people and places we may not have known directly in our own lives. Photographs in an old album, even of strangers,

evoke a familiar longing that compels me to look and look, and even as we inexplicably pine for the voices and stories behind every picture that we know we may never have a chance to hear, we revel in the imaginations they provoke – a sensation that is as painful as it is pleasurable. That is why many of us now derive pleasure in popular forms of nostalgia, actively seeking out films, music, monuments and literature that allow us to swim in its waters; of course some of us work very hard to dry ourselves off and break free from what we see as crass and backward-looking sentimentality but today, filmmakers, retirees and even students have flocked to the altar of nostalgia, breathing, gawking and tasting every film, food and story offered by the subjects of their inner need to know their past.

Naturally, nostalgia has its critics. After all, nostalgia can enable us to see only the sunshine. Often, the recollections are borne from beautiful vintage photographs and wonderful fluffy memories where its dream-like state acts like a narcotic, and we forget the need for the mundane and the constancy that it brings. At the same time, as the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard puts it, nostalgia also gently warps the picture we have of the past. It is easier to remember the bits of history where the hero won. It is easier to think about beautiful dances and balls, and the sumptuous clothing that rich people wore, and ignore the social injustices and extreme conditions affecting the rest of the population. My father's love for all quaint British habits and architecture ignored the fact that a lot of that was built on the backs of people living in poverty and bondage. Often nostalgia excuses the sad historical detail that is often told by the winner of the day – sweet but sometimes hardly objective.

For sentimental old fools, nostalgia makes it easy to get lost in that achingly beautiful sadness. I would often, as a child, be practically paralysed with the thought of some beautiful thing I had experienced, or even some sad thing I had experienced. But living in that aching sadness means that you always feel that way – and it is hard to be that emotional all the time. Hence, living in nostalgia can be a source of emotional turmoil and a catalyst for depression because our longings, anchored in the past assumes that we have nothing left to live for. Nostalgia often leaves us harking for a past that was painful as it was beautiful. In fact, it is downright exhausting.

The trouble with nostalgia is also that it is easy to stay there in the past and ignore the present problems we have. Governments find it hard to build a road or public housing because we want every cemetery or forest preserved for posterity. Invariably, their protectors often overestimate their importance. For the less financially endowed nostalgia is the indulgence of the upper class. For them, a roof over their heads and quicker route home to the family would have been more important considerations.

Ultimately, we fall in love with nostalgia because it shows us a simpler time. A time when technology did not run our lives. A time when there were fewer things to keep track of and fewer problems to manage. And we can learn from that sort of life. To put the mobile phones down once in a while. To enjoy running around outside in all weathers and seasons. Nevertheless, while nostalgia is not the same as history, and history is not the

same as fact, we need it. History, without the nostalgia of old places and smells becomes sterile and it distances us from people that have made us who we are. More importantly, nostalgia makes fact meaningful for us – and we learn how to enjoy both. As a dedicated lover of nostalgia, I have learned to love it on my own terms.



Julian Bagгинi discusses the role of nostalgia in modern society and the issues associated with it. How relevant are his views for you and your society?

In my opinion, Bagгинi's views on nostalgia are highly relevant to Singapore's context. As a relatively young nation with only 51 years of history, we look to shared memories and heritage as a unifying force, but this can sometimes stand in the way of current developments.

In paragraph 4, Bagгинi asserts that nostalgia 'recognises the intense meanings we attach to home, childhood, family, ancestry and place', as nostalgia is a manifestation of human 'longing for connection'. This suggests that nostalgia helps us value the significance of aspects of society close to our heart and serves to help us relate and form ties with others. In my opinion, Bagгинi is spot-on in saying this, and this view is highly pertinent in Singapore today. As a rapidly developing nation-state, Singapore's landscape has evolved tremendously over the years. New infrastructure has replaced the old, sometimes leading to a sense of loss for the older generations. To take a case in point, many middle-aged Singaporeans identify with the iconic 'dragon playground', which was a mainstay in many Housing Development Board (HDB) estates of the past. Now, such playgrounds are rarity, but these memories remain dear to Singaporeans simply because of associated experiences. In the past, such playgrounds were hotspots every evening where parents would take their children to play while they chitchatted with their neighbours who had done the same. Evidently, such common spaces arouse a sense of nostalgia as it was a platform where community ties were strengthened. As seen from the enthusiastic response of Singaporeans to pictures of these 'dragon playgrounds', their sentimental value is undeniable for the community spirit fostered there. Hence, Bagгинi's claim is indeed relevant to Singaporeans today.

In addition, Bagгинi asserts in paragraph 8 that nostalgia can sometimes act as an obstacle as governments seek to sacrifice heritage spaces for new infrastructure. As a city-state grappling with tensions between the past and present development, Singapore can be said to find itself in this exact situation,

rendering Baggini's view highly relevant. The most significant example would be a few years back, when the Singaporean government wished to build an 8-lane highway through Bukit Brown, requiring the exhumation of graves that had significant cultural value. Many protested against the move, citing the need to preserve national heritage and Bukit Brown's unique position as a cultural sanctuary especially for families whose deceased relatives were buried there. This brought up the tension of balancing past and present development, the fine line that the government had to toe between prioritizing economic and practical development and the sentimental value of a place imbued with cultural value. As Singapore continues to progress and new developments arise that call for heritage to be sacrificed, this tension will again surface, rendering Baggini's view highly relevant.

Ultimately, Baggini, in asserting his views on the value of nostalgia in one's personal experiences and national development woes, has made highly pertinent and relevant arguments with regard to the Singapore context. It remains to be seen how we best balance all factors for progress as a country.

Teacher's Comments:

A well-organised and lucidly written response, drawing on apt examples.

Critically assess the view that we cannot be sure of anything.

The postmodern view that we cannot be sure of anything is one that appeals very much to postmodern society. Yet is it really true that we cannot be sure of anything? If we define “to be sure” to be having absolute certainty in asserting a knowledge claim, it appears that such a view does indeed hold. It appears that absolute certainty is impossible to achieve due to the infinite regress of justification, where any knowledge claim one makes requires support, and that very support itself requires justification and so on infinitely. For instance, if James claims to know that the Earth is round, he may justify such a claim by saying that his geography textbook stated so and geography textbooks are known to be right. In this case, he would then have to justify his claim that geography textbooks are right and so on. Thus, it seems impossible to achieve certainty as we are unable to stem the infinite regress of justification. Foundationalism attempts to resolve this problem of the infinite regress of justification by basing our entire belief system on a bedrock of indubitable basic beliefs. The foundationalist enterprise does achieve this to some degree of success, but the knowledge we can have certainty about remains limited, as shown below.

The first foundationalist camp, the rationalists, argues that we can base our entire belief system on basic indubitable beliefs. These beliefs are a priori truths, or truths that can be discovered just by thinking. For instance, even if Sally were to sit in an empty room with no contact with the outside world, she would be able to know that $2+2=4$, or that a triangle has three sides. These truths are analytic, and cannot be negated without contradiction, and therefore cannot be doubted. The rationalists, then, have successfully presented a kind of knowledge that we can have certainty about.

It appears, however, that the knowledge that can be acquired via reason, while certain, is extremely limited. In fact, it appears not to be able to tell me anything about the outside world, or overcome scepticism of an external world – reason may tell me that $2 \text{ marbles} + 2 \text{ marbles} = 4 \text{ marbles}$, but it

cannot tell me if the marbles exist. Descartes attempts to overcome such scepticism by arguing that we can build all knowledge on the first certainty, which is that 'I think, therefore I exist'. Even if there were an evil demon deceiving me into thinking I exist, the deception itself implies someone being deceived.

While such an argument effectively proves the existence of the self, it threatens solipsism. Descartes' cogito argument only proves my existence to me and his existence to him, not his to me or mine to him. Therefore, it appears that Descartes's cogito argument has not successfully broadened the scope of knowledge that we can have certainty about. Can empiricism do better?

Empiricism, the second foundationalist camp, argues that knowledge is derived through experience rather than reason. Only through experience of an object can we have the concept of that object. This explains why a blind man does not have the concept of red, or why a deaf person does not have the concept of music. The empiricists base certainty of all beliefs on the incorrigibility of sense data, where because sense data is given directly to our sense, they leave no room for error and cannot be corrected. In addition, one can exercise extreme scepticism and yet cannot deny the existence of sense data that present themselves to me – if Samuel has a headache, he can be sure that he feels pain in his head even if he cannot be sure that he has a head!

While empiricism seems to have successfully presented another realm of knowledge that we can be sure of, it appears that it suffers from the same flaws as rationalism does. As sense data themselves contain no propositional content, while they cannot be doubted, they cannot be translated into useful knowledge claims. Any attempt to interpret sense data requires an inferential leap, thus opening up room for error as it goes beyond the immediacy of the sense data presented to the sense. This again falls into the trap of solipsism, where one cannot know anything apart from themselves. This renders the knowledge gained via experience as limited and meaningless – it is not useful to be sure that I am perceiving a human shaped patch of brown if I cannot assert with certainty that it is a human being that I am perceiving.

From the analyses of the two schools of foundationalist thought, it is apparent that although they both prove that we can be sure about some things, this realm of knowledge that we have knowledge about is extremely limited. Here, however, Kant argues that a harmonious reconciliation of the two foundationalist strands allows us to extend our knowledge beyond the narrow boundaries that rationalism and empiricism have imposed.

Kant does this by arguing that both the sense and reason perform distinct cognitive functions and must work together to achieve genuine cognition. Reason outlines the presuppositions necessary for experience to take place, while experience supplies reason with sense data, which is the only way to know truths of the world. The logical faculties of the mind then order and interpret the sense data in order to form objective judgements about the world. As Kant himself put it, “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind”.

In fact, reason and experience not only need the other's involvement in the knowledge construction process; they build upon the one another to expand our scope of knowledge. Experience can overcome the limits of practical reason. In mathematics for instance, while Tabitha may easily be able to reason that $2+2=4$, she may have some difficulty arriving at the answer to $57938470+2189349$ just by thinking. Instead, she would have to sum it up via a synthetic operation or even by bringing up some representation of numbers, such as her fingers. Likewise, reason supplements experience where knowledge gained via reason is shown to have lapses. Like in Hume's missing shade of blue, reason can allow Joseph to observe that every shade of blue is one shade lighter than the previous one and from there arrive at the missing shade of blue by logical reasoning.

It appears that Kant has successfully reconciled the previously opposing strands of thought, arriving at certainty and expanding the realm of knowledge that we can be sure of. Such a satisfactory conclusion, however, is prevented by a major flaw. Kant's arguments rely on our sense to achieve knowledge of the world. Yet, there are arguments against the supposed incorrigibility and certainty of sense data that undermine the certainty of such a belief system.

Firstly, our senses can be deceived. Take the lemon thought experiment for example. If you were to close your eyes and imagine very hard that the most sour lemon you've ever tasted has now burst forth on your tongue, you may discover that you start to salivate, your facial muscles may contract – your sense have just been deceived into reacting as if there were a lemon when there was actually none. If sense can be deceived, then they cannot possibly be a reliable basic belief. Secondly, there are limits to certainty that our sense can give us. Suppose Jane goes to sleep one night and wakes up the next morning. She cannot say for sure that she has woken up in the same bed as she went to sleep in last night. For all she knows, her parents had transported her in the night to an identical bedroom in another country. But as Jane does not have an unbroken series of sensory experiences, she cannot have certainty.

As such, it seems that we have returned to the starting point, where while it is not true that we cannot be sure of anything, we cannot be sure of very much either. Such a defeatist position, however, has been rejected by several who argue that to be sure, we do not need to have absolute certainty, for absolute certainty is limiting and untenable.

Hume, for instance, proposes that requiring absolute certainty for all our knowledge claims leads us to extreme scepticism, which will be undermined by daily life. We just cannot help being sure of what we have to be sure of, even if we do not have absolute certainty. The sceptic Jason, who is unable to be absolutely certain of whether the lion attacking him is real or not and therefore does not run away, will have his knowledge construction prematurely halted. How unfortunate.

Another philosopher who holds such a position is Moore, who argues that anyone who argues that things such as matter, time, space or self do not exist is holding inconsistent beliefs as they go about their daily lives making common-sense propositions that necessitate a belief in such things. In addition, Moore argues that the statement “everyone believes common-sense propositions to be true, but they may not be true” to be self-contradictory. From these two arguments, we can see that even without absolute certainty, we can say that we are sure of our knowledge claims. In fact, by rejecting absolute certainty as a prerequisite for knowledge, we open up the possibilities

of knowledge that can be gained. Moore, for instance, with his common-sense propositions, is able to prove the existence of an external world and external objects by waving his hands before him and asserting “Here is a hand. Here is another. Therefore, external objects exist.”

Now that we have ascertained that absolute certainty is not necessary, let us return to the flaws of Kant's argument. The vast realm of knowledge that Kant's belief system can bring us is inhibited by the lack of certainty that the sense data can give us. Yet, as previously established, absolute certainty is not necessary. In fact, just as there cannot be counterfeit coins in a society where no real coins exist, the very awareness of the possibility of sense deceptions reveals that our sense perceptions have been right before and we have known them to be so. Therefore, by understanding that we do not need certainty, we are able to say that we can be sure of some things while keeping in mind the fallibility of such knowledge claims.

In conclusion, it is clear that the view that we cannot be sure of anything is an untenable view. If we insist on absolute certainty, we may find that we can acquire certain, albeit limited knowledge. If we concede that absolute certainty is not necessary, a whole new realm of knowledge that we can be sure of opens itself up to us.

Teacher's Comments:

Great piece! Systematic treatment of the issues raised in the question, with laser-like precision and concision. A lot of ground was covered, and the argument remained clear throughout. A little more emphasis on knowledge not needing certainty would've made this brilliant. Good job!

Critically assess the view that we cannot be sure of anything.

Modern philosophy has often operated on the principle of sceptical doubt – where we question our beliefs instead of blindly adhering to certain dogmas in order to gain a deeper insight into the world. In the course of this, the question arises “Can we be sure of anything?” Firstly, by “anything” I refer to all forms of propositional knowledge, no matter how mundane or seemingly trivial – encompassing propositions as simple as “I exist” to those as complicated as “We should rebel against the establishment”. I believe that by examining whether we can claim to have knowledge about these claims, we can shed light on whether we can be sure of them – and thus answer this fundamental question. I believe we can only be sure of a few limited types of propositions and experiences, but that ultimately having doubt about everything else is pointless and should not concern us.

In order to be sure of any proposition, we need to have a proper justification for that proposition. In the course of providing the justification, we inherently make another propositional statement that must itself be justified. In this way, we can always doubt the justifications that we provide, and thus descend into an infinite regress of justification. While it might indeed seem pointless to doubt whether my classmates exist, in order to be sure that they are seated next to me, I need to first be sure that they exist!

There are two historic approaches to dealing with this infinite regress of justification – rationalism and empiricism, both of which attempt to provide a set of indubitable beliefs using which we can generate a superstructure of knowledge. Rationalism advocates the use of a priori (often analytic) beliefs like $1+1=2$, since such beliefs can be known before experience and cannot possibly be doubted. Indeed, the hallmark of this approach was to recognise that for analytic propositions, the predicate is contained in the subject, thus we cannot negate the statement without creating a contradiction. Anyone who tries to argue that a square does not have four sides is being silly and should get a

mental check-up. Thus in this way, basic geometrical proofs seem to be all but certain, and we can be sure of them! Not only that, but I can in fact prove that some conscious identity, “I”, exists, for the very act of my thought proves that such a conscious being exists!

Before we get too euphoric about this apparent success of being sure of anything, we need to realise that being sure of analytic statements is not a very good achievement. For one, such propositions only serve to quantify what I already knew. “All bachelors are male” does not tell me anything that I did not previously know, at most it made more explicit the relations of ideas that are inherent in the term “bachelor”. The problem lies not in the surety of analytic statements, for that is true by definition, but in synthetic statements, statements like “every change has a cause”. Such statements have a predicate that is not contained in the subject, so it can be readily contradicted without any contradictions. Our present rationalism based approach fails woefully at demonstrating that such synthetic propositions, using which we generate the vast majority of knowledge in the world, must be true.

Even the other foundational approach runs into a similar solipsistic trap. Empiricism uses the incorrigibility of immediate sense data as a bedrock to justify what we know, and thus be sure of the truth of the propositional statements that we make. Even if I doubt that I have an arm, I cannot doubt that my arm aches as I write these words! Indeed, our emotions seem to be an aspect of our lives that can escape sceptical attack, for it makes no sense to doubt how I know I am in pain, for example. We seem to be sure of this too! Alas the problem here is also that knowledge of sense data does not entail that we know anything else! In order to turn my sense data into a statement that sheds light onto any aspect of our world, I would need to make judgements and utilise my active cognitive skills. Pure sense data is nothing but a “blooming confusion”, as Kant put it, “Intuitions without concepts are blind”. Thus this new set of feelings and emotions granted by my incorrigible sense data might not be so indubitable after all. I might be having a headache, but actually the doctor might tell me that the pain is not in my head, but rather in my spine. While I can certainly that the pain feels like it is in my head, it seems that I cannot utilise this indubitable piece of knowledge to know anything else – severely limiting the things that I can claim to be sure of.

It seems that thus far we have been able to become sure of the following facts – my innate existence, analytic statements, geometric proofs and immediate sense data. It seems impossible to be sure of anything else. The implication of this on the knowledge we can claim to have seems immense – and if we end up in a situation where we claim not to have knowledge at all, then surely that would be a failure.

Before we go down this line of self-pity and despair, we can try to examine synthetic statements closely once again. While mathematical statements like a square has four sides are analytic, those like $1+1=2$ are, in fact, synthetic! It seems that we now have a new class of synthetic statements we are sure of. In fact, upon close examination, much of the axiomatic, mathematical knowledge we have seems to be synthetic, and yet we know it before experience. To be sure, understanding such statements, which Kant termed “Synthetic A Priori” does require experience in order to understand the meaning of all the terms in the statement, but once that is granted the truth of the statement itself is guaranteed. Apart from mathematical knowledge, concepts like space and time themselves seem to fall under this category of synthetic of synthetic a priori propositions. In this way, we can employ Kant’s transcendental arguments to discover a new category of propositions we can be sure of!

Once again the difficulty seems to be extending this new class of propositions we are sure of in order to be sure of anything else. In math for instance, knowledge of certain axioms that formulate a particular mathematical system cannot ever be used to prove the truth of the axioms themselves. This, together with Gödel’s other incompleteness theorems, demonstrate that even in Math, the most certain of all areas of knowledge, complete certainty is unattainable – the axioms we assume will themselves remain unprovable – we cannot be sure if they are true.

At this point, we ought to stop and carefully examine what we have proven thus far. There is a finite class of statements we seem to be sure of, and there is an entire world full of every other proposition we can envision of – whose certainty is not guaranteed. While it has been shown that “I”, my immediate sense data, the concepts of space and time and all analytic statements are certain, that is all the progress that we have made! Of course, we cannot be sure that there will not be another, even more fundamental class of statements

whose truth we assume in order to generate any knowledge or understanding about the world – perhaps it is only a matter of time until the next genius comes along who like Kant, showcases a complete revolution we should adopt in our perspective.

The point is this – for all practical purposes and to the best of our knowledge, it seems impossible to be sure of the vast majority of propositions we claim to have knowledge of, and regarding which we thought we have absolute certainty. However, after making just a few assumptions (whose truth, like the mathematical axioms, we have to grant), we can continue to live our lives like before. Firstly, we can grant concepts like causation to be true, for even though we can never be certain that a certain cause has a certain effect, we have no choice but to assume the principle of regularity and to accept that as creatures of habit, this simply is how the world will be interpreted by us. We can also extend this to the other categories that Kant proposes in order to explain how we have cognition – while we cannot prove the truth of those categories, we have to assume that they are so in order to make any intelligible deductions about our process of cognition.

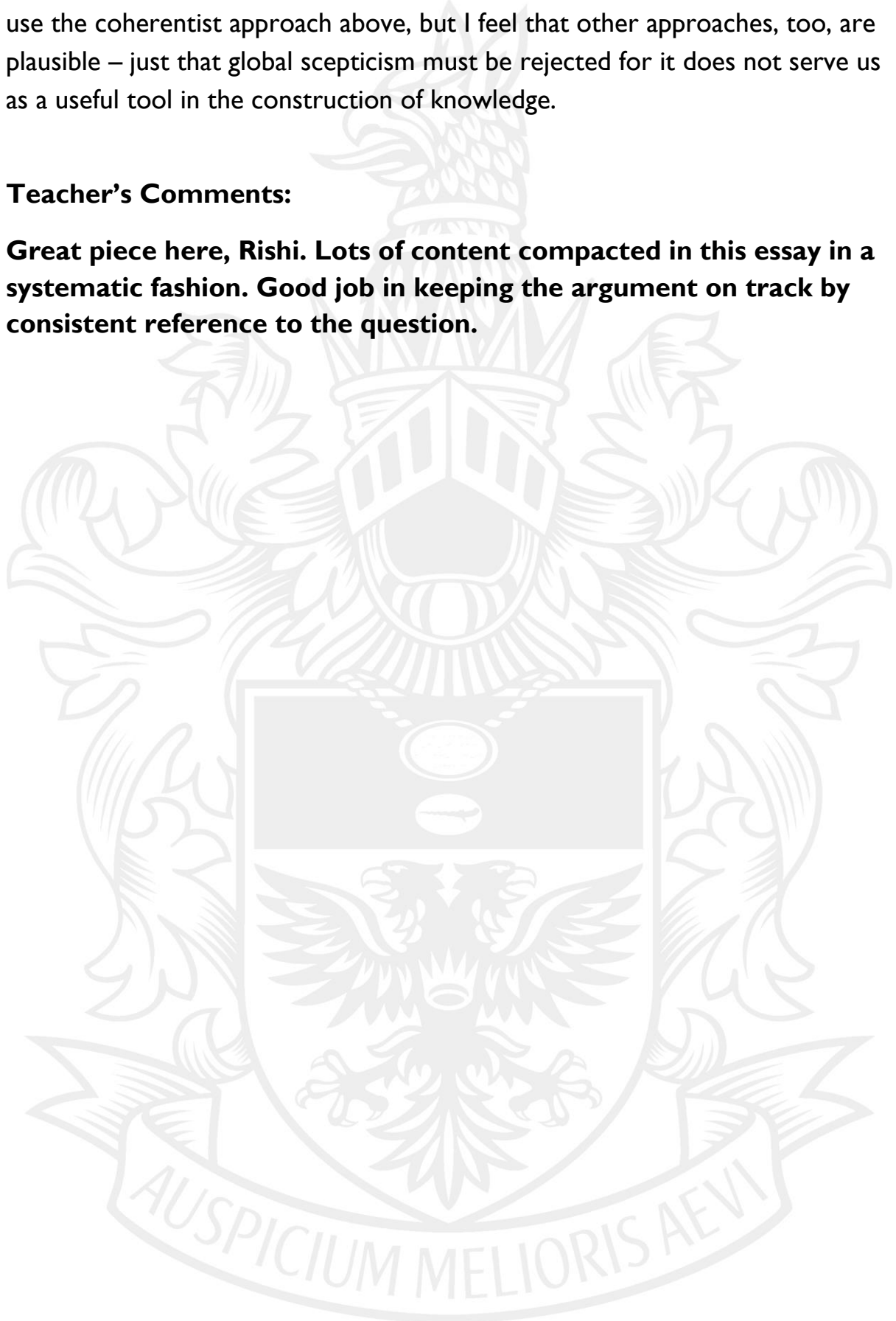
This does not mean that we have to fall back to a foundational approach of generating knowledge, now that we have decided that complete certainty is futile. In fact, we have instead established that having an infinite regress of justification might be okay after all, for even if we cannot be completely sure of anything, we can be sure of different propositions to different degrees. Rather than constraining ourselves to a superstructural model in order to attain absolute certainty, it is far more useful in terms of practical knowledge generated, to use a web of knowledge – where all the propositions we claim to have knowledge about support and reinforce one another. In this way, even though we cannot be sure of any one proposition, we can be fairly (of course not completely) sure of the entire system of beliefs.

In conclusion, I believe that there is a limited class of statements for which we can be sure of, but that such a set of certain propositions will always remain finite and cannot encompass even a significant minority of propositions in the world. Instead, I feel it is superior to just grant a set of principles like causation, as Kant did in his categories, such that we can form some knowledge about the

world – and thus utilise philosophy in a useful manner. I have explained how to use the coherentist approach above, but I feel that other approaches, too, are plausible – just that global scepticism must be rejected for it does not serve us as a useful tool in the construction of knowledge.

Teacher's Comments:

Great piece here, Rishi. Lots of content compacted in this essay in a systematic fashion. Good job in keeping the argument on track by consistent reference to the question.



KS Bull 2017 | Issue 1

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