



# KS Bull

## 2022 | Issue 2



# Raffles Institution

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### Can space travel ever be justified?

The space travel industry has been rejuvenated by fresh and unconventional actors, like Elon Musk with his SpaceX brainchild and Richard Branson with his Virgin Atlantic project. At the same time, publicly funded space institutions like NASA continue to make headway in space travel, most recently launching a shuttle carrying a Rover to traverse Mars, a possible planet to call home. These developments have once again fired up the debate on whether space travel can ever be justified, and whether the incurred cost of human lives and zero-sum resources can ever be weighed up by the immense albeit uncertain benefits of space travel. There have been existing reasons to justify space travel, such as the pursuit of human knowledge and the use of space travel as a political tool. In addition, today's world creates extraordinary circumstances that further justify space research: the involvement of private corporations and the inevitable nature of climate change. Therefore, space travel can be justified under certain conditions, like those of today.

Some critics believe that space travel can never be justified because of the massive amount of public resources spent on it that could be used for more pressing purposes. Indeed, this view can be summed up by the words of former President of the United States of America, Dwight Eisenhower, "Every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who are hungry and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed." Indeed, the view that space travel incurs a huge opportunity cost of resources is illustrated best by how \$200 million was spent in the year Neil Armstrong landed on the moon – \$200 million that could have been spent on housing the poor and educating the illiterate, throughout the year and across all 50 states of the US, rather than on a once-off trip that may have not yielded much beyond a day's worth of fanfare and a false sense of superiority for having done something before the Russians (who actually reached space first). If space travel seems so unjustified in a rather developed country like the US, imagine how much more unfathomable it would be for the 80 million impoverished individuals in India to accept that the government has spent an annual budget amounting to billions on the Indian Space Research Organisation, when it could have been used to improve sanitation in the country. Both examples point to the fact that space travel can never be justified when it diverts resources away from addressing social problems that are most definitely impeding people from living better lives, in exchange for benefits that oftentimes have very low probability of creating any tangible outcomes. Obstacles, one after another, lie in the way of space scientists and astronauts, from finding an area that is safe enough to explore, to constructing a shuttle that suits all requirements, to launching it successfully, to gathering enough data and returning safely, only to discover the need to organise mission after mission because each round can only yield so much return. At one point, the question of whether the government is using its resources responsibly comes into play. Although the government

may try to justify its actions by explaining how it benefits future generations with increased knowledge, the fact that we are denying an impoverished girl a potato in order to plant a tree for future non-existent generations is simply counter-intuitive. Thus, critics would say that space travel can never be justified.

It is not just the cost of material resources, but also that of human lives, that stops critics from justifying space travel in all circumstances. Under Ronald Reagan's leadership, the explosion of the Challenger shuttle, that carried not just astronauts but also a schoolteacher, was a tragic event that was broadcast live to all citizens of America, scarring the hearts of loved ones and children in particular. Space research can never be justified because of the possible loss of human lives. And as much as these astronauts may have given consent, it is important to recognise that their family members and friends may not be as supportive, and that the unfamiliar nature of space travel coupled with the irreversibility of the decision renders any consent meaningless. Hence, to protect children, parents, or spouses of astronauts, some argue that space travel can never be justified.

Indeed, it is worth noting that the prohibitive cost of resources and, potentially, of human lives renders space travel unjustifiable. However, there are specific circumstances that can tilt the scale, such that there is an imperative to carry out space travel despite its drawbacks. As climate change becomes increasingly impossible to solve, and private corporations come onboard to share the massive costs of space travel, there are unique circumstances that could justify space travel in addition to generic arguments for it. I will therefore be elaborating on traditional reasons to justify space travel, and how the trade-off is made even more palatable given new developments.

One conventional argument to justify space travel is the pursuit of scientific knowledge. While space travel may not always bring about tangible outcomes, it allows us to make better sense of the universe we live in, thereby having a better understanding of our role in the greater scheme of things. This is why space scientists sent out the Voyager Golden Records on a shuttle that orbits in space. It contains sounds and recordings of the different flora and fauna of Earth, as well as an introduction to mankind in many languages. While the project has so far not yielded significant practical returns, we continue to justify such pursuits because we recognise the innate desire within us to understand our environment so we can better contribute to it. Space travel is therefore justified even in the most extreme of instances in which it brings about no tangible benefits.

More than that, there are more forms of knowledge we derive from space travel that make space travel justifiable. Despite the costs incurred in space travel, it has not only brought about greater knowledge that is applicable to space alone but also to our daily lives. For example, space travel led to the creation of weather satellites that shuttles used to study climate conditions in space. Eventually, they were developed into Global Positioning Satellite technology that is not just useful in assisting with navigation by essential parts of society like the military but is also being put to use to bring data networks to poor and isolated communities. In such instances where space travel has brought positive outcomes

to the rest of society, the resources devoted to space travel are no longer seen as a sheer waste but rather an investment, and can therefore be justified. Moreover, the increased involvement of private corporations, such as Elon Musk's SpaceX and Richard Branson's Virgin Atlantic projects, means that the cost argument that critics bank their opinions on becomes less of a concern in the value judgement society needs to make. The inclusion of private funding means that pursuit of knowledge can be achieved without significantly compromising socio-economic welfare. While pursuit of knowledge simply for self-actualisation could alone justify space research, the accumulation of knowledge that specifically benefits society, as well as the funding support of companies, further tips the scale in favour of space travel. While space travel can therefore be generally justified, this argument shows how it is especially justified in instances where it creates trickle-down benefits to civilian technology and in instances where corporate funding reduces public expenditure.

Moreover, the increasing possibility that Earth could never be a permanent home has increased the urgency of space travel. The United Nations Climate Change Report in 2020 alerted the world to the fact that the planet would eventually experience a rise in temperature beyond 2 degrees Celsius, even if we made a concerted effort to bring down our carbon emissions to zero by the year 2050. It is beginning to dawn on many that climate change is a mammoth task that is too late to try to tackle, that the world could become uninhabitable at one point in time, and that a "Planet B" is necessary. In such periods of existential threat to the human race, space travel that seeks to locate a new home for mankind is especially justified – even if it meant fewer resources to feed the hungry and clothe the cold for now – because the far worse scenario is not poverty but extinction. Justifying space travel with the sole purpose of seeking out a potential planet that is similar to Earth is especially applicable when there have been glimmers of possible hope. For example, space scientists have discovered the Kepler-452b planet, which has a mass 1.06 times that of Earth, and orbits at a similar distance away from its star as Earth does around the Sun. Space scientists have also discovered the TRAPPIST-1 system that contains multiple Earth-sized planets. These examples show how funding space travel to explore the true inhabitability of these planets could yield real solutions for mankind to address the problem of climate change, because such research alone has demonstrated a hopeful outcome. Therefore, as much as space travel in the past may have been unjustifiable because it merely brought benefits to the wealthy who had the luxury to involve themselves in the nebulous pursuit of knowledge, space travel today, at least in practical areas such as planet colonisation, can be justified because it concerns everyone on Earth regardless of socio-economic status. It ensures that our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren can live to see the day even if climate change wipes out the Earth. Thus, in instances where space travel plays an indispensable role in addressing crucial, existential issues like climate change and the need for another home, it is possible to justify space travel even if it is an extremely expensive project.

In conclusion, it may not make sense to fund space missions in such times as the Covid-19 pandemic, as the American government has done for NASA. However, space travel has

always been justifiable due to its ability to generate technology for society that may not have been funded otherwise, its ability to bring a sense of national identity to a broken nation, and its ability to fight proxy wars. Perhaps space travel may continue to remain like a nebulous project to many, but as climate change threatens the very breath of mankind and private corporations step onboard to fund massive projects, perhaps space travel can be justified. It allows us to shoot for the moon, and though we may miss, we will certainly land among the stars.

#### **Comments**

*Mature, thoughtful response that sets out clear conditions for why space travel can be justified. Well-researched and comprehensive coverage of the main issue. Some conflation between space exploration/research with space travel. Excellent organisation of ideas – mature introduction and wonderful transitions. Strong personal voice that is evident throughout the essay. Variety of sentence structure and vocabulary.*

### Can space travel ever be justified?

In the age of the “billionaire space race”, where individuals such as Elon Musk, Richard Branson and Jeff Bezos pour billions into building reusable rockets to send themselves on joyrides into space, the question of how necessary and beneficial space travel really is is inevitable. After all, to the average person, these exploits are nothing but the whims of the ultra-wealthy with too much time and money on their hands. Thus, in an era plagued by increasingly pressing issues like climate change, social inequality, wars and famines, is space travel ever justifiable? How can we focus our attention elsewhere when our planet and its people are so desperately in need of help? Yet, I believe that while these concerns are valid, and it would be irresponsible to spend billions on building rockets when Covid-19 is raging across the globe, in the long term, space travel is important to our advancement and development as a civilisation, as not only can it bring about unforeseen benefits but also bring us to new worlds and new discoveries.

Opponents of this view believe that since space travel’s benefits do not directly have positive benefits on the lives of people, it is unjustifiable that so much be spent on an endeavour that has little tangible impact. After all, it is true that the average person living today would likely never fly beyond the Earth’s atmosphere on any other vehicle than a commercial airplane. Space travel remains and will likely remain far too expensive for the average Joe, at least for the next 50 years. To a starving child born below the poverty line or a struggling parent working two jobs to provide for their family, the resources used for space travel would have been better used to provide food, housing, and medical subsidies. Even the middle-class often complain that their hard-earned tax money is being used to fund space agencies rather than being directed towards improving healthcare or education. Especially in today’s world, where social inequality is such a prevalent issue and the gap between the rich and poor is only widening, space travel does nothing but worsen this gap, as rich people can spend millions for a 60-second trip to space aboard Elon Musk’s rocket, while ordinary people gain absolutely nothing. This was perhaps most ironically illustrated when Jeff Bezos thanked Amazon workers for their hard work that had funded his trip to space. When modern day space travel is in the hands of billionaires who seem to care only about stroking their own ego, who treat space travel like a fun little project to spend their money on, it is thus no wonder that many people are protesting excessive spending on space travel. Furthermore, space travel itself may exacerbate existing problems such as climate change given that a short trip on a spacecraft releases more greenhouse gases than a commercial flight. Could these billionaires not invest instead in solar and nuclear fusion power rather than rockets? Therefore, when space travel seems more about space tourism than space exploration, in a world fraught with so many pressing issues, it is thus easy to see why some believe spending on space travel is unjustifiable.



It must be acknowledged that excessive spending on space travel, whether for space tourism or exploration, is unjustifiable when there are extremely pressing issues happening here on Earth. In times of global crises like a pandemic, I believe that governments should definitely direct more funds toward helping those currently in need, rather than investing in the future. However, while there are always “more pressing” issues in the world, I believe that space travel does have many unforeseen and long-term benefits that justify spending time and money on it.

Firstly, space travel could help us advance scientifically, as research into space travel may help uncover technologies previously unimaginable. As with scientific research in general, it is often difficult for us to see the true value and potential a research topic could bring about. Just as in the early days of the Internet many sceptics felt it was useless and only meant for rich people to use (as ordinary people could not afford or need computers), we may not be able to see the benefits of space travel right now, as we are often unaware of the value of scientific research. Space travel involves many branches of science, such as physics, to understand how to plan spaceflights; engineering, to design sturdy and robust engines and spaceships; and biology, to understand and mitigate the effects of microgravity and radiation on the human body. Researching and investing in space travel also means investing in related technologies. The moon landings were done with technology less advanced than what we have in our smartphones today, and yet they resulted in a series of inventions and improvements that are critical to our lives today, such as GPS and communication satellites, as well as better engines and designs that can be used in cars and airplanes. In fact, the Cold War’s Space Race is said to be a golden age for scientific and technological advancement, simply because technologies used in space travel were so widely applicable. Who knows? Perhaps research into space engines can be applied to build even better cars and planes, or the question of how to build a power source that can sustain space flight could lead to new ideas about renewable and compact power sources on Earth. Understanding how radiation affects our bodies when we travel into space could help us develop protection and treatments that can be applied to skin cancer treatments. In all, the interdisciplinary and multifaceted nature of space travel may lead us to new discoveries that we cannot imagine now, but which may be possible in the future and thus research into space travel is justifiable.

Additionally, space travel could provide us access to resources we are desperately in need of. Having squeezed our planet Earth of all its minerals, metals, and fossil fuels, which may be depleted in a century or two, space travel could provide us an answer to the consequent problems. Asteroids could contain unimaginable amounts of various precious metals such as platinum, titanium, and iron. While it is true that greedy billionaires would very much like to be the first to reach these golden mines and profit off having control over them, it is undeniable that we still need these resources if we are to grow and expand as a species. Furthermore, the staggering abundance of hydrogen on gas giants such as Jupiter could provide us more energy in the form of hydrogen fuel cells, or we could even harvest energy directly from the Sun itself. Thus, space travel could bring us beyond our limited Earth to seek new resources necessary to the growth of our species from a type 0.7 to a type 2, able to harness the energy of our star. Films such as *Interstellar* have shown us how space travel may even be our last resort if our Earth is destroyed by climate change. Cynically,

one may view space travel as but another manifestation of humanity's unquenchable greed, where we look to discover new worlds, strip them bare of their resources, before ditching them and moving on to the next. While this view is somewhat valid, and regulations and laws must be put into place before we land on these other worlds beyond our own, it does not detract from the fact that to advance and sustain the civilisation, we must at least attempt to access resources outside of our planet, as it will be depleted one day. This is a long-term goal of space travel, yet it is important to continually make progress toward it. Thus, space travel can be justified as a necessary expansion that will allow our species to survive.

Last but not least, and perhaps most obviously, space travel helps us fulfil our natural urge to explore and discover new frontiers. In contrast to the previous two benefits, this is a much less pragmatic and more philosophical objective of space travel, which some feel is invalid given the importance of focusing on the tangible lives of people currently living. However, this deep-seated need for exploration and expansion is inherent to human nature, and space travel represents an exciting possibility that we and future generations must try to explore. The same spirit that led early explorers like Columbus to set sail off to new lands or that led great minds like Einstein to ponder nature's laws in an effort to understand our universe compels us to look up to the night sky and wonder if we will ever go up there. It is the reason science fiction is as popular as it is, with movies such as *The Martian* and *Interstellar* showing us the wonders of what might be out there. After all, why did millions of people tune in to watch Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin step on to the Moon, or the SpaceX launches, or the launch of the James Webb Space telescope? The importance of fulfilling this thirst for adventure and new horizons cannot be understated. Thus, while it is optimistic to believe space travel will bring all positives and be smooth sailing, it is also too pessimistic to ignore the importance of space travel in fulfilling our innate need to explore, and to go beyond what is currently possible. Therefore, space travel helps quench our thirst for exploration and for pushing the boundaries of what is known, and thus is justifiable.

Perhaps billionaire joyrides into orbit are unnecessary and may leave a bad taste in people's mouths. However, space travel goes beyond that. It can help unlock new technologies and resources that we cannot imagine now, as well as fulfil our innate desire to explore. Thus, space travel is justifiable, and while more pressing issues may always be present, I believe it is important for governments and corporations to slowly but steadily work towards this final frontier.

### **Comments**

*An enjoyable read. Good awareness of issues contained in the question, and generally well-argued with different perspectives. There is an attempt to address "space travel" and not merely space tech. Would have been good to explore space tourism to a greater extent.*

**‘We cannot trust science to provide an effective answer to our environmental concerns.’ Discuss.**

Anyone who pays the most cursory attention to the media today is deluged with eco-anxiety: global warming, climate change, loss of biodiversity, extinction. Each crisis is more alarming than the last. The world is drowning and burning at the same time. Given the multitude of environmental concerns and the impending global eco-disaster, many have begun to examine the main causes of our climate woes: mankind and science. Ever since cars were invented, the air pollution index has been soaring; ever since factories started churning, natural resources are being gobbled up. Human innovations seem to be contributing to the climate crisis. This raises the question: can we have faith in science to solve our environmental problems instead? I would argue yes. Even though science has, under some circumstances, exacerbated the situation, I believe that science still can effectively help us stave off our environmental woes. This is because it mitigates the impacts of our activities sustainably and targets the root causes of environmental degradation.

Those who are doubtful of science’s power in improving the environment often point to the fact that technology merely reduces the symptoms of our environmental crisis and may even worsen our environmental wellbeing. Our over-reliance on science and excessive faith in scientific innovations have led us to blindly adopt technological solutions, neglecting other alternative, viable and often necessary ways to approach the problem. Take, for example, the heated debate surrounding electric vehicles developed by Tech Giants like Tesla and BMW. They were designed to reduce our consumption of non-renewable energy in our daily commutes, such as fossil fuels which have led to greenhouse gas emissions that intensify the global warming effect. However, commercialisation and the widespread access to such technology have instead led to the Jevons Paradox, where an increase in efficiency of driving has encouraged more driving, as people feel less morally remorseful of doing so. As a result, roads get more congested and the consumption of electricity skyrockets instead. It seems like science can be a panacea to our environmental worries but, in reality, it fails to address the root cause of the problem, which is our irresponsible action, giving us tacit permission to continue driving, instead of walking, cycling, or using shared transport. Hence, it is reasonable for those critical of science to reject it as an effective means to solve our environmental problems.

While science may not always achieve the desired effect, it remains the most powerful tool to mitigate the impacts of human actions on the environment with the requisite speed. The pace of scientific developments is stunningly rapid and in recent decades, there has been an excellent track record with the emergence of green engineering methods,

renewable energy discoveries and ecological reconstruction plans thanks to fintech which has channelled funding towards the sector. Such technologies constantly expand our human capacity to slow down the pace of environmental degradation, first by reducing our carbon footprint on the planet and then by holding corporates responsible for their polluting behaviour. This is crucial, given the evident failures of negotiations at climate conferences such as the Paris Agreement and the recent COP26. For example, a global network of 200 satellites by San Francisco firm Planet.com now guards our rainforests, corals, and coastal mangroves by sending real-time data monitoring the density and health of our ecosystems. With these deep transparency tools, we can begin to reshape capitalism: any firm that dares to conduct illegal logging would be clearly captured and exposed to the consumers, triggering consumer boycotts. The timeliness and accuracy offered by science act as an effective deterrence against potential threats to our environment as science can now help us to track corporate carbon footprint and trace responsibilities. In fact, tropical rainforests in Brazil have seen a growth in density thanks to such technology in recent years. It has also helped us in minimising the damaging impacts of forest fires on biodiversity given the speed of information exchange between sensors. Thus, we can safely find some solace in science's ability to reduce our environmental worries, given its proven track record.

In addition, science may target the root cause of environmental degradation because it provides unbiased, objective statistics that can win over denialism and ignorance. This empowers more to be aware of and proactive in putting a stop to degradation collectively. Even though the pursuit of science is a fallible human endeavour, the self-correcting mechanism and culture of peer review inherent in the field enable scientists to provide relatively more accurate information that allows us to make reliable inferences about the current climate conditions as compared to speculation, prejudice, and bias. For instance, after the Trump administration slashed funding for the Environmental Protection Agency by a third in 2020, scientific evidence pouring in from climate research agencies all around the world has forced the US government to re-examine its decision to reduce its support for climate change research. Following the backlash from environmentalists and the public, the Biden administration reviewed the empirical evidence presented and was compelled to increase funding for climate research, as well as to bring the US back into the Paris Agreement. Since our failure to put a stop to climate change is largely due to our ignorance of the present situation and the wilful rejection of incomplete information, supplementary scientific data on the shrinking glaciers, rising sea levels, droughts and floods can help us visualise and wrap our heads around the severity of the issue, provided that findings are communicated to the public meaningfully. Such attitude shifts and awareness matter since they can be translated into individual involvements in climate strikes such as the Extinction Rebellion protests, exerting political pressures and eventually pushing for concrete green policy outcomes. Thus, science bolsters our confidence that more can make the effort to protect the environment because it addresses the root cause of environmental degradation by altering minds.

In conclusion, with the clock ticking, we cannot afford to wait for traditional conferences and negotiations to slowly seep into the minds of all stakeholders. The impending natural disasters necessitate that we adopt the best method of mitigation and prevention in our hands because science provides both short-term and long-term hope for environmental protection. Of course, science should not be our only weapon against environmental degradation. Education, government regulations and equitable access to technology should also be considered to complement it in order to ensure that we can efficiently and precisely attack our environmental problems from all angles. Our future depends on it.

**Comments**

*Well-formulated argument that looks at how scientific processes/innovations change human behaviour. This balance between the topic (trust in science) and stakeholders of science (corporation and countries, though maybe not so much on consumers) was well executed, as your choices of details were precisely explained. You want to pay a little more attention to your finishing lines in each paragraph for a stronger evaluation.*

**‘In today’s digital age, freedom of expression works better in theory than in practice.’ To what extent is this true?**

Recently, the acquisition of Twitter by billionaire Elon Musk has been the talk of the town. Chances are, you have probably seen it being reported on by the news recently. Musk posits that his reason for buying the company is simple: he wants to return Twitter to a free speech haven where individuals are free to express their own views and wants to allow those like the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, back onto Twitter. As evidenced by this, it is clear to see that Elon Musk believes very much in the Western ideal of personal freedoms of expression being put before the good of the state. The reason why many people, even those outside Western countries, have become enamoured with the idea of freedom of expression is that the proliferation of ideas on social media and the internet is loosely regulated (often not by choice). Many who desire freedom of speech have seen social media and digital sites as a pseudo safe haven for them to operate in. But what exactly does freedom of speech bring about that makes it justifiable for us to ignore the consequences it brings about? How well do these ideals of freedom of speech actually translate into real life situations, with so many more variables at play? I believe the ideal of freedom of speech falls apart when put into practice, actually encouraging polarisation and destabilisation in our societies, along with allowing for fake news and information to spread.

Detractors will argue that freedom of speech works just as intended in practice or sometimes even better in terms of allowing people to express their opinions about and criticism of others, regardless of the differences in societal status between the two, without fear of censorship or threats arising from it. Some believe that in terms of providing a platform for individuals to express their concerns and unhappiness with organisations like companies or even the government, the ideals of freedom of expression are at work. Being able to openly criticise large organisations regarding their mishandlings could help to improve their operations and allow for better handling of future situations, resulting in net societal benefit. In the absence of freedom of speech, a government or company could simply cover up its mistakes and ignore the existence of the issue by use of censorship or even threats of legal action. Case in point, in late 2019 when a whistleblower in China’s Wuhan province warned of the dangers of Covid-19 and its possibility of spreading, the Chinese government scrambled to censor his post, citing that he was creating unnecessary noise and unrest, and that his information was false. I concede that due to this abhorrent infringement on his freedom of expression by the Chinese government, China was unable to contain the Covid-19 virus within China, and could not impose proper restrictions on it, nor could the public be informed about it. The lack of freedom of expression in this case highlights how it allowed for an organisation’s mishaps

regarding their handling of a deadly virus to be covered up, allowing it to escalate to unimaginable heights, causing suffering for so many innocent citizens in the long run. In comparison, an incident like the questioning of America's war efforts in the Middle East in their war against terrorism showcases the importance of freedom of expression. Because people were able to express their views and information gathered, people began to piece together suspicious actions taken regarding the handling of things like drone strikes and civilian casualties. This eventually led to the American government releasing papers showing that there were indeed misuses of drone strikes on innocent families, and them making a vow to stop any such actions moving forward. Comparing the two situations, I am forced to concede that freedom of expression does work just as well, if not even better, in practice than in theory with regards to the criticising of organisations for the betterment of society.

However, I think the benefits just listed are overstated and also overgeneralised regarding freedom of speech or expression. For every incident where freedom of expression has helped benefit society, there have been countless more situations where we have seen freedom of expression tear people apart, resulting in what could have been an opportunity to improve and move forward our society to devolve into a warzone. This situation is not helped by the fact that digitalisation has allowed for every single person to express their views online, sometimes even anonymously, causing the situation to often become a shouting fest rather than a collection of ideas. Furthermore, for a comment to become a moment that actually incites change in society, it takes a lot more than purely freedom of expression allowing for some things to be said, and many other factors are also at play. Hence, I think that the practise of freedom of expression does not entirely live up to the promise of its theoretical benefits.

Freedom of expression works better in theory to the extent that it is supposed to encourage meaningful discourse and debate, whereas in reality we see that it actually invites polarisation of groups in society and the destabilisation of society. In theory, freedom of expression should allow for different groups of ideologies to come together and have meaningful and progressive discussions on how to move society forward, eventually coming to a compromise where everybody walks away with a more nuanced view of the issue discussed. The digitalisation of this process is supposed to allow for even more people to be involved and heard in the discussion, creating an ever more nuanced view of the issue and its possible compromise. However, oftentimes in reality this process of discussion just devolves into the polarisation of society. Case in point: the 2017 tweet by actress Alyssa Milano that set off the #MeToo movement where over 19 million tweets in 2018 came from different women stepping forward and recounting their encounters with sexual harassment in the workplace. Instead of helping cultivate a conducive environment for the discussion of sexual harassment in the workplace, it instead devolved into a shouting fest between the two different sides of pro-women and pro-men. The inclusion of so many voices in the discussion served to muddy the waters instead of creating understanding. As the saying goes, too many cooks spoil the broth. Because everyone had the freedom to write whatever they wanted, there were many who were not even

interested in trying to move the discussion forward but instead argued just for the sake of arguing. This also resulted in uncivil attacks from both sides, turning a possibly fruitful discussion into a full-on war, as both sides dug into their ideologies and did not look back. This led to the creation of pro-women groups alongside pro-men groups, with both sides feeling like they were under attack from the other and neither willing to make any concessions. Hence, it is clear to see that the freedom of expression has morphed into a tool that allows for these kinds of discussions of improving society to go unregulated and eventually descend into chaos, prompting us to ask if it was really worth the trouble in the first place, and if there could have been a better way to address the issue, perhaps in a more organised and civil manner that did not break our society apart. Therefore, I think the theory works better than practice in terms of trying to encourage positive discussions.

Freedom of expression also works better in theory to the extent that it is supposed to allow for a wider variety of opinions to be available, but in practice it is exploited in an effort to proliferate fake news and misleading information. In theory, it should allow for us to put our knowledge and information out for the world to see, aided by technology. It should allow for different articles and hence opinions to be presented to us to reference and take inspiration from. It should help spark our understanding and perhaps even provide us enlightenment upon reading of a different viewpoint. However, this is a far cry from reality. In reality, there have been many groups who have taken advantage of the freedom to express themselves and exploited it to help spread misleading or even false information in an effort to forward their agenda, preying on the doubts and insecurities in people's minds. For instance, a survey done in 2022 recently found that 31% of Americans are still sceptical of Covid-19 and the benefits of a vaccine shot. Conspiracy theorists claimed that the mRNA vaccine was rushed (it was not), causes gene mutations (it does not), and lowers the strength of our immune systems (definitely not). To substantiate their claims, the anti-vaxxers spread falsified information about Covid-19 and faked test results all in an effort to try and provide evidence for their baseless claims. The digitalisation today also exacerbates the issue by creating echo chambers of information, recommending those who seem even mildly interested in these types of content more and more extreme views until they are hooked and unable to return. These falsehoods actively undermine the good work being done to save people's lives, ultimately resulting in over a million unwarranted and unnecessary deaths in America due to Covid-19 as of 2022. It has also led to policies and legislation being made based on these falsehoods, causing laws to be put in place by politicians that actively harm the people themselves. Hence, freedom of expression actually results in the unregulated spread of absolute falsehoods that harm society instead of working like it should in theory, helping provide a more holistic and all-encompassing view of issues.

In conclusion, freedom of expression is a concept that has many limitations and is unable to hold true in the presence of so many different variables that are present in real life. When faced with the option of complete freedom, are we really mature enough as a society or even as individuals to make the right choices and be the bigger person all the time? I believe the absence of regulation even for something like our speech and



expressions is detrimental in the long run, as oftentimes regulations are put in place for a specific reason and for a specific purpose. Take for instance the Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulations Act (POFMA) that was introduced in Singapore. It was indeed a huge blow to freedom of expression as the government could now reasonably squash any dissent or opposition. However, we have to keep in mind that it actually helps us when barriers are put around sensitive topics which do not need to, and honestly should not, reach the mainstream, in light of their detrimental effects on us as a society, and how it might just tear us apart. Ultimately, freedom of expression is a complicated thing that, like many other things in life, needs regulation and assistance for it to realise its full potential as a tool for good while mitigating the negatives it brings about. At the end of the day, it is a tool and how it is used will definitely change depending on the user using it.

### **Comments**

*An enjoyable read. I appreciated that you made consistent attempts to compare the theory and reality of freedom of expression. Still, in the penultimate paragraph, some concrete evidence of the “policies and legislation being made based on [the] falsehoods” was needed.*

**‘There is no longer any value in telling the truth’. Discuss.**

Relentless profit-maximisation and result-orientedness have been, in one way or another, the 21<sup>st</sup> century zeitgeist. With more and more people taking note of such goals, the hackneyed but noble “focus on the process” has been all but pushed to the very back of our concerns. In such an era, we no longer seem to accord equal importance to integrity and righteousness, as much as we do to the desired result itself. Gone are the days of Aesop’s fables, done are the days filled with the learnings from these fables as well. This is a very common lament by the older generation, who very much believe that we are not prioritising integrity. Yet, while the world seems to have moved on and regard telling the truth as an act that has no meaning in our world today, I strongly believe that there still is much value in telling the truth. I will be utilising examples from varying sectors and levels, to drive home the point that due to both pragmatic and moral reasons, telling the truth is as valuable and precious as it was in the past.

Detractors of my stand posit that telling the truth simply has no economic importance, especially due to the immense benefits that hiding or falsifying the truth may bring to today’s profit-drive firms. Undeniably, the past was a much more righteous time. With a lack of societal pressures on things like career, education or profits, people in the past simply had no incentive to lie. In fact, telling the truth presented a noble image of oneself to others, so that was the case in bygone times. However, that situation, when juxtaposed with today’s worldly realities, seems to be unrealistic. Today’s world brings immense competitiveness across spheres of life. This can be illustrated in the media industry, where sensationalism (ironically) has become the norm. With the decreasing attention levels of audiences and increased competition with other media outlets as opposed to the past, sensationalism, which inherently comes with the warping of truth, seems to be the only way for a media firm to differentiate itself from the pack and thereby generate profits. Hence, telling the truth in this context, nowadays, takes a backseat when millions of dollars are on the line. Examples range widely, from the gross representation of the 2021 US Presidential Elections by rightist media outlets like Fox News to The Online Citizen’s article on PM Lee falsifying the state of his family (which notably gained over a million views). These serve to reinforce that it is the need of the hour to be pushing truth-telling to the back and embracing falsification, as it is simply valuable in the form of profits for firms to do so. Other industries also see the same phenomenon. Pharmaceutical companies like Pfizer-BioNTech have gained much by cherry picking their testing grounds for vaccine efficacy (which is also a form of not portraying the truth or reality of how effective their vaccine actually is). Hence, it must be said that as economic aggrandisement is of paramount importance to firms, its owners and shareholders, today’s competitive world comes with the low-hanging fruit of profits, if firms do not tell the truth. Therefore,

from an economic standpoint, there no longer seems to be any credible value in telling the truth, as opposed to the past.

Granted, in many ways, the above argument holds water. There simply exists a way out for many money-driven entities to gain what they need – by not telling the truth. However, upon further scrutiny of the previous argument, we can note that it all seems too good to be true. For ages, philosophers, scholars, and even successful businessmen have harped on the immense value of telling the truth. We now see the merit on this side of the argument as well: telling untruths simply is not sustainable in the long run, just like it was in the past. Integrity remains a key value in our world today, as it enhances the power of politicians to gain trust from their electorate. Politics today is dotted with several examples of reigning politicians and leaders who have fallen out of favour with the public. Whether it is the ex-South Korean leader Park Geun Hye whose involvement in the Burning Sun scandal shattered her reputation, or Najib Razak's unscrupulous 1MDB dealings, one thing remains common: the public has immense disdain for the people in power who do not come out and tell the truth to the very people who voted them in. While a nuanced take would still admit that their moral wrongdoings would not have been miraculously saved by a willingness to own up to their mistake by telling their truth, it can be noted that hiding their crimes only served to prolong the pain and anger of the people who entrusted them with the ability to lead them. Clearly, people still do place great importance in telling the truth, evidenced by the undeniable backlash when truths are not told, just like they did in the past. On the other hand, when politicians tell truths to the public, they can gain the masses' support, as people would realise that they can trust their leaders to make decisions for them, hence ensuring that these politicians stay in power, for the greater good. Moreover, it must be noted that today's world brings unprecedented interconnectedness, in the form of technology and social media. This would mean that politicians' misfiring is often exposed and shared with the public in no time, so there is no incentive in hiding the truth, as evidenced by the utilisation of social media in the attempted coup of Turkey recently. Hence, it must be said that to gain the support of the people, telling the truth is just as important (if not more important) as before, to politicians worldwide.

The value of telling the truth can also be explicated from a moral standpoint, where there is much to be lost if lies replace the truth. A case in point can be the recent handling of the Covid-19 pandemic by the Chinese government, who – to say the least – did not furnish citizens with the truth. Providing various narratives for the sources of the pandemic, and them not accepting the truth that a pandemic had emerged until much later, has resulted in not only strained international relations (with WHO, US and EU) from a pragmatic point of view, but also millions of lives which arguably is of much greater weight, from a moral perspective. Simply telling the truth on the existence of the pandemic early on would have resulted in countless lives being saved, which would have been of huge value to the families of the lives at stake. Telling the truth is also inarguably important in the sphere of sports today, for it champions sportsmanship and pure human excellence. The example of Russian athletes doping for the Olympic and the convenient hiding of this truth from the

international sporting bodies was simply immoral, undermining the value of sportsmanship. The cricket ball-tampering scandal on the other hand, was characterised by the two antagonists, captain David Warner and Steve Smith, coming to the forefront to admit their mistake and sharing the truth. This brought the saga to a wholesome and respectable end, with fans being pleased with their willingness in telling the truth, for it signifies a willingness to change and improve, and this is of much value to the underlying ethos of sport in our day and age.

In conclusion, while a superficial observation of the issue at hand reveals that truth-telling is not the norm today (especially in economic contexts), that is not to say that telling the truth is of no value today. This essay has covered much ground, bringing examples from the economy, politics and even sports, but the one thing in common is that telling the truth is of much value due to its ability to avert conflict, bring morally sound closure to issues, and enhance the reputation of stakeholders at hand. While we seem to have strayed away from this noble goal of integrity, its value is undeniable, and there is every reason for it to have a high standing in people's minds today, due to its pragmatic and moral benefits. Moving forward, we must consider how integrity can come hand in hand with economic profit, and work towards this while knowing that such changes come *poco a poco* in today's society.

### **Comments**

*This was a fully relevant and insightful response, with good focus on "telling". Evaluation of "value" was also evident throughout, although this could be sustained more in your last paragraph. Also, paragraph 2 made some simplistic assumptions about the past. Good job using a range of examples to support your points and covering different perspectives/issues from politics to media, although the "sports" illustration needed evaluation instead of merely stating what happened. Use of language is organised, with a strong personal voice and quite confident command of the language. Some of your expressions can be more subtle though (such as in the thesis and conclusion).*

**‘A career in sports or the arts is still undesirable.’  
How far is this true of your society?**

Right after Low Kean Yew claimed the 2021 Badminton World Championship title, the nation witnessed a surge in parents sending their children for badminton classes, seemingly signalling an improving sentiment towards a career in sports. Similarly, Joseph Schooling’s 2016 Olympic gold medal inspired our small nation: there is hope for a successful career in sports. On the artistic front, Anthony Chen’s *Ilo Ilo* and *Wet Season* have both garnered immense critical acclaim for their raw and poignant depictions of the Singaporean experience, with the former winning the prestigious Caméra d’Or prize at the Cannes Film Festival. These show an increasingly positive view of careers in sports and the arts in Singapore. However, though efforts have been made for a career in sports and the arts to be more desirable compared to the past, they remain largely undesirable in Singapore.

The growing desirability of careers in sports and the arts can be seen in the increased support from the government. There has been increased funding for talent development opportunities for employment in Singapore, making a career in these areas more feasible and accessible. For sports, there are government-issued scholarships, and the establishment of the Singapore Sports School, which specialises in training athletes, shows that the government is serious about developing talent, specifically in the field of sports. The same can be said of the arts through the establishment of the School of the Arts (its prime location near Orchard Road further confirms it is not just a token effort and meant to be quickly forgotten about) and LaSalle College of the Arts, both of which are heavily supported by the government. And this does not come as a surprise. In a 2005 address, PM Lee expressed that, after years of devotion to economic development, it was time for Singapore to work towards making our society more vibrant and cultured. With this set as a goal of Singapore, it stands to reason that a great deal more would continue to be done in the future to support those who wish to take on a career in sports and the arts, both of which contribute heavily to a country’s culture. Increased government funding allows for sportspeople to train with different athletes and coaches, even overseas, which will help them excel in their sport, as well as work with better staff to cater to their other needs, like physiotherapists and dieticians. Government initiatives like the Arts and Culture Resilience Package and the overall increase in funding, almost two-fold from 2019 to 2020, will give arts practitioners access to better resources to create and learn more. The recent setting up of an animation studio by Pixar in Singapore also gives better chances for employment in a career in the arts. Overall, given that education and employment opportunities are increasing in both sports and the arts, those who wish to undertake such careers would find fewer unknown factors on their path and be able to pursue their

passion with a little more peace of mind than before. Hence, they have become more desirable.

However, while such conditions exist to give a boost to those who wish to undertake such careers, it is still up to people to decide if they do. Unfortunately, most do not, as such careers remain largely undesirable to this day. Even with increased education and employment opportunities, a career in sports and the arts is still unpopular amongst Singaporeans. Unfortunately, it seems like our deep-rooted pragmatism and perhaps justifiable cynicism towards Singapore's arts and sports scenes are hard to eradicate. The number of attendees at arts institutions in Singapore, in fact, fell by around 10% from 2013 to 2019, signalling a decline in interest in the field. One can only imagine how these figures will be affected by the pandemic, which called off many profitable arts events like exhibitions, concerts and plays, cutting off the income of artists in Singapore, and showing yet again that such a career is full of volatility and instability. And while there is an increase in sports careers, the number of athletes that go on to become professionals is alarmingly low. Most who participate in the Youth SEA Games are students who stop representing the country and competing internationally after they reach adulthood and become committed to a job that takes up most of their time. Being an athlete is a huge commitment, and becoming a world-class one is an even greater investment that government provisions are unable to cover in Singapore. Pay at professional levels is not high either. The average football athlete in Singapore earns about \$1500 a month, which is highly unsustainable, especially as an athlete cannot work as an athlete their whole life, as they deteriorate physically. Hence, it would be more practical to build skills that will enhance future employment choices. As a result, interest in sports often remains merely as interest. Even if a child is extremely set on wanting to pursue the arts or sports as a career, parents often quickly shut them down, knowing the difficulty that lies ahead. As pursuing education and employment in sports and the arts remains unpopular, a career in sports and the arts is still undesirable.

Furthermore, careers in sports and the arts are undesirable as they are not respected in Singapore. In a survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, over 80% of respondents deemed the arts to be unessential, generating outcry from artists and organisations all over Singapore. This shows that our society is not yet ready to accept the significance of art and culture in our lives. This aligns with Singaporean pragmatism and a frankly unhealthy obsession with academic results. Careers that require the highest scores to get into, like in medicine or law, and more recently in STEM, are lauded as the pinnacle of society, while artists and athletes are often regarded as lost children who played too much in school and have yet to awaken from their naive dreams. Pursuing sports and the arts in Singapore is not only seen as undesirable as they are unsustainable but also because one is generally not expected to do a good job in these Singaporean industries. Barely anyone watches Singaporean football – not even Singaporeans themselves – and Mediacorp dramas are often known as mealtime accompaniments for “aunties” who are unable to discern good media from bad. These criticisms are, to a large extent, justified. Those who do not wish to graduate from drama school just to be cast in such shows will then prefer

to undertake other areas of study or choose to pursue it overseas, which is usually even more uncommon. Hence, the lack of respect for sports and arts professions in Singapore makes a career in these areas undesirable.

Finally, laws in Singapore serve to make a career in sports and the arts tougher, and hence less desirable. The strict laws in Singapore are meant to maintain order and promote prosperity, but most actually tend to serve more mainstream perceptions of prosperity and success, posing challenges to those who wish to pursue more niche careers, such as those in sports and the arts. Sports athletes have to maintain training consistently in order to make the most of their prime years to improve themselves before they have to retire. A two-year gap in training (say, to complete their compulsory National Service) disrupts the pursuit of their career. While appeals can be made, they are almost always refused, out of caution against those who may choose to abuse the system. This puts athletes on a lower playing field compared to their international peers, and further lowers the chances of Singaporeans making it in international competitions and proving that sports are a viable career in Singapore where one can achieve the success that they long for. The arts are liberal forms of expression that need to present fresh and interesting ideas, or the arts in Singapore will risk becoming more homogenised and too safe to be taken seriously. On this front, the Singapore government has received much criticism for unreasonably, sometimes laughably, strict censorship laws, due to a largely conservative population. The National Arts Council withdrew \$8000 from the funding of *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* by Sonny Liew (which, ironically, directly led to its immediate selling out locally upon release) for jokes about political figures that would definitely be considered mild in the eyes of those overseas and, in fact, of many Singaporeans. The Wild Rice theatre group has also expressed their dissatisfaction with the guidelines set by the NAC on the content of their performances, as they are extremely restrictive and prevent them from creating the art they wish to. For artists, having creative freedom stripped from themselves and being trapped by conservative standards undermines not only the meaning of their work, but also their role as artists and individuals. Without being able to tell the story that they want to tell, or perform the shows that they want to perform, many artists are hindered from creating art of high quality, that at the same time, also puts them at a competitive disadvantage with global peers. Hence, the laws in Singapore put a limit to the extent that athletes and artists can hone their skills and craft, stopping many from achieving what they would like to in their careers. It reveals that the government is, deep down, not ready to support these industries wholeheartedly. Hence, it would not be worth it to give up a stable income and secure life in Singapore in favour of struggling without purpose, hence a career in sports and the arts is undesirable.

Overall, it seems that much of the pessimism in Singapore's sports and arts industries is in fact realistic. Though efforts are made to make such careers more viable, both socially and financially, little has changed, as seen from the low popularity of such careers due to their instability, lack of respectability, and the unfavourable state of the industries themselves, which are unlikely to get better with only the efforts of dedicated individuals. To improve the state of things, the Singaporean government seemingly must take the risk of a

legislative transformation, or things are unlikely to change. And it is important for things to change. As a nation of such high economic status, Singapore is sorely set back in terms of culture, to which both the arts and sports contribute. “Medicine, law, business, engineering – these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love – these are what we stay alive for”. Singapore ranks as one of the lowest in terms of citizens’ satisfaction in their lives, so hopefully, we can find more things to stay alive for.

**Comments:**

*Overall, a good grasp of the main issues that plague those who want to pursue a career in these areas today. Development in places could be more thorough, but there is a good range of examples and clear attempt to link this to Singapore.*



## PASSAGE

*Clare Chambers discusses the issue of marriage today.*

What differentiates marriage from other relationships? It is not set apart by its durability: unmarried partnerships can be more permanent than married ones. Children are not the sole preserve of marital relationships: in most liberal democratic states, it is just as common for children to be born to unmarried parents as to married ones. Just like their married counterparts, unmarried partners cohabit and are financially dependent. They too go to great lengths to celebrate anniversaries and make commitments.

So, marriage is not singled out by permanence, or children, or love, or happily ever afters. It is also not distinguished by religion: some marriages are religious but many are not. The real distinction between marriage and unmarried partnership is the role of the state. Marriage is a form of relationship recognised and regulated by the state. When the state recognises marriage, it does three things: it defines, it endorses, and it regulates.

First, state-recognised marriage means that the state defines marriage and controls access to it. In a marriage regime, the state dictates who may marry. It determines whether marriage must be between a man and a woman, or whether same-sex marriage is allowed. It determines how many people can be married to each other. It determines whether and when divorce and remarriage are available. In a marriage regime, the state may also place religious or racial restrictions on marriage.

Second, when the state recognises marriage, it provides public and official endorsement of the state of being married. A marriage regime includes a state-sanctioned marriage ceremony, with officials and celebrants. Obtaining a state-recognised marriage is not like obtaining a driving licence or completing a tax return: it involves a solemnified and lauded ritual in which the state is intimately involved. And so, when the state recognises marriage, it declares that marriages are special.

The third aspect of state-recognised marriage is regulation: the state provides a married couple with legal rights and duties. Unmarried people have legal rights and duties too. But state-recognised marriage involves giving married people a bundle of rights and duties concerning many areas of life. These may include financial support, parental responsibility, inheritance, taxation, migration, and next-of-kinship: crucial areas of life that affect everyone, married or not.

Many of the most important rights and duties given to married people pertain to separation. Perhaps the strongest justification of state-recognised marriage is that it gives legal protection to the more vulnerable member of a divorcing couple, usually a woman. Marriage enables wives to focus on caring and domestic work while retaining a legal entitlement to the income and assets of the family. In a marriage regime, this legal protection is often not granted to equally vulnerable members of unmarried couples. For example, in England and Wales, unmarried women who devote themselves to childcare and housework have no automatic financial rights over any family income or assets that are in their partner's name, no matter how long-standing and marriage-like their relationship is, and this puts them in a position of serious vulnerability. Thus, marriage today represents an important bulwark against the possible inequality of treatment that could befall each member of a separated couple.

Historically, marriage has been a deeply unequal institution. The legal rights and duties of marriage have been profoundly gender-unequal in many countries. It is no surprise, then, that feminists have been objecting to marriage for centuries. Their objections have particular force in times and places where women are legally subordinated in marriage. Even today, there are married women who still have no legal rights to their own children, no rights to own property independently of their husbands, no rights to resist marital violence, no rights to divorce.

Of course, many states (though by no means all) have reformed their marriage laws so that they are gender-equal. It is possible to have an egalitarian marriage regime, one in which wives are not legally inferior to husbands. But even if we could remove misogyny from law entirely, we must remember that 'marriage equality' is not the same thing as 'equality'. All state-recognised marriage, however reformed or constructed, is still unequal – state-recognised marriage means treating married couples better than unmarried couples in stable, permanent, monogamous sexual relationships.

It means treating married couples better than those in non-sexual or caring relationships. It means treating married couples better than those who are single or polyamorous. It expresses the assumption that central relationship practices – parenting, cohabitation, financial dependence, migration, care, next-of-kinship, inheritance, sex – are bundled together into one dominant relationship. And so, it denies people rights that they need in relation to one practice unless they also engage in all the others and sanctify that arrangement via the state.

State recognition of marriage is also anachronistic. While more traditional couples do bundle together their relationship practices into one marital relationship, most people today (including married people) live more diversified lives, changing our relationship practices. In the past, we had simple family structures all settled down in the same vicinity and we only had to support our own families. We now juggle blended families, face family separation by migration, and manage multiple financial dependents. It is no longer apt to

regulate partnerships assuming that marriages are the only ‘correct’ configuration of a relationship.

This is not to say that there are no aspects of relationships that need regulation. The state needs to determine who owns what, who is responsible for children, and who is someone’s next of kin. And it needs measures to protect people made vulnerable by relationship practices, relationship pathologies, and by life events. In an ideal marriage regime, the state must deal with such matters for everyone, not just those who are married. In some areas, marriage makes no legal difference, but in others, the state uses the married couple as the default and leaves the unmarried as an afterthought. This is not justice.

If justice requires treating married people differently from unmarried people, what is it about marriage, specifically, that justifies that difference? What relationship practice is being protected or respected? In every case, that relationship practice will be found in unmarried relationships too. In a society that aims to respect the autonomy and equality of its citizens, there are no grounds for the state to recognise one specific family form above others. Whether or not the state recognises marriage, it should not discriminate against those who refuse to participate in it.

***Clare Chambers discusses the institution of marriage and criticises the role the state plays in it. How far do you agree with her observations, relating your arguments to your own experience and that of your society?***

Clare Chambers posits many claims about the role of the state in regulating marriages and points out the numerous ways in which the state either contributes to or denigrates the lives of couples of all variations.

Chambers points out that “it is possible to have an egalitarian marriage regime, one in which wives are not legally inferior to husbands”. I would say that this is largely true in the context of Singapore, where there are few or even no cases where the woman is legally subjugated to a reduced or inferior position relative to her husband. This awards some degree of credibility to the progress of our society in realising the importance of upholding gender equality even within marriage, which I find especially heartening given that Singapore is still a relatively conservative society in other regards. That being said, despite the applaudable progress that Singapore has made in upholding the rights of women even in marriage from a legal standpoint, such a viewpoint fails to consider that there are still existing pressures placed on women to either enter a traditional marriage with a man or fulfil certain expectations as the primary caretaker of the household and children, even whilst managing a fully-fledged career. This unfair expectation that women should contribute a proportionally higher amount of their time to domestic affairs compared to men is evidenced in laws regarding the amount of parental leave women are afforded by the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) compared to men. The MOM stipulates that women are allowed 16 weeks of maternity care, a number which is especially staggering when compared to the measly 2 weeks of parental care allowed for men. While there has been further progress made in allowing women to share their leaves with their husbands, the societal expectation that women should be the primary caregiver of children is still reflected by the state, putting them at an implicit disadvantage in the workplace. Hence, while Singapore has undoubtedly ensured a fair marriage regime where women are not legally inferior to their husbands, other areas of codified law suggest that married women with children may be disadvantaged in other ways.

Next, Chambers posits that the state “uses the married couple as the default and leaves the unmarried as the afterthought”. Unfortunately, this is indeed very true of Singaporean society, which despite its shining progress in the economic sector, still has some progress to be made in terms of removing the social stigma and financial barriers against unmarried couples. The most glaring example of this is the laws passed by the Housing Development Board which state that singles are not legally allowed to purchase a public housing flat of their own until the age of 35, while couples who (importantly) intend to get married may

apply for a Built-To-Order (BTO) flat as young as 20. This staggering discrepancy in the abilities of couples to attain stable housing is unfortunately a subtle measure by the government to increase the number of “nuclear family” units to increase our steadily falling fertility rates and mitigate the challenges posed by an ageing population with a shrinking pool of youths to support the elderly dependents. This law may also exclude other communities of unmarried people like single parents or homosexual couples, who would face difficulties in finding affordable and sustainable housing in the long run. It appears that although Singapore has progressed economically since its independence in the 1960s, the necessity to foster stable family units and raise the next generation of workers to sustain our economic prowess, causes the government to regrettably sideline unmarried couples who do not fit neatly into the category of “desired” family units, resulting in these people being marginalised by the law. Hence, this lends credence to Chamber’s point that states position the married couple as the default and leave the unmarried couples sidelined.

Ultimately, while Singapore may identify itself with a certain standard of socio-economic development, it still lacks in ensuring that equality both within and between all marriages is observed. While the progress made in reforming laws regarding parental leave is admirable, both the state and society still have a ways to go in alleviating the expectations to have a traditional marriage on Singaporeans.

### **Comments**

*Good attempt with relevant observations and valid evaluations! Keep it up.*

**‘Equality for all is only an aspiration.’ How far is this true of your society?**

“To build a democratic society, based on justice and equality”. Equality has been a dominating tenet of Singapore’s social fabric, and a recurring ideal that permeates the psyche and legislation of most, if not all, aspects of our nation. It can be understood as the fairness and equality of opportunity, resources and just treatment, on demographic grounds of gender, race, income, socio-economic status, the list goes on. The pursuit of equality, which has existed for decades and centuries, is far from over. This raises the question: is equality nothing more than a distant, ideal, and desirable yet unattainable goal, that can be worked towards yet never truly realised? Though there are definite grounds for pessimist and defeatist attitudes, I do not believe they are ones of reason. Although there is definitely a long way for our nation and world to go in our fight for equality for all regardless of markers of identity, and setbacks and limitations are rife today, equality is an attainable and feasible goal, and not simply an aspiration.

Critics of my stand posit that even with the painstakingly-achieved progress in Singapore for gender, income, and racial equality, the backslide of progress has all but undone it, throwing Singaporean society even further back in its fight for equality. They argue that policies and national stances that worked for us in the past are failing now, bringing up the failings of meritocracy as a driving force of our education system and its role in even exacerbating the income inequality in Singapore. For the first few generations under Singapore’s meritocratic education system, it was truly an ideal: generational privilege was barely present, and privilege passed down did not exist. Meritocracy, which refers to the practise of sieving and rewarding people based on talent and merit that shines for itself rather than socio-economic status, enabled education to act as The Great Social Leveller of the nation. It provided a platform to those on the lower rungs of Singapore’s socio-economy to be discovered, mobilised, and hence rise to the top, thereby uplifting those at the bottom and forcing those at the top to compete on equal grounds – truly a great tool in Singapore’s fight for equality. However, times have changed, and meritocracy in our education system has turned education in Singapore into an insidious double-edged sword, one that is now slicing away at what progress for equality we have made. Now, each generations’ subscription to meritocracy has incentivised parents – especially wealthy and connected ones – to seek to provide their child with every advantage possible, while the poorer and less advantaged students are left out in the cold, creating and maintaining a vicious cycle wherein the elite or “winners” of meritocracy rise to form an elite class of their own, and the “losers” are left struggling at the bottom. There is definite cause-effect, or at the very least correlation, between the socio-economic statuses and academic achievements of students today. Reports have found that 60% of students in elite schools live in condominiums and landed properties, as opposed to the 90% of

neighbourhood school student populace that live in Housing Development Board flats. With time, the once Great Social Leveller has become a tool of the wealthy elite to maintain their own position at the top of the hierarchies, while keeping the disadvantaged at the bottom. Now more than ever, Singapore is producing an increasingly detached wealthy elite, widening and deepening the gap between the haves and the have-nots. In this respect, my society is moving farther away from equality for all at unprecedented rates, and equality truly seems like an unattainable dream, nothing more than an aspiration.

Although I do concede that the pitfalls of our education system have further entrenched income inequality, I still maintain that the government has been and is continually implementing effective and sweeping measures to reform the education system and direct it back to the path of achieving equality for all. Singapore's education system is currently being reformed in a model of Finland's, which has been lauded as the "best education system in the world", in terms of the efficacy of it as a tool in evening out income and socio-economic status gaps in Finnish society. Sweeping changes can be observed. In 2019, children with special needs were officially included under the Compulsory Education Act. Quotas have been implemented on the most elite schools of the nation, on the percentage of students they are required to take in from neighbourhood primary schools, and elite secondary schools are pressurised to announce the variety of schools they accepted students from. The government has a multitude of accessible schemes set in place to aid students of lower socio-economic status, including every school's Financial Assistance Scheme. Prestigious government programmes and scholarships have been actively extended to neighbourhood secondary schools and junior colleges as well, including the renowned and greatly coveted Public Service Commission (PSC) Scholarship and President's Scholarship. Those in power are acutely aware of the backsliding of progress in terms of equality that the education system has caused, and have evidently been expanding great efforts to close the gap in Singapore, by extension making great steps in Singapore's journey to equality for all. In fact, the government has even set deadlines for when to expect some forms of equality to be realised. By 2024, all families with a school-going aged child will have a personal computer and efficient internet connection. These goals were put in place to ensure that, regardless of family background, each student will have equal access to resources and opportunity to excel in the education system, which is being moulded to cater to each and every student, regardless of identity. As can be seen from the concrete time goal that has been set, some form of equality has been promised by the government, and we can see from the extent of measures taken that its legitimacy exceeds that of a kiss and a promise. Singapore's education system is on the fast track to becoming an essential tool in facilitating and engendering income equality. If this is not enough to prove that equality for all is a feasible, realistic goal that both the government and the people can attain, with enough effort and cooperation, then what is?

Secondly, the current upward trajectory of Singapore's fight for increased women's and men's rights within and outside the workplace, and its extensive efforts made to alter entrenched gender inequality mindsets, leads me to believe that equality for all is soon to be achieved. A precedential and significant part of gender equality is the division of

household commitments and work between each parent, and large steps have been made there. Previously, there was substantively unequal allocation of housework that kept women out of working. In 2011, 78% of prime age women that were out of work were doing so due to child-minding responsibilities and commitments, while it was a measly 9% for men. However, that number has since been reduced to slightly over 50%. Additionally, fathers used to only take two to three days of paternal leave from work to care for their newborns, while the mothers bore the brunt of the responsibility of taking maternity leave, and hence compromised their careers by being deemed “unreliable” at work, missing out on promotional opportunities. Now, with the government recently rolling out policies that afford fathers ten weeks of non-transferable, paid leave instead of one to two, the burden of child-minding and household responsibilities is split much more evenly among the parents. Hence, women now have more free time to pursue their career and rise to fill more leadership positions in the workplace. Furthermore, numerous concrete steps have also been taken to increase gender parity in the workplace and bring women to the forefront of booming industries and corporate. Modelled after the United Kingdom policy, the largest corporate firms in Singapore or those with 250 or more employees are required, sometimes by law, to publish the percentage of female and male workers in their company, and the corresponding places of these positions on the corporate ladder. This policy has opened doors and even invited checks and balances to be placed on larger companies to uphold gender equality in the workplace, by placing them under immense pressure from both the public and governmental eye. The perennial “glass cliff” and “glass ceiling” phenomena that exist in hindrance of women in the workplace are now being tackled with determination and tact by the government, and women are being increasingly empowered to fight these arbitrary limitations on their workplace achievements that oppress them below their male colleagues as well. Companies such as Singtel and DBS now have quotas in places for the number of female employees they must hire, and the increased representation of women in leadership positions, including 60% of UOB’s employee promotions in 2020 being awarded to women, have been shattering glass ceilings all over the country. Singapore is currently at the acme of its fight for gender equality, and policies and legislative measures are proving effective now more than ever – it truly is an upward trajectory. Singapore is on track to achieving full gender parity, at least in the workforce, and though not in the next few decades, equality for all should not and cannot be dismissed as nothing more than an aspiration. It is real, concrete, and achievable, but only if the government and the people continue to throw their weight and power behind current efforts.

Lastly, although Singapore’s fight for racial equality and to stamp out racial discrimination has been one peppered with setbacks, it is regardless still effective and works realistically towards equality for all. Ever since the racial riots of decades ago that shocked our nation, Singapore’s stance on racial discrimination and racism towards minorities has been firm and crystal clear: zero tolerance. The late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew has stated that the only thing Singapore does not tolerate is intolerance, particularly towards communities of other races of religion. Since then, any Singaporean would be hard pressed to say without a doubt that racial fairness and equality has not been structurally written into numerous



policies and legislations. The quotas that have been placed in relation to the Housing Development Board's flats on the percentage proportion of minority and majority races that can inhabit one level is testament to the government's efforts towards ensuring a society wherein citizens have equal rights to housing and lodging, and each citizen is given a fair shot at applying for a flat, including Built-To-Order apartments. Additionally, our education system ensures that each child, regardless of race and religion, is able to have easy and affordable access to high quality public education that teaches subjects and provides programmes that cater to them. These efforts are clearly reflected in the public's psyche, as can be seen from reports made based on surveys conducted regarding citizens' perceptions of racial equality in Singapore. Close to 80% of respondents agreed that all races have equality of opportunity in education and the workplace. Even when the majority of public sentiment reflects that of equality having been achieved, the government has not faltered or halted efforts or measures in achieving complete and unquestionable racial equality. On this trajectory, we can only reasonably predict and conclude that equality for all has indeed been attained to a large extent, and therefore it would be presumptuous and overly dismissive to conclude that it is only an aspiration.

In conclusion, equality for all is undeniably an ideal by all standards, yet pushback and backsliding due to unforeseen and unpredictable circumstances are inevitable. Yet, with the cooperation of the government and the people, along with the determination to not give up on achieving this goal and the belief that it is attainable, equality for all is realistic, we can be said to be more than halfway to achieving. Do not let it become a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it is only just an aspiration if we believe so. Believe and we can achieve together, equality for all.

### **Comments**

*Largely well-discussed, though some arguments lack fairness and depth in addressing "for all" – it is clearly not realistic to expect equality for all. There are also some issues with factual inaccuracies (e.g., paid paternity leave – a father is given only two weeks, although he can apply to share up to 4 of his wife's 16 weeks of paid maternity leave; HDB ethnic quotas – introduced to prevent racial enclaves from forming, not so much to promote "racial equality"), though there is sustained effort to provide detailed illustration. The closing sentences are awkwardly phrased, but at least there is effort at a reflective conclusion.*

**‘Government regulation of the media has become less effective today.’  
Do you agree?**

China is a country with one of the most controlled media scenes in the world. From its infamous “Great Firewall” protecting its citizens from external influence to its government-owned media platforms and its own heavily regulated Internet search engine, it is without a doubt that the government of China has exhausted almost all its means to control the knowledge of its citizens, and is likely one of the “best” countries in the world in terms of censorship and media regulation. Prima facie, it seems that China’s defences are invincible, but as millions of users have proven otherwise, with the aid of a Virtual Private Network, bypassing China’s censorship efforts is as easy as the press of a button. Indeed, in today’s world, government regulation of the media has become far more complicated than confiscating a printing press or blocking access to certain websites. It has become a cat-and-mouse game of taking down social media posts, arresting whistle-blowers, and “bribing” media outlets. Although some may argue that increased government focus on censorship has allowed it to retain its efficacy, I am of the opinion that due to the rise of new media, shift of traditional media to digital platforms, and ever-increasing education rates, media regulation by the state has been reduced to a shadow of its former self.

Admittedly, many governments around the world have been stepping up efforts to control the media in their countries. In the right hands, the media has proven to be a powerful weapon that citizens can wield against the state, or vice versa. Governments are aware of this, and thus many place emphasis on varying degrees of media control. In Russia, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, numerous newspapers and news stations are owned by the government and used to broadcast propaganda supporting the regime. When the Russian invasion of Ukraine commenced in 2022, these media platforms were used to broadcast messages justifying the invasion, which has been termed a “special military operation” to “denazify” Ukraine. As the only body in a country with legitimate ruling power and direct control over laws and legislation, the absolute power wielded by the government has definitely been effective to an extent. The Russian government has also used this power to mandate that all privately-owned news stations broadcasting anti-government messages display a message after their programme stating that the contents of the programme may be unreliable or externally influenced. The efficacy of these messages is evident: interviews by external journalists with its citizens have shown that many, especially the older generation, fully support the president and his administration. The focus on media regulation also manifests as governments improving their technology and digital capabilities to deal with the rise of the Internet. Closer to home, the Singapore Government has set forth plans to ready itself for the digital world under the Smart Nation

initiative. This allows it to better tackle threats that may surface through new media platforms such as the propagation of radical and terrorist ideologies. Thus, governments stepping up efforts for media control may have allowed them to maintain their status as a force to be reckoned with on the media scene.

However, being a large, mostly immobile body has not benefitted the government in any way in the modern era. With the rise of new media platforms such as social media, complete control over citizen knowledge has become well-nigh impossible for the vast majority of governments. Social media platforms lack any formal gatekeeping process, and at any one time, thousands, even millions, of messages from the outside world are pouring into the phones and devices of people all around the world. It would be unrealistic to expect a government to be able to filter through every single social media post, comment or image to look for unwanted information to censor. Furthermore, even if the government were to find something, say, a document containing radical ideologies, and successfully took it down, this does not mean that it will never pop up again in the future. The anonymity offered by social media allows anyone to post anything at any time, and through the creation of disposable “burner” accounts, tracking down and arresting the person behind the screen has become exceedingly difficult. By the time a piece of material is censored by the government, it is likely that many people have already viewed or downloaded it due to high social media traffic. For example, new media has allowed terrorist ideals and radical mindsets to spread easier than ever. In 2020, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a total of 98 terror attacks were recorded in the United States. Despite the country’s government being one of the most advanced, it has failed to completely seal itself off from foreign influence, resulting in the rise of lone wolf terror attacks by self-radicalised individuals who often kill many and injure many more. In Singapore, the arrest of a teenager who had intended to conduct an attack on a mosque with bladed weapons has proven that even a digitally-prepared government cannot effectively regulate social media. Hence, it goes without saying that due to the inability of the government to filter through new media content completely, some of its efficacy in media control has been lost.

What about traditional media platforms then? Surely book publishers and newspaper companies can be controlled by the government? As it turns out, however, the shift in many of these media platforms to online ones has also impaired the government’s ability to regulate them. Numerous newspapers have shifted to online websites, such as The New York Times, The Straits Times, and many more all around the globe. One no longer has to obtain a physical copy of The Guardian in order to enjoy its crowdfunded journalism – by simply going online, anyone can read these newspapers. In the case of books and articles, one prominent example comes to mind. “The Uncensored Library”, an aptly named world in popular video game Minecraft contains more than 240 banned books in multiple countries, available for anyone with a computer and the game to download and read. The fact that government-controlled media is now accessible through something as innocent as a video game and by children is astonishing. With all these traditional media platforms

jumping on the new media bandwagon, government regulation of them has certainly become less effective.

One must also recognise that advancements in technology are not the only factor in media slipping out of government hands. Education rates around the world are also rising in developing and developed countries alike, with countries like Singapore boasting literacy rates of almost 100%. Education allows one to develop critical thinking and evaluative skills, prompting many around the world to scrutinise the information they receive through the media more closely. Many have also started to question government policies, especially those on censorship, resulting in a push for open journalism and free media seen especially in more authoritarian countries. While the Russian government has indeed been able to retain the support of the older generation, many Russian youths have begun to question the motives of the government when it sent troops onto Ukrainian soil. Fuelled by information from social media platforms, accessed by advanced Virtual Private Network technology, thousands of Russians have taken to the streets in cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg to protest against the invasion. Ironically, government education policies have instead worked against the government in such cases, where citizens will no longer believe the words of the state without first examining them. Therefore, education has also decreased the effectiveness of government media regulation.

In conclusion, while many governments have dedicated resources to continue controlling the media, these efforts are ultimately only partially effective or even futile, due to new media, technology, and education. In order to stay relevant on the media scene, governments must learn to work with citizens and media companies, to use censorship for its intended purpose – to prevent harmful ideas or knowledge from reaching the eyes and ears of others. The age of the government’s monopoly on media may be over, but with an efficient, incorrupt, and democratic government, things can still turn out for the better – for state and citizen alike.

### **Comments**

*On the whole, this is a sharp and insightful analysis. Supporting points are clearly articulated and generally well developed in terms of both logic and illustrative support. Good range as well. Balance was introduced and competently handled. Good linguistic control shown throughout. Expression is varied, sometimes original and felicitous. Well structured, easy to follow.*

**Consider the view that comics offer nothing more than entertainment.**

Think of lasagne, and your mind will most likely wander to a familiar cynical furry companion: Garfield the cat. Think of Peanuts, and there is a high chance that what you would first recall is a beloved franchise featuring unlucky yet lovable Charlie Brown and his beagle, Snoopy. What do these all have in common? They are the signature icons of some long-running serialised comics. Across the popularisation of pop culture and media, comics have always had a firm place in being a unique medium able to bridge the gap between writing and drawing. In the sphere of art, they are often regarded as a medium of low art – made for entertainment of the masses, and barely, if ever, taken with the same importance as something considered revolutionary such as Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* or classic novels such as *Ulysses*. At a base level, it does provide an immersive form of entertainment, but upon a deeper look, it is also a nuanced and powerful medium of storytelling and representation, producing some of the biggest cultural icons of today's world.

The view of comics as a medium and form of entertainment is indisputable. With its ability to tell stories and weave tales through writing and art, it creates visual narratives that are both easily engaging and immersive. Take Marvel, for example. One of the leading and most iconic film and entertainment franchises in today's world, it has produced countless films that have sold theatres out for weeks and span multiple genres, from feel-good, comfort films to binge-worthy series. *Avengers: Endgame*, one of its biggest releases, maintains its position as the highest grossing box office release worldwide. However, these movies would not have been possible without its source material: the Marvel comics. The serialised adventures of the plucky heroes we see on screen often fill up multiple bookshelves of dedicated collectors, and without them, Marvel's hit movies and television series would never have been able to exist. The potency of comics as a form of entertainment and its primary purpose to entertain cannot be disregarded – it is a valid view, especially when looking at the purpose of comics directly.

However, comics offer a lot more than just personal entertainment. As with any media, they too have the power to shape perceptions as well as influence and inspire people. In particular, comics across time have created powerful cultural phenomena and have cemented some of its characters as influential cultural icons in the realm of pop culture and beyond. Comics are the source of some of the world's biggest and most attended conventions, such as the yearly New York Comic Con. Featuring a several-day-long festival where people are able to purchase their favourite comics, meet creators and get a glimpse of new and upcoming releases, it brings together people of different classes and backgrounds, all united in a similar passion they share towards comics. Cosplay, the act of

dressing up as a character you like or want to be like, is also a common practice and pastime within these communities. With these conventions having so much reach that they often cause hotels near it to be fully booked out for weeks, it is impossible to deny the cultural and real-world impact that comics have. Besides just entertaining, its influence in boosting other businesses such as restaurants and inns where conventions are hosted goes beyond simple fun and personal enjoyment, exemplifying the cultural significance and reach it has over its fans and readers alike. On a personal level, it also gives its readers an avenue for self-expression through activities such as cosplay fan performances held at comic gatherings. Beyond just being a medium of entertainment, comics are able to influence and shape lives, and generate powerful cultural impact.

While comics, especially serialised and established ones have a lasting impact on people and our culture, they are also powerful on a smaller scale. Comics, as a combination of both the literary and visual arts, share a quality that the two are also known for: the ability to tell stories and act as representation, especially for smaller voices that wish to be better heard. This year, the Singapore Art Museum hosted the Singapore Art Book Fair (SGABF), a physical convention and sale platform for Singapore's local creatives to showcase and market their work. Though some featured were writers, many more were artists, especially budding, independent comic writers looking to market and spread their work to more people. Visitors were able to purchase small, handbound comics or zines directly from the artist. These often touched on personal subjects such as isolation within a modern society, self-harm, pregnancy and abortion, and the experience of being a LGBTQ+ person or someone of a minority race in Singapore. Comics allow these artists to paint powerful pictures of their stories, with visual depictions of their plight and experience alongside captions that build intimate narratives. While some do entertain, others are mercilessly direct in telling painfully truthful stories that leave readers feeling more guilty or uncomfortable than entertained. Still, they tell powerful stories whose personal weight can sometimes feel scarily intrusive but dredge up important questions and shape one's view of their society and their choices. The SGABF was a roaring success, with people often queuing for more than an hour in a stuffy warehouse to enter the exhibitions. Comics' ability to entertain lies often in its form of combining visuals and text, and thus when those qualities are kept in its transition to heavier and more personal exploration of topics, they are able to become an artistic medium with immense potential in raising issues and sharing experiences. The immersive value of comics usually used to entertain cannot be discounted when adapted to other uses, and therefore work just as powerfully when used to give a voice and representation to those seeking reform and change, or to tell powerfully personal stories.

Comics are used not just on an artistic level to bring to light hidden issues but are utilised by papers and media outlets seeking to criticise and ridicule pre-existing views or structures. "Political cartoons", as the medium is often called, tend to be presented in a format heavily inspired and referenced from comics – with a lined style, exaggerated flat or no colours, speech bubbles and a smart use of layout that creates narratives from flat pictures. The Economist, a magazine known for its commentaries on political, big issues

and global matters, often features these caricature-based short comics and drawings on its cover or within its pages. Following the engaging and eye-catching style of traditional bound comic books, these caricaturised drawings serve as succinct and witty commentaries or representations of real-world issues. By not being restricted to realism, these artworks are even able to shape one's interpretations and associations of the figure depicted. During Donald Trump's residency as US president, he was often depicted with a large, wrinkly head, big belly and scrawny body, pinning an image of arrogance and self-centred privilege onto the man in a smart use of manipulating people's visual associations and connotations. Comical or caricaturised depictions of people are not only able to insert layered representations of visual and dramatic irony that are hard to achieve in literary writing, but also serve as an alternate medium for critiquing real issues. These caricatures, whose exaggerated style would have never taken form without drawing heavy inspiration from the pop culture and stark nature of comics, are an important asset that often goes past just being entertaining to look at, but can affect real-world problems and change the way that people view certain issues or figures, having tangible effects and consequences.

While the core purpose and function of comics is still to provide an entertaining experience, having a view that restricts it to simply that and nothing more means discounting its ability to influence our culture and self-expression, and its potential both to uplift voices and bring social issues to light, as well as critique them and change perceptions or opinions. In the same way that the visual and literary arts are considered powerful and influential mediums, comics – as a combination of both their best qualities – should be viewed not as a form of entertainment, but an art form with influential promise and potential.

### **Comments**

*Overall good understanding and appreciation of the genre's purpose. Range of illustration might have been expanded (e.g., manga; more mature-themed graphic novels like "Persepolis", "Maus"). The economic value of comics might have been discussed too, while its cultural value might have been more effectively assessed against that of other media forms such as novels and television (indeed, paragraph 3 was not very specific or clear about what exactly the "cultural" impact of comics is).*

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