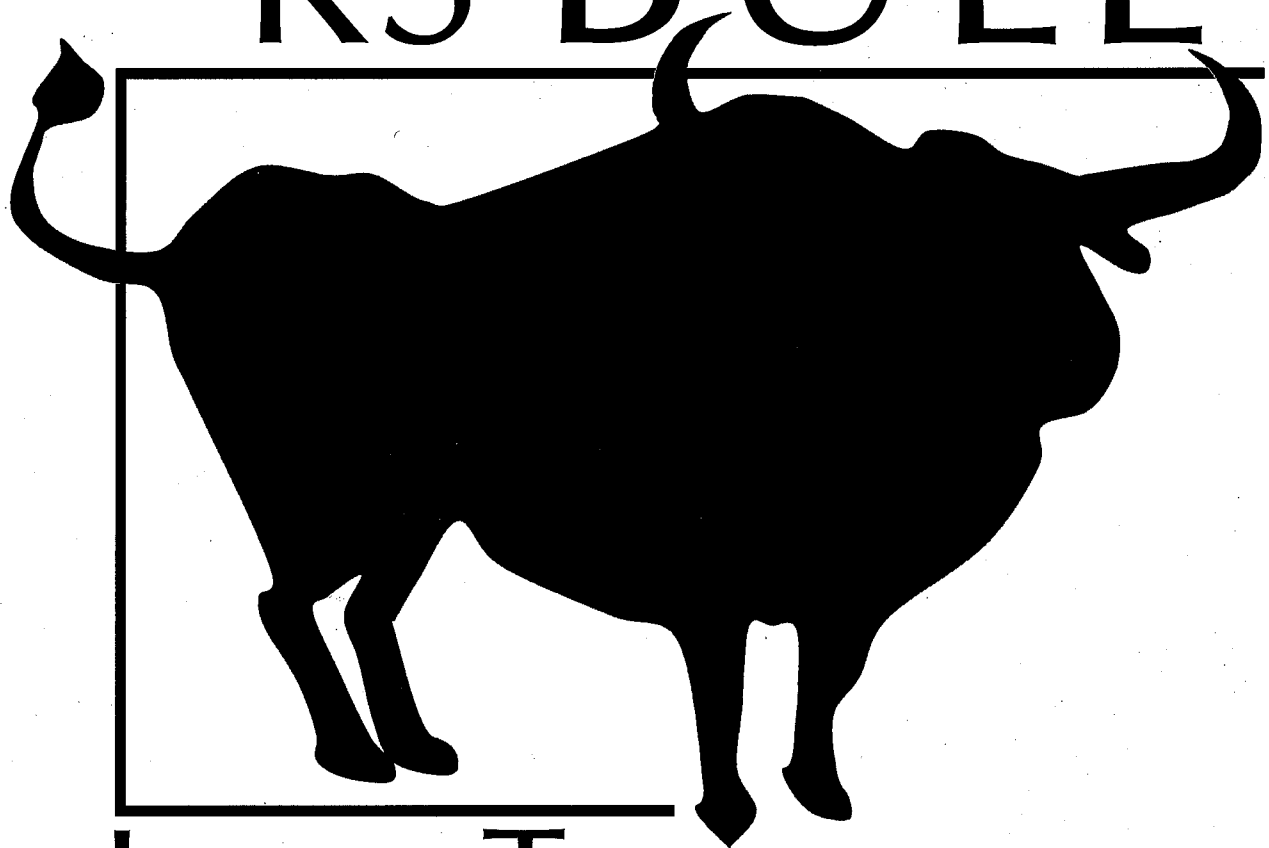


Raffles Institution  
(Year 5-6)  
Knowledge Skills Department

# KS BULL



Issue Two  
2013

# **KS Bull**

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Issue Two 2013

# Message from the Principal

Just this week, *The Economist* (September 7-13th) declared that Irish poet and Nobel Laureate, Seamus Heaney had died, at age 74. The penultimate paragraph of the obituary said that 'he was taken so comfortably for granted in the pantheon of poets that his going had the shock of a great tree falling. He (Heaney) had written of such a tree, the chestnut planted by his aunt when he was born and then, in later years, chopped down with *the hatchet's differentiated / Accurate cut... Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere, / A soul ramifying and forever / Silent, beyond silence listened for.*'

What a lyrical piece of writing for an obituary, and how artful, the writer's use of irony and evocation of pathos, juxtaposed with the cruel reality of the hatchet's accurate cut.

In this introduction to the second issue of the KS Bulletin for 2013, I'd like to draw your attention to writing from one's own context and in one's own voice.

It is impossible to read the writings of Heaney and not be aware of the deep history of Ireland, the terrorism and the political turmoil he and his contemporaries lived through. Neither is it possible to read Heaney and not notice that his language and thoughts had been shaped by his early struggles on a farm and the trauma of relatives lost from sectarian murders in Belfast.

As a writer, it is legitimate to reflect your context – your nation's politics and the current issues that you and your contemporaries are engaged with – in your writing. This will lend authenticity to your essays and contextualise your arguments so that the reader or assessor can fully understand your perspective. Not everyone has the same definition of key ideas such as 'democracy', 'civil rights', 'equity' and 'parity'. It is important to set the context and elaborate on the nuances, historical legacies and current realities that shape your views on each of these concepts or terms. In order to do that, you will, of course, have to read widely and critically from a range of media. Again, for authenticity's sake, it will also be important to reflect these views in your own voice, in a way you are most comfortable writing.

Happy reading, and writing.



Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)  
Principal

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## Essay 1

'Make poverty history.' Is that a realistic goal?

Grace Sum Jia En | 14S06P

The word 'poverty' conjures up heart-wrenching images of starving, malnourished children in Africa, the homeless beggars living in the subways of New York, the penniless who live in the slums of India or even the children and women in Nigeria who are deprived of the basic right to education. Poverty is associated with the disenfranchised, the group of people deprived of the basic right to sanitation, education, food, clean potable water and shelter. Riding on the crest of industrialisation and urbanisation, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened dramatically, resulting in the heightened concern towards poverty. Despite various efforts made by advocacy groups and governments, government inefficiency and corruption, exploitation of the poor and the debilitating circumstances chain the poor to this poverty trap, such that the effectiveness of current effort is greatly undermined. Should governments, corporations and humanitarian aid organisations fail to collaborate and take collective action, the pursuit of rendering poverty history may well be a futile one, relegated as a far-fetched, unattainable dream.

Idealists may claim that there has been heightened awareness of poverty plaguing the developing world, with government, non-government and international organisations stepping up to the plate and taking more visible, concrete action. Countries like the United States and organisations like the European Union and United Nations have implemented various programmes to ameliorate the problem of poverty. For instance, the 'Backpack Farmers' programme implemented in Nigeria serves to educate poor subsistence farmers on sustainable farming practices, teaching them how to make a living instead of merely giving them finances and food. Such programmes not only inculcate in them skills that will help them improve their lives in the long-run, but also elevate their confidence as they are able to support themselves instead of depending on the state or welfare organisations. As the notion of poverty encompasses not only absolute poverty but also the 'poverty mindset', such programmes, should they prove effective, would serve to eradicate such problems from the root. This argument assumes that human efforts would be sufficient to 'make' poverty a thing of the past. Furthermore, many point to the advancements made in society through industrialisation and outsourcing, where multi-national corporations enter the developing world, providing jobs and 'hope for a better life'. As job opportunities are scarce in the poor regions, the entrance of such companies expand the job market, revitalise the market, and stimulate economic growth. Such companies include Apple, which brought millions of jobs into China, Nike and other renowned world brands. Economic growth is also cited as a reason to believe that the goal of ending poverty is in sight as fewer people are living below the poverty line of US\$2 per day. Hence, many idealists point to economic growth and the entrance of corporations into the developing world as heralds of the hope of a new age where poverty is no longer a pertinent issue.

Nevertheless, such perspectives are highly idealistic and superficial, failing to take into account the multifarious and diverse facets to the problem of poverty. By assuming that human effort alone can resolve poverty is an over-simplification of a complex and multi-faceted issue. The argument assumes that the implementation of programmes

to educate the poor and various aid programmes would necessarily mean that the aid goes directly to its intended beneficiaries and that heightened awareness translates into collective and most importantly, effective actions.

Firstly, many developing, impoverished nations are saddled with internal problems like civil unrest, political turmoil and government corruption. Political instability and internal disunity render any effort at eradicating poverty ineffective as most policies only work under the premise of effective and stable governance, with strict enforcement of laws and regulations like ensuring payment of taxes to fund social and economic development projects that could uplift the nation. Also, many governments are riddled with corruption. For instance, about 40% of food aid delivered to developing nations is siphoned away by government officials who oversee the distribution of food aid. In some African countries, this is as high as 70%. With such excessively bureaucratic procedures embedded in the administrative system which is overseen by corrupt government officials, it is no wonder poverty remains deeply entrenched in such countries.

Furthermore, some profit-driven organisations and individuals in the developed world not only turn a blind eye to their counterparts suffering in poverty-ridden countries, they embark on unscrupulous practices to capitalise on and exploit them. This lack of empathy in market-driven corporations further exacerbates poverty. For instance, renowned global brands with large consumer bases like Nike exploit the poor labourers in China by conducting their manufacturing in sweatshops. In these poor regions, the people are desperate for jobs and these large companies, banking on their desperation, offer them jobs with harsh working conditions, long working hours and low wages, as little as US\$2 a day. A worker in the US, on the other hand, doing the same job would get US\$20 an hour. This disparity is evident in unethical practices adopted by the multi-national corporations around the world. Another poignant example is the case of Genetically Modified (GM) food. Such technology is deemed as the panacea to world poverty as it has the potential to revolutionise harvests and greatly increase crop yield, resulting in a reliable and abundant source of food, especially for the poorer countries. Unfortunately, such technology, in the hands of the unscrupulous and ruthless, is equally potent and arguably more dangerous. Monsanto, a biotechnology firm, capitalises on the poor farmers' hopes for a better life by selling farmers GM seeds that are genetically engineered to be planted only once and at exorbitant prices. This is akin to extorting money from the poor to line the pockets of the rich. In this profit-driven world, where money is the zeitgeist, and the rich inhumanely exploit the poor, efforts at alleviating poverty are not only rendered fruitless, they signal a major step in the wrong direction.

Finally, the debilitating circumstances surrounding the poor are a vice-like grip that chains them to the lowest rungs of the socio-economic ladder, depriving them of the chance at social mobility. The rich have the resources and connections to help them advance up the corporate and economic ladder. The poor, on the other hand, are plagued with financial troubles, lack of family support and are mostly brought up under violent social conditions. Studies have shown that there is an irrefutable link between poverty and family abuse or crimes. 70% of members of gangs or secret societies come from poor families with many of their parents involved in gang activities or crimes. Even in supposedly rich countries like Singapore, with impressive GDP and economic growth rates, there is a yawning income gap — the Gini coefficient increased from 0.448 in 2011 to 0.459 in 2012 — with the highest Gini coefficient amongst

the economically developed countries. There is still a section of the population who are stuck in the poverty trap, living in 1 or 2-room apartments and depending on financial assistance schemes. Economic growth, hence, is no marker of the eradication of poverty, but is a mere smokescreen to avoid and deny society's most intractable problems. The 'poverty mindset' is further accentuated as people develop feelings of resentment and blame the system, seeing themselves as victims of a rigid and ruthless system, where they slip through the cracks and the benefits are concentrated at the top of the economic ladder. While this belief may hold a modicum of truth, this group of people, instead of channeling their energies to upgrading themselves, directs their unhappiness towards the system and are unwilling to work hand-in-hand with the various support systems. As self-help is essential to the eradication of poverty, such pernicious mindsets render efforts at making poverty history ineffective, thrusting this goal out of reach once more.

Poverty is an increasingly prevalent issue in modern society and should be tackled by the government, humanitarian organisations and individuals together, and not as separate entities with divergent agendas. Advancement in different directions is not a step in the direction to achieve this goal but is a haphazard stream of efforts that yield no fruit. Unless such obstacles are surmounted, the goal of 'making poverty history' is unrealistic and unattainable. The efforts and solutions should not be applied in isolation but should consider the dynamic interplay of the various facets to the issue of poverty, complemented on both political and economic fronts. Only then can we identify and dismantle the underpinnings of poverty and free the impoverished from the shackles of poverty.

***Marker's comments:***

***Generally well done. Balance could be better in terms of efforts conducted globally. The role of education and other root causes of poverty could have been addressed. Think about including a discussion on relative poverty. Nevertheless, many of the points are relevant with clear development of ideas.***



## Essay 2

To what extent is social media a useful platform for change?

Andrew Chia Shao Quan | 14A01B

A world without people posting photos of their latest meal on Instagram, or engaging in vehement, sometimes incoherent, rants on Facebook, is almost an inconceivable one, despite social media being a recent innovation. The power of communication enabled through such platforms for sharing user-generated content has undoubtedly been a useful platform for change. Social media has reinvigorated mass politics, subjected governments and politicians to increased scrutiny, and serves as a valuable alternative for worthy causes seeking funding. Finally, social media serves as a platform for new inclusive collaborations.

Some, however, may argue that activism on social media is all talk and no action. 'Liking' or sharing a glitzy, well-packaged link or video may be free and painless, and thus easy to do, but when social media activism tries to translate itself into a lasting, on-the-ground movement, it often fails. That is because couch potatoes may be happy to flood their friends' notifications feed, but are unwilling to devote the time and money to translate online popularity into concrete results. The classic example of this is Kony 2012, a social media campaign against the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. Despite a moving video that garnered thousands of "shares" on Facebook and millions of YouTube views, it eventually fizzled out due to the lack of committed volunteers and funding needed to lobby Congress for change. Thus, some sceptics argue that social media activism is a mere flash in the pan that results in few tangible results.

No doubt, there are social media movements that are big on ambition and small on feasibility, and eventually fizzle out. However, this does not invalidate the power of social media as a force for change. Social media has reinvigorated mass politics and shaken up old political structures. In the past, politicians facing the limits of time and manpower could only afford to reach out to a handful of power brokers and institutions in search of support. This support and funding have often meant promises for favourable policies for the rich or unreasonable protection for union workers. However, the advent of social media has empowered politicians to reach out to the masses in a much faster, more personal way, broadening their base of support and freeing them from being beholden to special interest groups and lobbyists. President Obama's 2008 campaign is ample proof of this. His innovative use of social media allowed him to attract large majorities in the youth vote, and amass a close to US\$700 million war chest of campaign finance, mostly through small donations. Once in office, President Obama faced down powerful organisations with vested interests like the National Rifle Association, big oil companies and big pharmaceutical companies, in large part because, unlike the Republican Party, he was not reliant on these interest groups for funding. Thus, it can be seen that social media has reshaped the electoral landscape in favour of mass politics.

Social media has also increased the ability of citizens to scrutinise their governments and politicians. Previously, media specialists were able to carefully calibrate news coverage of the government or candidates to mask their gaffes and emphasise

desirable characteristics and results, either through the use of thoroughly rated press releases, targeted influence through contacts in the media industry, or overt censorship. However, this is no longer possible in the age of social media. Social media has expanded the base of information for tech-savvy citizens beyond their borders, and enabled news of politicians' true, ugly opinions to spread no matter how desperate the effort to contain it. Even in a repressive country like China, Pan Shi Yi, an industrialist with millions of followers on Sina Weibo, was able to raise awareness of the laxity of air pollution regulation in China, particularly PM 2.5 microscopic particles harmful to the lungs, especially those of children. In January, 42% of people who tweeted on Sina Weibo mentioned "smog" or "PM 2.5", and Chinese president Hu Jintao himself gave the impetus for Beijing to prioritise the management of PM 2.5 pollution. Similarly, Senator Todd Akin's insensitive comments on a woman's body preventing pregnancies in cases of "legitimate rape" rapidly went viral, leading to the Republican Party withdrawing support for his senate re-election. Thus it can be seen that social media has radically altered the degree of scrutiny citizens have over their leaders.

Social media has also served as a valuable alternative for social movements seeking funding. Traditionally, advocacy movements seeking funding were limited to pandering to the whims and fancies of the rich and powerful, slow and byzantine non-governmental organisations, or people within the community they intended to help. Particularly among the poor, this has meant that too many worthy social projects have ended up getting too little funding. Social media has enabled campaigners to have a global perspective in fund-raising, attracting more support and funding. Kickstarter, a website dedicated to helping worthy ideas find funding, has given rise to projects such as Landfill Harmonic, a project to fulfill the hopes and dreams of aspiring and promising young musicians in the slums of Paraguay who play on instruments made of recycled materials. Landfill Harmonic, as of August 2013, was able to raise over \$130,000 to fund its own worthy initiative. This, after only months of campaigning. Thus, it can be seen that social media has served as an invaluable platform for social causes worthy of our time and money.

Finally, social media serves as a vital platform for new, inclusive collaborations. Eliminating the distance of geography, and allowing anyone to share their own content means that social media has allowed for new kinds of collaborations in a cost-efficient way. The YouTube Symphony Orchestra, a project done in conjunction with the London Symphony Orchestra, is a project whose main aim was to include ethnic instruments within the paradigm of Western classical music. The project was made possible only because online submissions for auditions, and the use of a video uplink for the actual performance in the Sydney Opera House, meant that players of traditional instruments did not face significant travel costs as a barrier to participation. In this instance, social media enabled an attempt to promote inclusiveness through collaboration, a change that would have been impossible without the existence of sites such as YouTube.

All in all, it can be concluded that social media is indeed a valuable and powerful platform for change. As with any platform, movements that are ill-conceived and unfeasible will fail and die off, as they should. That being said, social media, by disrupting traditional monopolies on influence and information and by serving as an alternate structure to find like-minded individuals for support and funding, has undoubtedly made a difference: a difference to the children in Paraguay empowered

to fulfill their aspirations; a difference to the asthmatic child in Shanghai, whose middle-class parents can now lobby their local official to bring down PM 2.5 levels; a difference to the 99% in America who are not able to afford lobbyists. Social media has brought change, and made a positive difference to our world.

**Marker's comments:**

*You've presented your case convincingly through clear structuring of content, choice of examples and a style of writing that is unpretentious. Consider examining the "quality" of change in your examples, assessing its impact on society (e.g. is the change effected lasting?) Also, since the question doesn't specify a focus on positive change, self-radicalised terrorists can be considered as an aspect of your discussion.*

## Essay 3

Is equality for all within your country a realistic and desirable aim?

Elizabeth Gunawan | 13S03E

We often look at equality as a marker for a civilised and developed nation. Equality for all citizens in the various aspects of life – be it income equality, gender equality and racial and religious equality amongst others – is more often than not seen as a desirable aim. Whether this aim is difficult or realistic, politicians and citizens alike will strive towards this desired goal. While I agree that equality for all in terms of equality of opportunity is a desirable aim for my country, the extent to which it is realistic is questionable.

While most foreigners – in particular Westerners – tend to view Indonesia as a Muslim country, we are in fact a secular country. Despite having the largest Muslim population, the government protects each citizen's rights to practise their own religion. Officially, six religions, namely Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism are equally recognised. Every Indonesian is thus equal regardless of their religion. This aim for equality for all in the domain of religion is clearly desirable as religion is often a controversial issue, close to the hearts of many, and may spark conflict. For instance, in Makassar where there is a sizeable Christian minority, riots have occurred when the Christians felt they were treated unfairly. Hence, religious equality is desired to prevent conflict. Thus, religious equality is very much a relatively realistic and desirable aim.

However, in spite of the progress that my country has made in terms of providing religious equality, it still has a long way to go before true religious equality is achieved. It is stated in the national constitution, the 'Pancasila', that each individual must have a religion of the aforementioned six and must undergo religious studies in their religion if they were to study in a government school. Being an atheist or agnostic is to go against the law and can land one in jail. One such example would be the imprisonment of a twenty-eight year old Indonesian man last year after he announced on Facebook that he was only Muslim by name and was in fact an atheist. Therefore, while religious equality exists for believers, the same cannot be said for non-believers and arguably those whose religions are not recognised by the government, such as Judaism. In this case, while religious equality for all remains a desirable aim as it is the right of every human being to choose their beliefs as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the extent to which it is realistic is arguably not as great in the short run as it is unlikely that the government will rewrite the national constitution and ideology that we all believe in any time soon.

With reference to the opening quote, inequality is still pervasive in Indonesia. While some view Indonesia as a poor developing nation, the existence of multi-millionaires make the country an unusual country. The existence of our large poor population in spite of our rich natural resources also points to inequality. Income equality and an equal distribution are very important and a highly desirable goal for all nations as inequality and poverty in the lower classes would more often than not lead to growing dissent and unhappiness that may culminate in a large scale violent conflict. One such example would be the May 1998 riots that occurred and spread throughout cities in

Indonesia, starting with the greater Jakarta area. Social mobility was viewed as nearly non-existent and many in the poor and middle classes felt that the rich controlled all the wealth and political power. The power of the oligarchy's presence in Indonesian politics was growing stronger and the market power was largely in the hands of a few conglomerates. The inequality that persisted for decades led to an uprising that ended up in a riot with the houses of the wealthy burned to the ground and more than a thousand people killed and severely injured with others falling victim to rape. Such situations of discontent and violence can arguably be prevented by a more equal distribution of income where citizens would be more satisfied with their lives and standard of living even if they were to compare them with their counterparts. Thus, income inequality for all would be a highly desirable aim.

The question lies in how realistic this aim of income equality for all is. While the World Bank paints a rather rosy picture, giving us a decent Gini coefficient of 0.394, making it lower than a number of developed nations such as Singapore and fellow developing nation China, debates over how accurate this figure is still persist. Numerous professionals often under-report their incomes while the self-employed choose to pay themselves a low salary and charge all expenses to the company instead. An interview conducted by the Jakarta Post revealed that the unnamed relatively prominent businessman interviewed was not even aware of the tax rates for the highest tax bracket as he pays himself a rather humble salary and utilises the company funds to fund his lavish lifestyle. Furthermore, income equality for all would suggest equality of outcome rather than opportunity, and we all know, in light of the fall of the various Communist states, that equality of outcome is neither a realistic nor a desirable goal. Another prominent and highly discussed issue when one is talking about equality would be gender equality. Women make up half the population and we all know that a country's most precious resource is its people. Women have much to contribute to a plethora of domains ranging from economic vibrancy and progress to intellectual pursuit and creative innovation. It is thus common knowledge and an arguably universal belief that gender equality is desired. Our nation's women are rising in stature as more and more are enrolling in institutes of higher education and are entering the workforce. Primary school education is compulsory for all, regardless of gender. Many Indonesian women are also working overseas in countries like Singapore, Saudi Arabia and Hong Kong as domestic helpers, sending money back to the villages to help build homes and send their children to school. This makes gender equality a highly realistic and desirable aim as only with gender equality can we truly progress as a nation.

However, gender equality for 'all' may not be as realistic. In Indonesia, there exists a sizeable population of transgendered persons, locally termed as 'wana', literally meaning female and male. The Indonesian government officially terms them as 'cacat', or disabled; this makes them ineligible to perform many legal tasks such as adopting children. Furthermore, homosexuality is also illegal in Indonesia. Thus, these transgendered persons and homosexuals are viewed as less than the rest of our citizens and equality for all in a relatively conservative Asian country is not as realistic as we thought and may even not be desirable to some as they view such groups of individuals to be sinful and believe that the acceptance of them would lead to the erosion of our social values.

Although true equality for all when it comes to equal opportunity is yet to be realistic and equality for some groups such as transgendered individuals and homosexuals remain debatable, I believe that such equality in opportunity is very important and

desirable as only then can our nation progress and be truly civilised. The acceptance, legalisation and equal treatment of such transgendered persons and homosexuals in other nations has not had a detrimental effect on their societal values. While we may not be ready at this stage to embrace such groups of people, I believe that equality for them should still remain a desirable goal as only then can we be an enlightened and tolerant nation.

In conclusion, equality for all regardless of race, religion, gender and sexuality should be a priority and desirable aim for my country, Indonesia. Equality of opportunity is crucial as only then is social mobility possible and only with this can we be an inclusive nation that progresses together. Thus, as discussed in this essay, equality for all in my country remains a highly desirable goal. The question lies in how realistic this goal is. The phrase "for all" arguably makes attaining this aim much less realistic. However, this does not mean that the aim of equality is any less desirable and that we should not strive for it. Our status as a developing country with limited government budget and our largely conservative and religious Asian society also makes achieving such equality for all difficult. I firmly believe that regardless of how unrealistic and impossible this goal of equality for all may seem, we should still strive to achieve this desired aim.

***Marker's comments:***

***While you have given a good overview of the issue, clearer topic sentences will enhance clarity of your writing. Also, think about articulating your arguments carefully to ensure that they are not overwhelmed by examples.***

## Essay 4

Consider the view that economic growth always brings about environmental damage.

Heng Wee Meng Samuel | 13S06F

The Kyoto Protocol is infamous for its failure to achieve any significant results in curbing the emissions of carbon dioxide globally. Despite agreements between much of the industrialised and developed world to cut down on their carbon emissions, carbon dioxide concentration levels are still on the rise and are estimated to reach dangerously high levels by 2050. Why did this protocol, upon which huge hopes were placed, fail? Was it because it did not nab the two biggest culprits responsible for the pollution – the economic giants that are China and the United States? With these bleak environmental circumstances we are facing, it is no surprise that many believe that economic growth always brings about environmental damage. My stand, however, is that although economic growth often brings environmental damage, there are many cases of sustainable economic growth. More importantly, polluting countries are gradually changing to pursue more environmentally-friendly economic growth.

Admittedly, sustained economic growth is most often driven by the engines of industrialisation. History has shown how by shifting the burden of work from Man to machines, a giant leap in productivity levels is achieved, which provides the backbone upon which a country's economy can rapidly develop. As the human population grows and our demand for goods climbs, more machinery has to be built and larger ones, too. As the size and complexity of machinery increase, they require an increasing amount of energy to run and so, many countries turn to fossil fuels and other non-renewable resources which provide a relatively cheap and convenient option. China, which has the fastest-growing economy in the world, also by far emits the most pollution; in 2006, China overtook the US to become the largest carbon emitter globally, producing a gargantuan 6200 million tons of greenhouse gases that year. In the capital city of Beijing, people have to wear masks when they are on the street and the sky, at least in some areas, is more grey than blue. China's rapid progress has evidently not been sustainable – she uses huge amounts of oil and coal each year, ignoring the environmental damage that the burning of these fuels cause because they are the cheapest options available. This set of circumstances is mirrored in numerous developing countries and hence, economic growth often brings about environmental damage.

As a side effect of economic growth, people around the world are generally becoming more affluent and, thanks to higher incomes compared to decades ago, can afford to buy more expensive commodities like cars as well as luxury items like branded handbags. This creates a cycle in which people who get richer tend to buy more, so companies in turn produce more, driving economic growth which restarts the entire process. People and firms benefit from better living standards and profits respectively, at the expense of the environment. Furthermore, with more planes and ships being built to ferry people's imports from across the world, a trend that was catalysed by companies like eBay and Amazon which encourage transnational purchases, the amount of pollution is increasing even further. After all, a single container ship emits as much pollutants as 50 million cars. Additionally, the purchasing of exotic products that is made possible by people's increased incomes also encourages the illegal trade

of animal parts. Tigers are estimated to go extinct within this century at this rate, and elephant populations in Africa are being decimated for precious ivory. These examples illustrate how economic growth can trigger many side effects that damage the environment to a greater extent.

However, it is clearly unfair to over-generalise and claim that all countries grow their economies so irresponsibly – those are the black sheep in the herd. Many countries, in fact, do not aim for fast economic growth but rather, sustainable development that minimises the degree of harm caused to the environment. These countries' governments have the mindset that for the citizens to lead good lives, they should not only focus on their economic progress but should, also ensure that the citizens live in a clean and pleasant environment, as they would be both healthier and happier. One common feature of these countries is that they work with nature rather than exploit natural resources for economic gain. Switzerland, home to the Alps mountain range, uses hydroelectricity to power most of the country, letting the melted snow flow through turbines in dams to generate electricity. Israel is a leading expert in solar energy, which powers 90% of water heaters in homes. Such developments are not limited only to industrialised and wealthy nations. Costa Rica, which is a moderately developed country, is heavily reliant on wind energy, with 99.2% of their energy originating from renewable sources. Hence, amongst both developed and developing countries, a large amount of resources has been devoted to renewable energy, ensuring that even with economic growth, there is no significant harm inflicted on the environment.

Furthermore, the parties guilty of most of the world's pollution are also beginning to change their policies, having recognised that polluting the environment is detrimental to their own people and for the global community on a more macro level. Scientists from the Global Footprint Network have estimated that if the entire world population lives by the lifestyles of Americans, we would need 4.1 Earths to fuel and provide for the massive level of consumption that ensues. These countries have to cut down on their economic growth at some point, or a disaster of global proportions will be impending. Furthermore, people from these countries are also voicing their misgivings of their country's unsustainable growth more actively. For instance, in China, environmental activism is on the rise and the results bear some promise. In the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit, China promised to cut down on their carbon intensity by 40% by 2020 while India, the third largest polluter, pledged to reduce their emissions by 20%. With a turn in these countries' policies, it is highly plausible that in future, economic growth would not bring environmental damage.

In conclusion, I disagree with the statement. While I concede that current trends seem to show that countries' economic growth will inevitably be followed by environmental degradation, there is an increasing amount of awareness of the deadly effects of unrestrained environmental degradation on the entire human population. More importantly, environmental activism is on the rise as more and more people voice their dissent and pleas for change to their governments. Not only are there already many "green" countries, but even the biggest culprits responsible for pollution are beginning to change their policies for a more sustainable approach. Environmental degradation is a global problem and requires an international solution. We have seen before how the world banded together to adhere to the Montreal Protocol to stop the depletion of the ozone layer. The results were staggering: what could have been an apocalyptic catastrophe was averted and the ozone layer is estimated to recover to a healthy level within the next ten years. As Thomas Malthus predicted some 200 years



ago that a disaster would come one day if humans continued growing at this rate, the global community is beginning to recognise the magnitude of the problem, no longer sitting on their haunches but grabbing the bull by its horns. With a concerted global effort, I am confident that in spite of the bleak and dreary situation we are presented with today, future economic growth will be sustainable and environmentally friendly.

**Marker's comments:**

***A bold attempt to argue that future economic growth will be sustainable and environmentally friendly. The claim that there are "already many green countries" seems overly optimistic and presumes upon a strong motivation to develop in a sustainable manner; more substantiation is required. However, credit is given to the wide range of examples and arguments that establishes a fairly strong case for optimism in the future.***

## Essay 5

How far do you agree that in expressing dissent, societies have gone beyond measures of good sense?

Koh Liang Ping I 13S031

In his book 'The End of History and the Last Man', Francis Fukuyama postulated that the world was on an inexorable march towards the universalisation of Western liberal democracy, and that liberal democracy, characterised by freedom of speech and assembly, will become the terminal mode in mankind's ideological evolution and the final, legitimate form of government for all humanity. This seems to suggest that democracy is intrinsically the best form of governance for the people, and a society where people are able to hold their governments in check and dominate them is good. But in recent years, we see many failings of this idea of democracy, free speech and unfettered people power. From the vociferous outbursts of European democracies in response to austerity measures to economic debilitation in France due to the mass protests against economic restructuring, it seems to us that democracy, where people express dissent without constraint, is more detrimental than beneficial to human progress. This essay will argue that public outbursts of dissent, when motivated by populist motives or when it leads to institutional breakdown, have certainly deviated from the realm of good sense, hurting nations and their societies. And yet, when motivated by legitimate concerns and when practised against governments where there is stagnation and gridlock, it can expedite and motivate progress, and when practised in the right way through correct media, it is constructive and necessary.

Much of the opprobrium against the expression of dissent in recent years is that they have become increasingly unreasonable and populist in nature, and that this serves to stymie rather than expedite progress. This form of dissent only serves the purpose of putting political pressure on government to make unsound decisions, and sometimes makes it absolutely impossible for enlightened decision-making. A clear example is the Eurozone. Ever since the beginning of the euro crisis and the massive cutback in public expenditure and social benefits in response to enormous debt levels, there has been much vitriol bubbling to the surface with the most strident outbursts happening in the Southern Mediterranean countries. The people, used to years of unsustainable welfare spending and pension schemes, and drunk with profligate excesses and an artificially inflated quality of life, were unwilling to swallow the necessary prophylactic: austerity and fiscal responsibility. Instead, in countries like Italy and Greece, the people took to the streets to demand that their governments preserve their benefits. This has made it significantly more difficult for governments to enact the necessary policy measures to ameliorate the problems facing the economy. Arguably, the people's dissent has hurt the efficiency of the governments and delayed the recovery process and this has diminished, rather than served, their interests. Clearly, when motivated by populist motives, the people's dissent simply restricts the ability of governments to make sound policy decisions.

Critics of public dissent also point out the fact that in many cases, the public's demonstrations and protests have served only the purpose of causing institutional breakdown and instability. Mass protests and gatherings have resulted in the loss of rule of law and damage to infrastructure in many countries, and in this case, public protest has certainly gone beyond the realm of good sense, becoming disruptive and

illegitimate. In France, during the 2008 financial crisis, after the recession forced many companies to shut down their factories and lay off workers, there was a complete breakdown of rule of law. Workers, some motivated by trade unions, kidnapped their bosses and held them ransom. These cases only served the purpose of shaking business confidence in France and tarnished the reputation of the French economy. During the London riots, there was widespread looting and damage to infrastructure, with protesters smashing windows, burning buildings and engaging in wanton crime and madness. This only served to smear the reputation of the UK, with the world appalled at what was described as 'moral decay' and breakdown of the rule of law. Evidently, when public dissent takes the form of violence and destabilises society, it has gone beyond measures of good sense.

However, public dissent, when motivated by legitimate concerns and practised against a sclerotic and non-progressive government, can actually serve to engender change for the better. When the government itself is unresponsive to the people and has failed to initiate necessary change for the betterment of the country, public dissent can help to pressurise the government into action, or in some cases, replace the government with a new one. An example is the Arab Spring. In 2011, there was a massive political awakening in the Middle East, with people rising out of passivity and demanding the fall of regimes that have oppressed them for decades. From Egypt's Mubarak to Libya's Gaddafi, these regimes have been characterised by years of neglect, mismanagement and brutality. Public dissent, such as the massive demonstrations in Tahrir Square, served to initiate regime change and liberate the people from the draconian oppression of their leaders. In a region plagued by years of backwardness, regression and despair, public dissent has clearly catalysed the change necessary for society to improve. Surely, this is within the boundaries of reason and good sense. Similarly, even when change is not initiated, as long as the cause is legitimate and just, and the government unresponsive, protest is reasonable and laudable. This is seen in Russia, where flagrant abuse of the state apparatus to ensure political victory has kept Putin in power. The imprisonment of political activist Alexei Navalny and the blatant and unapologetic election-rigging in the recent elections provoked thousands to gather in the Red Square, protesting against the injustice and illegitimacy of the Putin regime. Although real change has yet to be seen, their protest was certainly reasonable, for it was motivated by a just cause.

Public dissent, when practised via the right media, almost always leads to better governance and progress for society, and hence is sensible. Dissent connotes chaos and strife, but it does not always have to be so. If the state creates avenues that allow for the people to express their displeasure in a civilised and organised manner, it can be better attuned to the needs of the people. We see this demonstrated in consultative democracies like Switzerland, whereby there are avenues for people to voice their opinions without the need for mass demonstrations. In Switzerland, any citizen that does not agree with a policy has the option of starting a petition, whereby if he can get a sufficient number of votes within 100 days, he will be able to repeal the law. Arguably, this is a far more civilised way of expressing dissent, and serves to make governance more reflective of people's desires by giving people the option to repeal laws they do not like. Focus groups have also become a means to promote participatory democracy in many countries around the world. In Singapore, the national conversation, which is a nationwide focus group discussion on the future of Singapore, involves dialogue between select members of society and government officials. What this has done is that it has helped the people make known their disapproval of some

of the government's policies, and helped the government understand the people better, which is a rarity in the technocratic and elitist government of Singapore. As demonstrated by the above two examples, when dissent is expressed through proper channels, it can serve to bridge the gap between the government and the people, and result in a more consultative government.

That is not to say that all public dissent that is not expressed through nonviolent channels of communication is necessarily unreasonable or beyond the measure of good sense. When the people have a legitimate cause, and the government is oppressive and unresponsive, violent uprising is sometimes the only way to ensure progress and change. In Libya and Syria, Gaddafi and Assad respectively have refused to listen to their peoples' pleas for change. Gaddafi labelled the protesters "terrorists" while Bashar al-Assad promised nothing less than swift and decisive punitive action against those who were insubordinate to the regime. The people, faced with nothing but bellicose threats from their rulers, had no alternative to armed uprising. Indeed, the continuing unrest in Syria and the multiple futile attempts to bring the regime to the negotiating table only serve to reinforce the reality that street protest was the only solution for change. Hence, when posed with only the two alternatives of passive submission and coordinated uprising, the choice of expressing public dissent through arms is the only route to change and hence within the realm of good sense.

In conclusion, I would say that the question of whether dissent today has been sensible or not is inherently a conditional one. When dissent is motivated by populist and unreasonable terms, and when it seems only to destroy the rule of law and the very basis for civilised society, then it is heinous, unnecessary and irrational. But dissent, when espoused with a legitimate cause, and expressed against an unresponsive government, is a necessity to initiate change. When practised through media that ensure order and not chaos, it leads to a consultative government. Chaos and disruptive use of force are only legitimate when there is a just cause and an obstinate government. I firmly believe in the principles of free speech and freedom of assembly, for humans have a natural right to speak out and voice their displeasure, but this freedom is a dangerous thing, liable to be swayed by emotion and given to violent, destructive impulses. Hence, dissent and the ways it is practised should be regulated and controlled, such that they do not go beyond the measure of good sense and help human progress.

**Marker's comments:**

***Well-balanced and thoughtful response. Strong command of the language and excellent argumentation! One other possible angle to consider is when dissent is expressed against another group within the same society rather than against the ruling party.***

## Essay 6

How far do you agree that in expressing dissent, societies have gone beyond measures of good sense?

Chua Jun Yan | 13A01A

At the conclusion of every British parliamentary election, the leader of the second-largest party is sworn in as 'Her Majesty's most loyal opposition'. The apparent paradox of 'loyal opposition' is actually a vital ingredient of a healthy democracy – dissent which is expressed in a reasonable and logical fashion that lends itself to compromise and is ultimately for the public good and not narrow self-interest. Unfortunately, there seems to be a growing sentiment that societies are increasingly transgressing this measure of good sense. While there is no doubt a grain of truth in this, I believe that extraordinary circumstances sometimes call for extraordinary measures.

In some sense, it might be argued that legitimate disagreement is increasingly being ventilated through extreme and uncompromising means which polarise and paralyse society. Therefore, these actions could be described as senseless. In many cases, we have witnessed the rise of radical fringe groups which use shock tactics to attract attention. As a result, the moderate majority is alienated and ends up with a reactionary knee-jerk response, thus impeding social progress. For example, the SlutWalk movement has attempted to combat misogyny with nude protests. Although their cause is worthy, their strategy has led to the perception that feminism has become militant. This feeds into conservative rhetoric about the need to defend 'traditional family values' and ends up being counter-productive. In the same way, the Occupy Wall Street movement started out with good intentions of redressing gaping inequality. However, its doctrine of civil disobedience – as exemplified by sit-ins in public spaces like New York's Central Park – only further antagonised the '1%' and deepened social divisions. These case studies demonstrate that contemporary outlets of dissent end up sabotaging their own goals. They have consequently crossed the line of good sense. We ought to remember the aphorism, 'The road to hell is paved with good intentions'.

More disturbing are expressions of dissent which have no conceivable legitimate purpose but to cause disruption to the community. Very frequently, these detractors claim that they have lofty ideals. However, when you interrogate their high-brow rhetoric, you realise that they do not offer a viable alternative to the status quo. This has been worsened by the proliferation of the Internet, which emboldens individuals with a veil of anonymity. We have witnessed the perils of such thoughtless dissent with online vigilantes like Anonymous, which has hacked into and shut down the sites of companies like Visa and Mastercard. While the group purports to stand for the nebulous and amorphous notion of 'internet freedom', it is difficult to see how it has achieved anything of substance. Similarly, Julian Assange's WikiLeaks has the stated aim of promoting transparency, but has done little but endanger the lives of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan by releasing sensitive battle plans. Even in supposedly tame Singapore, the growth of platforms like the Temasek Review has led to caricatures and personal attacks against Members of Parliament like Tin Pei Ling. It is hard to see how this adds to discourse on real issues like the cost of living. As such, we can conclude that the plague of our epoch is dissent for the sake of dissent. This has clearly gone beyond the measure of good sense; indeed, it is nothing more than childish malice.

On the other hand, we must be cognisant of the fact that in some instances, the intensity of dissent is a justified response to the oppressive conditions which many are consigned to by the lottery of birth. In the words of American congressman Barry Goldwater in 1964, 'Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. And moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue'. Vehement dissent, expressed with courage and conviction, is sometimes proportionate to the extremities of repression. Take the trend of self-immolation, which has become a weapon of choice for protesters. The Tunisian vegetable seller who set himself ablaze in 2011 sacrificed his life and became a martyr and a symbol of the yearning for freedom of his countrymen. What followed this winter of discontent was the Arab Spring. It would be tactless and repugnant to lord over those like him and dismiss their actions as nonsensical. The same can be said of many monks in Tibet, who bravely throw themselves before Chinese tanks to protest the occupation of their homeland. Many of us in the free world might be unable to rationalise their methods. What we need to realise is that they have no political alternative to articulate their dissent and galvanise support. They are not just exhibiting good sense, but also moral fury which would put many of us to shame.

Furthermore, it would be historical chauvinism to believe that society has evolved to its present stage through dissent expressed within the boundaries of good sense. The Civil Rights movement was catalysed by what was viewed as audacious acts of defiance, like Rosa Park's refusal to give up her seat to a white man. Similarly, the Hippies movement of the 1960s relied on the liberal use of drugs like LSD and on concepts of free love. This precipitated the liberalisation of attitudes towards issues like sex. Both trends are now recognised as positive developments of their era. While we might mistakenly believe that today's expressions of dissent have gone beyond measures of good sense, we must understand that social change happens on the experimental outskirts of society. We can only truly judge whether an act of dissent made sense with the benefit of 20/20 hindsight.

In the final analysis, there is definitely merit in the argument that dissent is being aired through unyielding channels which hinder rather than help discourse. Nonetheless, this must be qualified with the understanding that there are occasions when such expressions of dissent are proportionate to the travesties they are trying to resolve. Neither must we fall into the 'End of History' illusion, and believe that what we deem sensible and insensible will not change with time. In the words of Mao Zedong, 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.' While some segments in society are undoubtedly trigger happy, there are occasions when opening fire is the only way to get a point across.

***Marker's comments:***

***Your essay was like a breath of fresh air. There is great choice of words used to constantly link ideas to the question's key terms and good choice of examples. It is a unified piece of writing from start to finish.***

## Essay 7

'The values of the market have no place in the world of sport.' How far do you agree with this statement?

Chua Zi Kai | 13S03A

'Citius, Altius, Fortius' – the motto of the Olympic Games, the pinnacle of sporting achievement in today's world. Revived in the 19th century, these games have served as a test of human limits and strength. However, the once pure intentions of such sporting events have been clouded by economic forces of the 21st century. Some may point to the market values that have gripped the sporting world as a positive development, but I feel that these values should be restricted or the world of sport may eventually lose its meaning.

Many point to the element of competitiveness in economies as a positive influence on the world of sport. Just as smartphone giants such as Apple and Samsung are in constant struggle for control of the market, releasing a new product once every few months, athletes have to have that appetite to set records and break boundaries in order to achieve greatness. There have been several great sporting rivalries in the past, such as that between tennis legends Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi, and more recently the rivalry between football players Cristiano Ronaldo and Lionel Messi, and these great rivalries only serve to enhance the level of sport. In the last two Olympics, Usain Bolt lowered the record for the 100m sprint progressively, a feat no one thought possible. These examples show how a competitive edge and a passion to win should be present in athletes, to serve as motivation and allow them to showcase the maximum of human capabilities. It is this element of competitiveness, which also drives the world's economy, which should be cultivated in every sportsman.

However, this value of competitiveness can sometimes be taken too far and its meaning distorted, such that it becomes the notion of winning at all cost. Numerous cases of doping have scandalised the world of sport, a notable example of this would be disgraced cyclist Lance Armstrong. Once held as a 'superhuman' for winning seven back-to-back Tour de France titles, the cyclist recently admitted to taking performance-enhancing drugs, much to the horror and disgust of the sporting world. This example shows how the true meaning of sporting competition was lost in the pursuit of a competitive edge. Furthermore, Armstrong was not a one-off case; allegations of doping have existed in the cycling fraternity for years. This points to a worrying trend: the value of competitiveness instilled in athletes is starting to take hold of their mind-sets, to the extent that winning is becoming everything. When that happens, sports would have lost its meaning as a test of human capability. Thus, we can see how the market value of competitiveness should not have free rein in the world of sport.

Another market value which has worryingly reared its ugly head in the world of sport is the idea of being profit-driven. Sports in the 21st century has become as much an avenue for companies to exhibit their products as it is a showcase of human talent. Nike and Maria Sharapova received much criticism when images of her skirt with obvious Nike branding were circulated. Take this idea further and we enter the shady world of match-fixing. In 2010, Italian football giant Juventus and a whole host of other clubs were relegated to the second tier of Italian football after being found guilty of intentionally fixing the results of matches in order to profit from bets. These

examples show how the notion of profit has distorted the world of sport, such that the competition is no longer out on the pitch but in the hands of bookies, a competition not for sporting prowess but rather who can make the most money and turn the biggest profit from such sporting events. This encapsulates the point that the market value of being profit-driven should have no part in the world of sport, as it distorts the original ideals of sport.

Lastly, the economy is built upon the idea of looking out only for one's own interests. This value is one which the sporting world should strive to stay away from. A main tenet of sporting competitions is to bring people from all walks of life together to celebrate the triumphs of human ability. To look out for only one's own interest would not only be detrimental to the sporting world, but be counter-productive. Take for example the case of the Moscow Olympics. In the midst of the Cold War, tensions were temporarily put aside as nations convened to celebrate the greatness of the human spirit and ability. Yet this example is problematic because the US was joined in its boycott of the Olympics by the likes of Japan, West Germany, China, the Philippines and Canada. The United Kingdom, France and Greece supported the boycott but allowed their athletes to participate if they wished. The nations that fully boycotted the Games held their own event in the Philippines. This was only possible due to the fact that sports transcends boundaries, and the sporting world should be held above the level of personal or national interests. Another example of this would be when footballer Paulo Di Canio caught the ball to stop play, instead of tapping it into an empty net as the opposing goalkeeper was down injured. His team would go on to lose the match, but his act of putting the spirit of fair competition above that of his self-interest would go down in the annals of history as an iconic act of sportsmanship. These two examples serve to show how sports should not be brought down to the idea of individuals merely looking out for their own interests but should be a true test of ability on a level playing field transcending all external interests. Thus, the idea of self-preservation, the driving force of most economies, should not be present in the world of sport as it ultimately corrupts the true meaning of sport – a fair test of ability.

In conclusion, whilst arguments for some market values to be present in the world of sport hold some merit, they should largely not play a huge role in the sporting world, or the true meaning of sports as a test of human ability would be lost. As Gene Tunney, an American professional boxer and the world heavyweight champion from 1926–1928 once advised aspiring athletes, 'Eat, breathe, live the game'. The economic world is black and white, while the sporting world is a tapestry of varied colours. The two should be largely held apart or the sporting world faces the threat of losing its true meaning.

#### **Marker's Comments:**

*Thoughtful and apt points are argued and supported with illustration, largely in a qualified and nuanced way, although the treatment of sponsorship (conflated with cheating for money) is disappointing in this respect. This is largely an excellent treatment of the question. The values of the market are well identified. The values embodied in and promoted in sport and why they are valued are appropriately referred to but not sufficiently explained and evaluated.*



Henry Ford once advocated the purchase of a car as a birthday gift for a child when he turned sixteen. Today, such a practice is still common among the affluent in America, and the car is now the most ubiquitous form of transport available throughout the world, which is not bad for a once obscure niche product. Looking to the future, the car does appear to have a bright one as current problems of pollution and congestion are surmountable through the use of technology, while the convenience accorded by a personal mobility vehicle is unlikely to be given up. It is thus fair to say that the car has a future.

It has to be conceded, however, that while societies have progressed rapidly and technology has evolved, the car remains a major polluter – a limitation that may cause its extinction in the future. Cars run on fossil fuels such as oil or diesel, and as these are converted to energy by motors, gases that cause pollution such as carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide are emitted. These gases contribute to an effect known as global warming, which causes a steady rise in the earth's temperature. They are also known to be harmful to respiratory health and may cause lung disease and breathing difficulties. Given the range of negative consequences that the driving of cars causes both to the environment and the individual, it may be difficult to continue the usage of such disruptive technology. The continuous rise in carbon dioxide emissions to 391.65 parts per million in 2011 has worried the scientists on the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. These esteemed scientists attribute the rapid rise in the concentration of carbon dioxide particles to the actions of Man, one of which is notably the common usage of cars. It may thus be untenable to continue using cars the way we do today, as convenient personal vehicles, hence causing a lack of a future for them.

In addition, the rising rates of car adoption in cities and countries that lack adequate attendant infrastructure has resulted in congestion that is frustrating and inefficient, which causes some to turn to alternatives and hastening the departure of the car as a mode of transport. Purchases of cars often do not rise in tandem with the construction of infrastructure such as car parks, roads or even petrol stations by the government and private corporations. This often causes a wastage of time for drivers, turning an initial convenience into a hindrance and a source of frustration. Hence, one often finds that citizens in overcrowded cities prefer to use public transport rather face daily annoyances. For example, cities such as Hong Kong, London, Tokyo and New York share common traits of having well-developed public transport infrastructure that is internationally renowned for its safety, efficiency and reliability. As such, locals, even the affluent, prefer to use the subway or buses rather than deal with the difficulties driving presents to them, with public transport usage at well above 70% in some of these cities. Hence, it can be seen that the inability of necessary infrastructure to keep pace with the adoption of cars can instead push the car back into obscurity as people turn to alternative modes of transport, both now and in the future.

However, the car remains a necessity in most parts of the world, given that a well-developed public transport system as an alternative is a luxury that only global cities can afford. The car rose to prominence as a convenient mode of transport, eliminating the need to rely on the schedules of public buses and on the fluctuations of the weather. Such benefits are still evident in large countries such as the United States, where it would not make economic sense to construct large public transport networks that would be severely under-utilised and would incur losses. Suburbanisation, the well-documented process where the rich move out of overcrowded cities into surrounding suburbs, is supported by the ability of the movers to be independently mobile. Large swathes of America would be uninhabited and isolated from adequate amenities should the car be eliminated in the future. In addition, some countries may be incapable of providing reliable public transport, and lack the will or funds to do so, which then forces citizens to turn to the car as the only usable mode of transport. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for example, the metro system is often late and prone to breakdowns, which prompts Malaysians to own cars, which are far more reliable. The majority of households in Malaysia own at least one car in order to travel to the necessary venues. Hence, the car is a necessity and is unlikely to disappear in future.

In addition, cars are viewed as a material asset that the growing middle-class aspires towards. As such, the demand for cars in developing countries is growing rapidly, and has led to a saturation of the car market – a phenomenon prevalent in certain Western countries – which was not expected for as much as another 50 years. This continuous demand for cars will eventually turn into reliance, as has been observed to happen in Europe and the US, hence necessitating the car's continuous existence. In China, for example, car ownership has grown by up to ten times in the past two decades in cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, while large swathes of interior townships are only just being exposed to the option of car ownership. Further evidence of the confidence car manufacturers, such as Toyota and General Motors, have in the growth of such developing countries sustaining the future of their brand is their hefty investments in countries such as India and even African countries such as Kenya. This allows for onsite development of local models for their growing consumer bases, as well as rapid distribution to eager customers. Hence, such growing demand by the rising middle-class is unlikely to wane in the future as cars remain a tangible reminder of their progress.

Car manufacturers are also in a prime position to ensure that demand for their cars is still strong in the future, given their strong research and development infrastructure and the culture of innovation present in the companies. The manufacturers are able to tap on their deep pockets, created by their huge reserves and high profit margins, to develop new concepts that will entice consumers to continue purchasing cars even in the future. Toyota, for instance, is investing heavily in producing a car that is able to run on hydrogen alone, which goes into further developing their popular Prius line. This will help to address concerns of pollution from the eco-conscious. More efficient and easier-to-handle cars are also being developed to reduce frustrations from congestion, while Google's self-driving technology leads to a world of possibility such as allowing the disabled the freedom of mobility or providing the aged with assisted driving. Hence, the culmination of such research-driven trends in a renewed interest in cars will ensure that cars have a future, although their form might have changed.

In conclusion, cars are here to stay even in the future, as challenges can be overcome and new developments entice new customers onboard. It is also too embedded in our psyche for cars to be given up.

**Marker's comments:**

*This is an informed and balanced response that is thoughtful, relevant and sustained in your argumentation throughout this essay. A very good effort indeed! Competent, secure and fluent use of the language. Clear organisation, coupled with a sound structure, makes this essay an enjoyable read. Good job!*

When the concept of democracy was first conceived in ancient Greece, its core principle was to give ordinary citizens the power to rule their own country. Modern democratic states use voting as the primary tool to realise this principle; people cast their votes to elect representatives whom they think would best represent their interests, or to make their stand on key issues. Yet, can it be said that the right to vote is the only facet of the concept of democracy? I do not think so. This essay will argue that although the right to vote is the core of democracy in theory, the most fundamental democratic principle of 'rule by the people' can only be realised with other critical conditions. These include the freedom of expression, strong institutions and the participation of citizens.

Prima facie, it certainly seems that the right to vote is all there is to democracy. For one, it is the heart of the concept of 'power of the people'. In representative democracies like Singapore and the USA, citizens elect leaders to act as their voice in legislative bodies. As a direct result of this, political leaders are directly accountable to their electorates for their actions, and must at least take account of the views of the people while making decisions. This is how citizens exercise their 'power'. For instance, in the years before the Eurozone crisis, Greek voters elected governments which promised them generous pensions and handouts. When this finally resulted in the collapse of the debt-ridden Greek economy, a fresh election ousted the incumbent government which claimed to be capable of resolving the country's economic woes. Representative democracies also hold referenda on key issues, for the people to vote and make direct decisions. This is what will happen in Scotland in 2014, where Scottish citizens will decide on whether to secede from the UK. Similarly, in direct democracies like Switzerland, people vote directly on all the issues being debated in parliament. These examples show how voting is the most direct way to realise the 'rule of the people' which is why it seems to be the only facet of democracy.

Moreover, one might argue that the presence of other facets of democracy merely facilitates the right to vote, making the latter the only true facet of democracy. In fact, many variations of democracy exist, but the only aspect remaining consistent across all of them is the right to vote. While many European democracies like Denmark and Finland have a free press independent from the government, Singapore throughout the 1960s-1980s maintained links with the media corporations like Singapore Press Holdings, with many ministers and Members of Parliament previously holding important positions in the corporation. Yet, since the right to vote was present in both situations, both are seemingly 'democratic'. The same applies for the format of key democratic institutions; presidential and parliamentary democracies have completely different methods of maintaining checks on political leaders, yet both are democratic due to the presence of the right to vote. Hence, it does seem as if voting is the only feature of the democracy, while other aspects exist merely to facilitate it, and can be varied according to the needs of the country.

Still, one sees many examples of places where people possess the right to vote, but are considered far from democratic. One instance is Afghanistan where people all over the country turned up to vote in 2009, but widespread intimidation by the Taliban and illegal actions like ballot-stuffing marred the democratic process. Similar situations can be seen all over the world in places like Zimbabwe, Uzbekistan and Belarus. The truth is that while the vote is the core of democracy in theory, the practice of democracy requires the presence of strong institutions, other important rights and participation by the people.

Strong democratic institutions are the hallmark of a functioning democracy. The theory of separation of powers postulates that democratic governments should have three key parts: the executive, the legislation and the judiciary. Without these, the right to vote cannot hope to achieve 'people's power'. The three organs of the state are meant to act as checks and balances on one another, without which democracy is compromised. In the recent scandal involving the Internal Revenue Service in America, the judiciary is investigating accusations of the authorities singling out conservative groups for inspection. Had the judiciary not become involved, the Republican Party would have been disadvantaged, depriving people of a chance to cast a vote in a fair election where all parties are given equal opportunities. Similarly, in Uzbekistan, where Islam Karimov controls all three organs, court cases involving accusations of corruption and misdeeds by government officials are invariably awarded in favour of the government. Despite people having the right to vote, they are powerless against corrupt leaders. Another key institution is the rule of the law. Authorities like the police are key in ensuring that elections are free and fair. The Afghan elections in 2009 saw widespread terror tactics where the Taliban threatened families with violent retribution if they went to vote. Ballot-stuffing was also practised, as the party of Hamid Karzai had its officials fill ballot boxes with illegal votes in their favour. Without the rule of law, people with the theoretical 'right' to vote are either prevented from actually voting or have their votes rendered meaningless by corrupt actions. Strong institutions are indubitably a fundamental facet of democracy in practice.

The freedom of speech is another important aspect of democratic countries in practical terms because they facilitate the formation of informed choices. While some limitations on expression are acceptable to prevent cases where harm is clearly caused, like hate speech and violent pornography, the existence of a free and independent press and the ability to express one's opinions are crucial because they contribute to vibrant political discourse which helps to inform the voter. For instance, newspapers and magazines like The New York Times in the US frequently run articles and editorials stating opinions on political candidates accompanied by relevant analyses. This ensures that people are exposed to a multiplicity of points of view, which they may not have thought or heard of, before they cast their votes. Informed votes are truly empowering because the people voting are surer of exactly what the new government plans to do and whether this is in their interests. In contrast, in places like rural Indonesia and Malaysia where access to such opinions from the media is limited, politicians regularly practise vote-buying by giving out freebies and cash handouts. Hence, it can be seen that freedom of expression must be facilitated by an independent and far-reaching media. Without these, even the right to vote cannot truly empower people to choose the right leaders. Another important aspect of a free press is its ability to uncover wrongdoings by the government, as in the case of investigative journalism. When the government is able to hide information at will, voters are deprived of information crucial to determining whether leaders will empower them by doing what they want.

The New York Times was responsible for uncovering the Pentagon Papers, which revealed that the US government conducted extensive attacks on Laos and Cambodia despite telling the public otherwise. It is clear that without freedom of speech and a free press, people cannot make a meaningful vote as they do not know which leaders will empower them by truly doing what they want.

Finally, democracy requires active participation by citizens. For one, this contributes to a meaningful vote as voters will have multifarious choices in elections. When citizens participate actively in democracies, they are unafraid of setting up political parties which reflect their views and can empower others with similar views. The example of Singapore from the 1960s-1980s was undemocratic due to the lack of viable opposition candidates, partially because many of them were censured by the incumbent government. Although the existence of too many parties can be disruptive to a democracy, a variety of choices is still crucial. Without alternatives to choose from, the right to vote holds no meaning as there are few candidates whose views are in line with those of voters. Moreover, 'power to the people' holds the assumption that the views of the majority of the population are taken into consideration. In the case of low voter turnouts, the right to vote becomes farcical as it only empowers those who turn up to vote, as opposed to the 'people', which ought to refer to the whole population. This is actually a worrying phenomenon in the world today; voter turnouts dropped to as low as 40% in some areas of the US. People must actually wield the right to vote for a system to be considered democratic. In cases where it is merely held and not used, the vote empowers the few, not the many.

Overall, the answer is absolutely clear: while the right to vote can be considered a crucial aspect of democratic theory, the practice of 'rule by the people' can only be achieved with strong institutions, freedom of speech and the media and participation by the people. It is true that by this definition, many states in our world would not be considered true democracies. To me, that is the nature of the concept: it is an ideal that we must constantly work towards, and I sincerely hope that the countries of our world will continually strive to achieve it.

**Marker's comments:**

***This is an informed, invigorating and balanced perspective and an impressive range of examples. Excellent! Language use is competent, secure and fluent. Clear organisation, apt vocabulary, varied sentence structures and a strong personal voice. A delightful read overall!***

### Essay 10

'Democracy means more than having the right to vote.' Discuss.

Teo Jia Yi Dominic | 13A01D

Democracy as a political system has long been symbolised by the power of the vote and thus it is increasingly common to regard the right to vote and democracy as indistinguishable – however, this is not true. Democracy is so much more than simply the right to vote; democracy is about the right to participate in regular, free and fair elections, it entails equal treatment under the law, it presupposes that there are certain basic liberties that cannot be infringed upon and it requires active citizen participation. To simply regard democracy as meaning the right to vote would be doing this political system great injustice for it is so much more.

It is undeniable that democracy means having the right to vote in regular, free and fair elections, but it is simply a means to practise democracy; the underlying principle behind democracy and the right to vote is the idea that the government is and must be accountable to the people they govern. This accountability ensures that the government will serve the interests of the governed and not its own selfish interests as it will otherwise be voted out and thus lose its legitimacy to rule. This can be seen in the recent French elections between Hollande and Sarkozy where the incumbent Sarkozy was voted out of the presidency due to the immense dissatisfaction of the French public towards his rule, characterised by declining economic growth and rising unemployment. Thus, the right to vote serves as a medium for the people to express themselves with regard to the state and the incumbent government. Democracy also means having the opportunity to vote in free, regular and fair elections, to truly allow the people a genuine medium of expression, unlike in countries such as Malaysia where in the recently concluded general elections, the incumbent Barisan Nasional was accused of giving foreigners citizenship by the thousands to gain their votes, and of intimidation tactics to scare the people into not voting for opposition parties. The same can also be said of Singapore, where the People's Action Party (PAP) often tries to scare people from voting for the opposition by threatening to withhold upgrading schemes for housing estates. The act of gerrymandering can even be said to constitute an unfair election, whereby the incumbent party is given an unfair advantage. Thus, democracy must mean having more than the right to vote; it must mean that the system of voting and the elections must be fair, where neither side nor party can stand to gain an unfair advantage. Beyond simply the right to vote, democracies mean accountability of the government to the people and fairness.

Democracy also means being transparent, and this transparency is another means to hold the government accountable. Every governmental body and action must be transparent for all to see, to pressure governments to exercise their powers responsibly and only for the interests of the people. Nixon's Watergate Scandal is a prime example of the lack of transparency that led to the state's abuse of power, where President Richard Nixon utilised his powers to illegally tap into phone conversations to collect data. However, should all actions have been transparent, such a transgression could have been avoided as such blatant abuse of state power would hardly have been tolerated. Thus, in order for the government to be held accountable, such as Nixon was via his resignation when the truth was exposed, transparency is an essential component of democracy.

Furthermore, democracy means having and protecting the basic liberties of the people, basic liberties that cannot be infringed on by the government. This was a concept put forth by John Stuart Mill, who argued that the state wielded immense power that it could readily use to abuse the people; thus certain liberties enjoyed by the people that limit the power of the state must be present. Such basic liberties include the freedom of speech, freedom to life, freedom to live in a safe environment, and freedom of assembly, among many others. Democracy means that governments strive to protect these inalienable freedoms and rights, and this is as important an aspect of democracy as the right to vote. Countries which allow people to vote but do not seek to protect these basic liberties cannot be said to be truly democratic, as it is then clear that much power continues to lie in the hands of the state for possible abuse. This is best seen in Singapore, where despite the fact that the right to vote exists, the country is hardly ever considered a democracy by the West; rather, it is often considered a semi-democratic state. This is because freedom of speech is curtailed where subjects regarding race and religion are out of bounds and many mediums of expression are under heavy supervision by the state, best seen in the new legislation of the Media Development Authority which states that websites with more than 50,000 views will require a state license, thus giving the government the ability to restrict our freedom of speech by controlling what is or is not 'acceptable' media and information. So, the ability to criticise the state and thus limit its power is greatly reduced. Therefore, in order for a democracy to be truly about the people, the state must protect the basic liberties of the people so that the government will continue to serve the interests of the people.

The entire concept of democracy revolves around the people and serving its interests but it cannot discriminate between individuals. It must view all people through identical and indiscriminating lenses and this is especially so under the law, in order to truly embody the concept of fairness. It cannot be the case where people receive different treatment and punishment under the law because of differences in race, religion, gender or class, best seen in China where the so-called 'Princelings' – sons of prominent party members – are hated for receiving much lighter sentences for crimes, as compared to the harsh sentences for the average Chinese, due to differences in family background. Such practices are undemocratic as they fail to embody the values of fairness and equality. This can even be seen in the United States, where a recent study conducted by Harvard University found that African Americans were much more likely to receive a heavier and more severe sentence for the same crime as compared to a white or Asian American. Thus, democracy must mean viewing every person as equal and giving equal treatment. Such concepts of equality and fairness must also be present in terms of equality of opportunity as expounded on by John Rawls, who claims that since we play no active part in determining whether we are born male or female, Asian or African, rich or poor, a fair society must ensure equality of opportunity despite these differences. This can be seen in the idea of meritocracy, which rewards people based on individual merit. Thus, democracy means more than having the right to vote; it is about ensuring fairness in society.

Democracy also requires active citizen participation as it depends on the rational choices made by the people, in voting for example. It also depends heavily on the people to keep themselves well-informed and participate actively. Different political parties will win the legitimacy to rule through voting and elections; thus it is the responsibility of the people to be well-informed on which party best represents themselves and their interests on a myriad of different issues. For example, an American must be



well-informed on the different stances adopted by the Republican and Democrat parties on various issues, and a voter cannot simply vote ignorantly, for the right to vote comes with a certain responsibility. If Americans truly believe that they should increase taxes for the rich, then they should vote Democrat, but if they are not in favour of raising taxes at all, then the Republican Party would be the party of their choice. However, they can only ensure that the government will serve their interests if well-informed voters cast rational votes. Democracy also means that the people have the responsibility to ensure that the government receives its legitimacy to rule and it is made aware of the people's reception to present and possible future policies. As democracy means responsibilities beyond just rights and entitlement, voting is made compulsory in many countries. If the citizens of Singapore had not voted to express their discontent with PAP policies, as evidenced by PAP's share of the votes dropping to an all-time low of 60.4%, the PAP would not know that its open door immigration policies or the rising costs of living and unequal growth were not popular with the people, and it would not have made the changes it did, tightening foreign worker rules and highlighting the theme of inclusive growth for the 2013 Budget. Therefore, democracy means more than just the right to vote; it also means fulfilling the responsibilities that one has, in order that the government can best serve the interests of the people.

In conclusion, the right to vote is only a minute aspect of democracy, albeit an important one. Democracy means the people, it means being accountable to them and it means serving their interests; it also means treating them as equal and creating a fair and equal society. However, democracy also means the people have to fulfil certain responsibilities in order that a democratic government can fulfil its obligations to the people. Having the right to vote simply encompasses a small aspect of ensuring accountability, but this on its own cannot adequately encompass all that democracy truly means. Though it may be difficult to fulfil all aspects of democracy, where even the United States – oft the symbol of democracy – fails to do so, striving to accomplish all aspects is what it means to be truly democratic.

***Marker's comments:***

***This is a convincingly written essay that features strong argumentation and a good grasp of world affairs. Well done!***

### Essay 11

#### Can we ever eliminate terrorism?

Yeow En Kai Joel | 13S06D

More than a decade after the world stood horrified as two passenger jets slammed into the two towers of the World Trade Centre, US President Barack Obama announced that American special forces had finally succeeded in killing the man responsible, Osama bin Laden, the head of the terrorist group Al-Qaeda. The news brought hope to the many weary of the bloody conflicts in the Middle East and terrorist attacks at home, that the forces of good were winning the 'war on terror', and that someday, just as the world's most recognised terrorist bit the dust, so too would terrorism finally be eliminated. In this essay, I will argue that while governments and security agencies worldwide have taken concrete steps towards reducing the effects of terrorism, the very nature of terrorism and the reasons why people resort to acts of terror to achieve their goals prevent the elimination of terrorism, which is an age-old problem that will continue to persist despite the best efforts of those seeking public security.

Prima facie, it might seem that with the ever-improving technology available to governments, terrorists are losing any edge they once had and will soon find their tactics of inciting widespread terror no longer viable. Surveillance technology, combined with facial recognition, allows governments to quickly detect known trouble-makers and track their whereabouts before they have a chance to strike. Electronic surveillance has also grown so sophisticated that major terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda, now shun mobile devices for fear that they have already been compromised by Western intelligence services. In fact, electronic surveillance was one of the factors that led to the downfall of bin Laden, as US intelligence agencies were able to track his courier, Al-Kuwaiti, back to the house in Abbottabad where he was living. Governments have also become more willing to use such technologies in the fight against terrorism, with laws such as the Patriot Act in the US making it legal for the government to access the electronic accounts, such as email accounts, of suspected terrorists. With such high odds stacked against would-be terrorists, it is easy to draw the conclusion that in the near future, it would become so difficult to be a terrorist that terrorism will be eliminated.

Secondly, one could point to the increasing international cooperation between countries as proof that terrorism will one day be eliminated. Governments around the world frequently hold conferences to discuss how best to deal with terrorism, and share tactics with their foreign counterparts. Militaries and security agencies also often cooperate with one another on such matters, even training together to share their expertise. Inter-governmental sharing of intelligence on terrorist activities also helps in preventing acts of terror, as intelligence agencies share about predicted attacks or individuals to look out for. For example, Singapore often shares and receives intelligence from governments of neighbouring countries, like Malaysia and Indonesia, as to the activities of terrorist organisations like Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) in the region. Such intelligence sharing led to the arrests of several JI members who had planned to attack public infrastructure, such as MRT stations, here in Singapore. Cooperation between governments has also helped to reduce terrorist activity. For example, the French military's intervention to drive out Islamic extremists from northern Mali helped

to prevent the area from deteriorating into a lawless land that would have become a breeding ground for terrorists. Similar efforts against Al-Shabab terrorists in Somalia and the Taliban in Pakistan have no doubt reduced the likelihood of acts of terror elsewhere in the world. Hence, as terrorism is a common problem that governments around the world face, international cooperation in this aspect has been strong, and some believe that the combined strength and capabilities of the countries of the world would be sufficient in leading to the elimination of terrorism.

However, to eliminate terrorism, one must eliminate the causes of terrorism. For every extremist killed, three more could be inspired to join the radical cause, and if so the fight would be a never-ending one, as one is only treating the symptoms and not the root of the problem. As such, the very nature of terrorism, where people are driven to commit acts that disturb the consciences of those around them so as to achieve their aims, is what prevents it from being effectively and totally eliminated.

Firstly, people use terrorism to achieve their political goals. While peaceful resistance as encouraged by Gandhi is all well and good, if the leaders of the country refuse to take heed of their citizens' requests for change, some might be driven to use more extreme measures to get the attention of the government. Such terrorism was present in Northern Ireland, where the Irish Republican Army (IRA) committed acts of terror like bombings and kidnappings to get the attention of the British government, as well as in Sri Lanka, where the Tamil Tigers fought against the government as they felt that they were not being accorded equal rights. As long as oppressive governments exist, or people are not content with the current state of affairs, beyond a certain point, some would resort to acts of terror to achieve their aims. While such insurrection does not always help these parties to achieve their goals, and in fact often alienates the population from their cause, these would-be terrorists would often perceive themselves as having no other choice but to use such damnable methods, or even justify their acts with the logic that the acts of their leaders are worse.

Secondly, terrorism is often used by those who justify their acts as being for a higher cause, such as for religion. Such terrorists often distort religious teachings to find a rallying call and purpose for the acts they carry out. For example, Islamic extremists believe that the Koran calls for them to fight to establish a global Islamic regime, and that they would be duly rewarded if they die while fighting for such a just cause. Christian extremists also fight for similar reasons, or to drive out foreigners that they believe are polluting the land. While most members of these religions reject these views and regard the acts of terrorists as despicable and indefensible, it only takes a few with such a distorted perception of their religion to spawn acts of terror. Such views also tend to be more common in areas of poverty, where people might subscribe to these radical ideas as they lack any other purpose in their life. Furthermore, the proliferation of the Internet worldwide has made it much easier for terrorist groups to spread their distorted and radical ideas, corrupting youth on the Internet who are easily persuaded by the charismatic speakers employed by these groups. Hence, as long as people are willing to accept distorted views of their religion to find a cause for their acts of terror, terrorism cannot be eliminated, for it only takes one person and one incident to strike terror into the hearts of many.

Thirdly, terrorism need not be conducted only by recognised groups like the Al-Qaeda, JI and IRA, as acts of terror are also increasingly being carried out by "lone wolf" terrorists, or people acting on their own. From the Tsarnaev brothers in the Boston

Marathon bombings, to the British soldier hacking incident, to the shooting of 73 innocent civilians by Anders Breivik in Norway, 'lone wolf' terrorists are arguably even more dangerous in the present day. As groups like Al-Qaeda are getting decimated by drone attacks in the Middle East, the capacity of these groups to carry out terror attacks abroad has been significantly reduced. However, with the advancement of information technology, one can now easily learn how to make a bomb from the internet, using everyday parts that are readily available, as can be seen from the Tsarnaev brothers' use of a pressure cooker and gunpowder. While these attacks might not be as deadly or severe as those carried out by so-called "professional" terrorists, they still have the capacity to cause massive loss of life, and serve to remind the people that they will never be safe, even in their country, which is precisely the point of terrorism. Also, more and more technologically advanced weaponry is available to terrorists. For example, fears that chemical, biological and nuclear weapons or similar advanced weapons in Syria would fall into the hands of terrorists led Israel to unilaterally carry out air strikes on targets in Syria, within Syrian borders. Hence, the capability of terrorists acting on their own to strike with deadly consequences makes terrorism even harder to eliminate, as such terrorists are often difficult to detect and often slip under the radar of a country's intelligence communities until they carry out their attack.

The aim of terrorism is to strike fear into the hearts and minds of people, to remind them that they will never be safe, even at home. As long as one act of terror can be carried out, the public will believe that more acts of terror can be carried out, and the terrorists would have succeeded. Hence, only if people are sufficiently satisfied that they do not have to turn to terrorism to accomplish their goals can terrorism truly be eliminated, and present efforts to combat terrorism are merely like trying to grasp at the wind. As such, I believe that given the present circumstances, the complete elimination of terrorism remains an unattainable goal.

***Marker's comments:***

***This is a thoughtful, informed response with a balanced approach to the question. A good range of arguments and examples demonstrates a good grasp of content knowledge. Argumentation is focused and fully developed. Good job! Competent command of the language. Apt vocabulary, varied sentence structures and clear organisation of ideas make this essay a delightful read! Well done!***

### Essay 12

#### Can we ever eliminate terrorism?

Chua Xing Jian Graham | 13A01D

The word 'terrorism' immediately brings to mind images of religious fundamentalists with bombs in their hands, and accordingly conjures up visions of collapsing buildings, such as the World Trade Centre during the infamous September 11 attacks, as well as bearded, turbaned clerics railing against the West. Yet, terrorism encompasses much more than mere Islamic fundamentalists. The essence of terrorism can be said to be, quite simply, any violent act designed to cause mass fear and terror. As such, the root causes and types of terrorists are often bewilderingly complex, and a complete elimination of terrorism in all its forms can be said to be highly unrealistic. However, terrorism can be fought against; some forms of terrorism, if not all, can be prevented, or at the very least ameliorated.

The most publicly visible form of terrorism is terrorism which arises from radical religious fundamentalism. The world is more than familiar with the names Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah, among others, which are radical organisations that carry out terrorist acts in the name of religion; in this case, specifically Islam. Many other religions, too, often have radical fundamentalist groups of their own which frequently carry out terrorist acts. Christian fundamentalists, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, fought each other in Northern Ireland and frequently committed acts of terror designed to unsettle the opposition. Hindu fundamentalists in India have often crusaded against Muslims, such as in the Gujarat Massacre in 2002. Yet these religious fundamentalists are often unorthodox in nature and are completely unreflective of the vast majority of believers. In addition, some religious fundamentalist groups, while unorthodox, are not necessarily violent or inclined towards terrorist acts. The fact that religiously-motivated terrorists are only a small fraction of the entire religious population makes it easier to believe that, with proper rehabilitation and guidance, such terrorists can be "purged" of their radical tendencies and the threat they pose eliminated. Efforts have been made to re-integrate such religious fundamentalists back into orthodoxy; such efforts are often successful and are able to ameliorate the threat posed by religious fundamentalists. There are numerous stories of rehabilitated terrorists returning to society and in turn themselves assisting in the rehabilitation of others. With the view that religiously-motivated terrorists are but a small minority, eliminating this form of terrorism becomes more realistic as an objective.

In addition, the advancement of modern technology has made it easier to identify, monitor and eliminate possible terrorist threats. Surveillance devices, as well as tracking programmes, are able to monitor the communication devices of suspected terrorists, allowing the relevant authorities to strike pre-emptively and deal with potential terrorists. There have been numerous cases where groups or individuals plotting to stage terrorist acts have been foiled by the state apparatus. For example, radical fundamentalists from the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) were prevented from striking at various locations in Singapore by timely state intervention. In the United States, the monitoring of social media has led to, on a few occasions, the prevention of a terrorist act in the style of mass shootings a la the Columbine High School Shootings, usually by a lone gunman. As well as identifying potential threats, technology also allows society

to reach out to and treat potential terrorists, who are often mentally unbalanced, eliminating the threat they pose to society.

However, very often, terrorism is the by-product of a vast array of factors and assuming that it would be simple to eliminate terrorism or categorise terrorism into a few different forms would be very naive or unrealistic, even. Terrorism often arises as a result of socioeconomic problems, or political discrimination, of an ethnic minority. For instance, the political organisation Hamas turned radical as a result of political and economic discrimination against Palestinians living under Jewish governance. In more recent memory, during the still-ongoing Syrian civil war, a rebel commander ripped out the heart of a government soldier (albeit the soldier was already dead) and proceeded to consume it on live video; the video was later circulated in an attempt to cause terror among loyalists to the ruling Assad regime. This shows that terrorism can also be used as a political message. Other examples include the frequent raping of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as an act designed to cause fear and terror, as well as the 1998 Rwandan genocide, in which the mass murder of Tutsis was designed as an act of terror. It is, realistically speaking, impossible to generalise terrorism or to give superficial reasons for why it exists. This makes its complete elimination, at best, an unrealistic ideal. This is because to eliminate terrorism, one must often first eliminate its root causes: poverty, political discrimination, et cetera. Or one must first heal and eliminate long-standing hatreds and divisions. In reality, this is nearly impossible. Though, for example, one may help the Burmese and Karens negotiate a ceasefire, one cannot so easily eliminate the mistrust they have had of each other since the colonial era. As long as the old hatreds remain, the possibility of terrorist acts still remains. In a similar fashion, unless Palestinians are granted their political and economic rights, there is still the possibility of terrorism as an expression of frustration and grievances.

In addition, the very advancement of technology sometimes serves as a hindrance in the struggle to eliminate terrorism. Another form of terrorism may arise which is much harder to combat: cyber-terrorism, in which technology itself is used as a tool of terrorism. The ubiquity and sheer rise of the digital realm is such that a complete safeguard or foolproof monitoring against any threat is virtually impossible. Even the most secure of digital fortresses can sometimes be bypassed, as seen in the recent hacking of Pentagon servers by Chinese cyber-terrorists. In addition, the anonymity of the Internet enables potential terrorists to hide and plan terrorist acts, with the sheer volume of digital traffic making it impossible to watch everybody. For example, in the recent Boston Marathon bombings, the perpetrators were not picked up on despite letting slip signs of radical thinking on the Internet.

Furthermore, it is also possible to argue that, quite often, terrorism may itself arise as a result of the struggle to eliminate terrorism. The 'War on Terror' and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, ostensibly to combat terrorist activity, has led to many atrocities and war crimes being committed in these countries. Often, these acts were carried out with the intention of causing fear and terror – ironically, using terrorism to combat terrorism, except that the former guise of terrorism is state-endorsed. Guantanamo Bay is another example; many suspected terrorists were held there and subjected to torture and interrogation – 'terrorist' acts, in an effort to combat and eliminate terrorism. Also, eliminating terrorism may run into practical problems of its own making; the assault by US troops on a Pakistani compound in the operation which killed Osama bin Laden, independent of Pakistani cooperation, raised the

question of whether the United States was violating Pakistan's national sovereignty. Eliminating terrorism, then, faces many practical problems, both in the identification and elimination of the threat.

It can therefore be concluded that eliminating terrorism is impossible if the goal is complete elimination of all forms of terrorism. Not only is it necessary to first identify and eliminate the root causes of terrorism – often the complex social, economic and political issues – the plethora of practical problems which efforts to eliminate terrorism face ensure that completely eliminating terrorism is unrealistic and unattainable. At times, terrorism may not even reveal its presence until the act is carried out; a disaffected youth may show no signs of stress until he sees a gun and goes on a rampage, as seen in the United States, or very recently, in the vicious Woolwich attack in the United Kingdom. Yet, it is still possible to at least reduce terrorist acts to a certain extent, such as through the use of rehabilitative techniques, in the case of attempting to 'cure' known terrorists, or staying vigilant for potential threats, as mentioned earlier. Efforts, if carried out with proper deference to human dignity and respect, instead of using terrorism as a means to combat terrorism, may be successful in ameliorating terrorism in today's world.

***Marker's comments:***

***Conclusion presents a good summary and reiteration of the main points raised earlier in the essay without coming across as repetitive and rehashed. Generally a good attempt on the whole!***

# 2013 General Paper Class Assignment

Essay  
13

Are the poor an inevitable feature of any society?

Teo Zhi Yao Samuel | 13S03F

The extent of poverty in the world remains shocking. Despite momentous efforts to eradicate poverty, with ending poverty designated as one of the millennium development goals of the United Nations, poverty remains a feature of nearly all societies across the globe today. Whilst there has been a modest decline in the proportion of those who are poor, the absolute number of poor has risen sharply. About a third of the world lives on less than US\$2 a day. Meanwhile, the wage differences between developed and developing countries continue to widen. In 1820, the richest country had three times as much income per capita as the poorest; today, this figure is 30 times. Within developed countries too, the situation remains as bleak – the global Occupy movement has shone a spotlight on the growing divide between rich bankers and struggling workers. Such facts may be shocking to many, considering the vast amount of resources that have been pumped into combating poverty. This has led sceptics to believe that the poor are an inevitable feature of any society, and that no matter how much effort governments put in, poverty can never be eradicated. Considering the ineffectiveness of current policies, this appears to be true. However, that does not mean that the extent of poverty cannot be mitigated. Rather than slow down our efforts to combat poverty, we should continue to ramp up efforts to narrow the gap.

The first kind of poverty that may exist in any given country is relative poverty. Relative poverty reflects the level of internal inequality. Many may argue that relative poverty is not an inevitable feature of society since many social programmes have already been put in place, and these programmes have often demonstrated some success at eradicating poverty. Education, in particular, has been hailed as a social leveler that allows individuals to break out of the cycle of poverty, and governments have long recognised this. George Bush's signature education law, the 'No Child Left Behind' policy, was aimed at ensuring that subgroups defined by income are able to meet the same achievement standards as others by setting expectations for all schools to meet so that national education would not ignore or fail more disadvantaged students. Likewise, Singapore's 2003 Compulsory Education Act, which made it mandatory for all Singaporeans to complete at least 6 years of education at primary level, also ensures universal access to education such that even the very poorest would be equipped with basic skills that might assist them to find employment or have the chance - of securing further education through scholarship schemes. Thus, it is hoped that each child, irrespective of family income, will have the opportunity to develop his talents and even possibly do better than his peers from wealthier families, and perhaps enter higher paying, more knowledge-intensive occupations. Such a huge investment in education raises the expectations that relative poverty will be eliminated and is not an inevitable feature of society since even the poor are provided with a fighting chance at success.

However, education is, ironically, increasing the rich-poor divide in many developed nations and has caused inequality in such nations to become even more acute, making relative poverty seem ever more impossible to eradicate as high hopes in compulsory



education schemes fade. It is well-known that children from more affluent families tend to do better at school. In analyses of long term data, researchers from the University of Iowa, found that rich children in the United States are, astoundingly, 70% more likely to complete college than poor children, completion of college being the single most important predictor of success in the workforce. Wealthy parents are able to invest time and money in their children, while lower income families are often stretched for time and resources. In Canada, citizens at the upper end of the income spectrum are spending five times as much per child as are lower income families. Universal education programmes are often ineffective at addressing the head start rich children enjoy, since they merely provide the opportunity for the poor to attend school, but do not address the challenges the poor carry with them into the classroom. The poor are not provided with adequate social support and lack access to experiences that children from more well off backgrounds get to enjoy, such as mind-broadening and enriching weekend activities or even stimulating conversation at home. Meanwhile, neuroscientists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science have found that children growing up in poor families with low social status end up with unhealthy levels of stress hormones, which impair neural development, preventing the poor from excelling at a young age. In short, children from low income households cannot meet academic and experiential benchmarks. In fact, those born to parents in the bottom fourth of the income distribution in the US, for example, have a more than fifty per cent chance of staying there. Therefore, the existence of relative poverty is an inevitable feature of society, since even education, our best hope for raising all boats together, has failed, and it appears that we currently have no effective strategy for breaking the stranglehold of the cycle of poverty for the most disadvantaged.

Furthermore, the poor will remain an inevitable feature of developed societies since globalisation has further increased the challenges those from lower-income brackets face in later life. Thanks to outsourcing and flexible supply chains, the poor, who lack skills to begin with, find themselves out of a job and struggling with even lower incomes than before. Thanks to globalisation, companies have gotten so good at creating and managing global supply chains that corporations no longer have to grow in developed countries but can head for cheaper countries. For instance, a typical Mercedes Benz worker costs the company US\$56 an hour in Germany. In Brazil, this figure is a mere US\$7 an hour. It is US\$4 in China and US\$1 in India. Whilst productivity is not yet as high in China and India as compared with Germany, Brazilian plants are already regarded as nearly as efficient as German ones. Profit-seeking companies like Mercedes Benz have responded with ineluctable logic. This has caused wages for low end factory jobs especially to stagnate, while highly educated workers have become increasingly valuable to companies seeking an intellectual advantage in an increasingly competitive world. The problem is that there are knowledge intensive jobs available in developed countries, and increasingly in middle income countries, but the poor often do not have the skills to take them up. This has left the poor within virtually every country out in the cold, and economic conditions have been particularly brutal for this sector of society. In Spain, inflation adjusted incomes of the poorest income bracket have declined from US\$30,000 in 2000 to US\$27,000 in 2010, whilst the rich observed an average increase of 30% in income. Globalisation has caused changes in almost every developed country's labour market from a manufacturing base to a primarily service-based economy. The poor often face structural unemployment in consequence, resulting in a widening income gap such that relative poverty becomes an increasingly entrenched feature of higher and middle income countries, even as jobs move to and increase opportunities in the more promising parts of the developing world.

Another, arguably even more troubling, kind of poverty is absolute poverty, based on the official poverty line of US\$1.25 per day of the World Bank, which makes comparisons between developed and developing countries. Often, anti-poverty advocates argue that absolute poverty in developing countries need not be a feature of these societies, since aid, most often in the form of monetary investments and contributions from international organisations like the World Bank, can work miracles in transforming the lives of the poor. Simple ideas have the ability to provide a platform for poverty reduction. For example, providing farmers in more fertile parts of North Africa with soil nutrients to ensure healthier crops can increase the chances of a profitable year for the farmer. With increasing incomes, the farmer can then adopt more efficient methods of farming and perhaps even later diversify into higher priced crops. The initial stimulus of aid money can go a long way toward lifting the farmer out of poverty. Chile is a prominent example. Its government has used aid money to invest in long term poverty reduction strategies, growing its economy at an average of 6.6% annually from 1985 to 2000. It also spread the benefits of economic growth by designing effective social programmes and revitalising 900 of the worst primary schools. Chile now leads Latin America in the use of computers in schools, along with Costa Rica. Hence, it may seem that absolute poverty should not be regarded as an inevitable feature of any society, since there are steps which can be taken to help many poorer countries develop and such attempts have often seen some success.

However, critics often point out that the methods by which aid is provided allow it to fall into the hands of corrupt governments. Absolute poverty then becomes an inevitable feature of their societies since aid money never reaches the poor and they never receive the help they need to improve their living standards. Resources donated are instead squandered by corrupt rulers, often ruthless dictators against whom ordinary citizens have no democratic recourse. Meanwhile, the international community can or will do little due to ideals of political sovereignty, which mean that intervention in the internal affairs of a country by external parties is frowned upon and, worse, which pose a threat of international conflict should overzealous forms of intervention occur. In many parts of Africa, in particular, the poor have stayed poor, while a succession of despots have run country after country into the ground. In other cases, aid money is not even donated, for fear of its being siphoned off for undesired uses, and it is difficult to get other forms of aid, such as direct emergency food aid to the people who most need it. For example, in North Korea, it is feared that defiant and self-indulgent leaders may misdirect financial aid to their much cherished armament projects or to fund their own notoriously luxurious lifestyles, in the teeth of the severe and often fatal famines and poverty of the country's long-suffering citizens. Attempts to deliver food aid to the poorest, meanwhile, often get bogged down in diplomatic negotiations over North Korea's nuclear programmes and sometimes lethal sabre-rattling, as food aid is used as leverage in strategic negotiations. Thus, absolute poverty remains an inevitable feature of many societies since even if foreign nations wish to remedy the state of deprivation of poor populations, their efforts are often futile when met with the callous resistance or venality of crackpot leaders.

In addition, absolute poverty is an inevitable feature of many societies because aid money, which underdeveloped countries are highly reliant on, is in itself problematic. Foreign aid often comes with conditions attached, which can worsen the recipient country's economic position in the long run. The United States only gives a skimpy 0.1% of its economic output in aid, yet stipulates about two thirds of this US\$9 billion must be spent on American products. Such restrictions undermine local producers

who are unable to break into or develop local markets, leading to entrenchment of underdevelopment. Countries that receive aid may also be forced to eliminate trade barriers, which can be detrimental to development. As it stands, no nation has ever developed in the long term under the rules imposed today on third world countries by the World Bank and the IMF. The East Asian tiger economies, South Korea in particular, have lifted millions out of poverty only with the use of protectionist barriers behind which to nurture infant industries until they were ready to compete in the aggressive global marketplace. South Korea built its export industries by protecting domestic markets and banks from foreign competition whilst requiring investors to build local know-how and transfer technology and knowledge to locals. Sustainable development becomes difficult for poor countries when they are forced to engage with the world economy under unfair rules which prevent them from using the very methods the richer countries used to develop themselves, further entrenching the advantages of the already better off. Absolute poverty thus remains an inevitable feature of society in the world as a whole since poorer countries find it difficult to develop their own local industries due to aid delivered under conditions which actually worsen the plight of the poor.

In conclusion, due to limitations in schemes meant to eliminate both absolute and relative poverty, the existence of the poor seems an inevitable feature of any society, developed or developing. However, this does not mean that our efforts at combating poverty are for naught and that we should halt such efforts. Whilst it is unrealistic to expect to completely eliminate poverty in all its forms, the gap between rich and poor both intra-nationally and internationally can be narrowed. Already, some countries fare better than others when it comes to relative poverty due to effective policy making. For example, the UK's welfare system, albeit not without its flaws, ensures the poor within that country have access to basic services and maintain the ability to enjoy minimum standards of living. The UK hence does much better in combating relative poverty than countries lacking such provisions, such as Indonesia. As regards absolute poverty, more can also be done such as encouraging richer countries to increase foreign aid to poor countries and relooking the conditions of aid to ensure the poor truly benefit in the long term and experience a reduction in not only hunger but also illiteracy, disease and access to opportunities for a better life for their children. While there will inevitably be some poor in any society, appropriate measures should still be taken to ensure the poor are not left lagging too far behind.

***Marker's comments:***

***This is a well-written essay that features clear argument structures and the use of a strong personal voice. Good job!***

# 2013 General Paper Class Assignment

Essay  
14

Can education solve all problems?

Evangeline Seah | 13S03P

The problems that plague the modern world are far too numerous to count, each one rapidly emerging, swelling and inflating into a calamity of unprecedented scale. Life's pessimists have sentenced mankind to extinction, death by our own hands. In the face of the ever-mounting number of challenges that we are facing today – poverty, gender inequality, just to name a few – mankind's future appears to be nothing more than a bleak, grey, hopeless picture. But maybe, just maybe, not all is lost yet, argue some optimists. Cue education, the tool that the modern world has recently taken up in campaigning and promoting change. All across the world, the irrefutable importance of education, and the role it plays in effecting change, is coming to light. Accordingly, countries are now adopting educational policies as their first line of defence against issues surfacing in society and around the world. Given the extensive use of education as the solution to the many challenges we face today, we must however begin to ask ourselves if education is truly the panacea to all our problems. Critics claim that there is little education can do to change the way things are now, while proponents, on the other hand, argue that education is indeed the answer to the many challenges that the world faces today because education gives individuals the much needed opportunities to make a difference. In my opinion, education is indeed a key approach that should be adopted in any movement of campaign for change, but education alone cannot solve all problems because there are inherent flaws and limitations to education and educational systems, and also because many of the issues we face today are multi-faceted.

Proponents argue that education is the answer to resolving persistent problems as education enlightens individuals and opens their minds to new possibilities. They argue that with education, individuals become more knowledgeable about the world. It is through education that individuals gain new knowledge and insights, helping them to become more aware of the world outside their society. In the process, they gain new perspectives and new lenses through which they may view the world. Education thus changes their worldview, and when such a paradigm shift occurs, a whole new world of possibilities seemingly opens up. Such enlightening of the mind, enabled by education, can be easily applied to the various challenges that the world faces today. Take the issue of gender inequality for example. Studies conducted in developing countries have shown that women who have been educated are half as likely to undergo harmful cultural practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) and four times as likely to protect their daughters from it. With education, women in developing countries thus realise that they have the right to speak up and defend themselves from harm and abuse. With education, the possibility of leading a more normal life is suddenly within reach. Alternatively, consider the recent educational package by the United Kingdom's Department for Culture, Media and Sport which seeks to tackle caste prejudice and discrimination by educating employers, schools, colleges and community groups so as to raise awareness of the issue and hence help to resolve it. There is also the international effort to combat racism and intolerance in schools by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). This project, titled 'Teaching Respect for All', was designed to develop

curriculum for use across the globe to promote tolerance and respect for all people. Proponents of education thus argue that since many problems such as discrimination are born from learned behaviour, education is the one force that can help individuals to 'un-learn' such behaviour and learn to adopt new mind-sets and perspectives, thus effectively resolving such problems.

However, the role that education plays in bringing about an end to the many problems today is only one side of the story. Large-scale problems can hardly be resolved by education alone, because there are many parties and players involved in one single problem and hence, using education to help those entrenched in the heart of the issue alone will not have significant impact. Consider the previous example of gender inequality. The root of this issue lies in the traditional patriarchal structure of the societies where gender discrimination is most prevalent. Using education to help women break free of the mind-set that they must remain subservient is only half the battle won – the difficulty lies not in convincing the women who so desperately want to be free that freedom of rights is something that not only men should have -- but instead, lies in convincing the men, who have thus far enjoyed wielding complete power and authority over their women, to let go of their control and traditional mind-set. Suddenly, the problem of gender inequality doesn't look so simple after all, does it? Clearly, the domineering men in such patriarchal societies will be more than unhappy and unwilling to accept the changes in women's status, for it means that they will have to relinquish their autonomy and control over women. This reluctance to set aside traditional thinking and practices is most clearly evidenced by the many cases of shocking brutality towards women who dared to rise up against the men, a most well-known example being the acid attacks on women who go to school in Afghanistan, with as many as 185 acid attacks on schools and hospitals being documented in the year of 2011 alone. Some men had even gone so far as to throw hand grenades into a girls' school, killing 100 schoolgirls. Clearly, men in these patriarchal societies are violently opposed to the idea of women becoming more aware of their rights and the idea that they may one day no longer be able to manipulate these women.

Additionally, education is intrinsically limited in its ability to effect change simply because it requires individuals on the receiving end to first be open-minded. If the individual being educated refuses to keep an open mind and accept new possibilities, new ways of thinking, then no amount of education will bear any fruit. This is precisely the case for the continuing persistence of discrimination in various societies. Such resistance and narrow-mindedness in unreceptive individuals embroiled in the many challenges of today is not something that education alone can address and hence, education cannot be said to be the solution to all problems.

Advocates of education may then argue that education is surely still the answer to many other challenges for it levels the playing field for many disadvantaged individuals and hence provides them with the necessary opportunities to resolve any problems. With education, people are better equipped with the skills necessary to find employment and to make themselves relevant to society. Education thus levels the playing field for everyone in society as it gives every individual equal chances and opportunities to compete, especially in today's society where an individual's level of educational attainment is increasingly a key factor in deciding how far an individual can go in life. A research paper by Professor Hanushek of Stanford University published in 2009 evaluated the economic value of education in today's world and showed that the average incomes of workers with high school education remain significantly higher

than those of the less educated. He also had substantial evidence showing that the average income of workers with a college education now dwarfs those of the high-school educated. This report thus suggests that with more years of education, individuals are more likely to enjoy a better life and hence it appears that education is indeed the key to bridging income gaps and that if more individuals could attain a higher level of education, problems such as income inequity would cease to exist.

On the contrary, the above argument once again fails to consider the possible flaws in the education system and the influence of other factors. On the surface, it may indeed appear as though education is the answer to achieving a level playing field in society, but that conclusion is based on the premise that education, and the education system, is always fair, an assumption that may not necessarily hold true. Singapore's education system in today's context is a clear illustration of how education may not actually solve problems but may instead exacerbate them. The Singaporean education system, based on the principle of meritocracy, has long been lauded by many as 'the great social leveller'. This may have been true in the past, but unfortunately, is not as true today. The Singaporean education system, being based on meritocracy as it is, inevitably results in the segregation of the academic elites, who, after achieving stellar results, go on to continuously receive the best education and opportunities there are available, leaving the rest of the population standing in the dust, with little room for those on the bottom rungs to manoeuvre their way up to the top. Moreover, this self-perpetuating cycle, which sieves out the best and keeps them away from the rest, is likely to exist in many other countries as well. With such inherently biased education systems, the stark differences in educational opportunities inevitably culminate in severely hampered social mobility later in life. Individuals who lose out early on in the race are then unable to grasp the better opportunities and attain the better life that education has seemingly promised them. Hence, education may not effectively solve all problems, due to the inherent bias in some educational systems.

The failure of education to solve all problems is further compounded by the obstacles that stand in the way of education achieving its full potential in resolving the many challenges in today's world. Education can only begin to help tackle a problem, if an education is even possible in the first place. In other words, education may be the key to solving the issue of poverty, but poverty is also the mountain in its path to effecting change. Without sufficient financial ability the poor cannot even afford tuition fees, much less the accompanying books and resources they would require. Other factors, such as parental consent, are also major road blockers to children in rural regions receiving an education. For those living in these rural areas, sending their children to school seems unnecessary, perhaps even inconvenient and a waste of time and effort. A research paper by El Daw A. Suliman of the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health provides convincing evidence that many Egyptian families find the opportunity cost of the child's time as labour and an additional source of income too high compared to the actual current costs of schooling and the anticipated future returns to education. The 42% of the families of working children who believe that school expenses represent a heavy burden, as revealed by the survey of Child Labour in Egypt (1991), is clear evidence of this. Evidently, there are many factors that stand in the way of individuals receiving an education. A similar phenomenon of a lack of accessibility manifests itself in a different form in developed countries like Singapore, where differing financial backgrounds of students inevitably dictate, or at the very least correlate, with differing degrees of access to opportunities. This is most clearly exemplified in the commercialisation of the process of entering primary schools in

Singapore, where students who live within one kilometre of the school have priority in gaining admission into that school. Not surprisingly, the prices of homes within one kilometre of the top primary schools have soared and this phenomenon in itself prevents education from levelling the playing field, for the wealthier families are clearly able to better afford these high prices compared to poorer families and can thus give their children a head start and a better advantage right from the get go. The cumulative effects of the inherent bias in educational systems, as well as the difficulties that some face in obtaining an education, prevent education from being the answer to all problems.

Furthermore, education may not be the solution to all problems, because the nature of education as one based mainly on theory and concepts, primarily addressing the cognitive aspect of an individual's development, may not be able to address social challenges. This is illustrated by the case of a lack of national identity in some countries. While many countries do have national education and civic and moral education incorporated into their curricula, the issue of national identity and national pride is, in essence, a personal one. And although national education lessons may be able to begin to create a sense of awareness in individuals that they are members of a larger community and that they belong to society, unity amongst individuals can only truly be cultivated when each and every member of society is engaged on a personal, emotional level, more often than not, through a first-hand experience of this unifying sense of belonging. This is something that education alone cannot achieve, and hence, education cannot solve all problems.

In light of the aforementioned arguments, it is clear that education, as argued thus far, cannot be the sole solution to all problems in this world. There are many other contributing factors to these problems and hence, the answer to resolving these issues should be to employ a multi-pronged approach. The example of environmental awareness is a case in point. In today's world, one would be hard-pressed to say without doubt that a majority of the world's population is unaware of the environmental damage that mankind has caused and is still causing today. Campaigns, advertisements, concerts, global events – the list of actions taken by various individuals and organisations to raise global awareness about what we are doing to our home goes on and on. Yet, factories in China are still dumping toxic wastes into nearby rivers illegally, with the Yangtze river absorbing about 25 billion tons of waste water a year, and deforestation continues, with firms like the US based Cargill corporation burning large areas of rainforests in preparation for soya plantations. Clearly, education has been insufficient to halt the environmental destruction that has been and is still ongoing in today's world. What this shows is that educating people is one thing, but the ability to take action and make a difference is another thing altogether. Other factors like political will and good leadership are key to making a difference beyond education. Ray Anderson, CEO of Interface, crowned 'America's greenest CEO', is a model example. Once a 'plunderer' of the Earth who used the earth's resources freely, Ray Anderson was challenged to lead the entire industrial world to sustainability after reading Paul Hawken's book, 'The Ecology of Commerce'. With this strong vision and the determination to make a difference, Ray Anderson managed, within 12 years, to reduce Interface's net greenhouse gas emissions by 82% in absolute tonnage, while fossil fuel usage went down by 60% per unit of production. These statistics show all too clearly the significant impact that motivated leadership has on making a difference in efforts to tackle urgent problems such as environmental damage and climate change. If Ray Anderson had not had the determination to make a difference,

no matter how educated the staff in the company was, there would likely not have been any significant change for there would not have been any initiative, not anyone to lead to put the wheels of change into motion. Education alone is clearly insufficient to solve all problems. Instead, we should look to adopting a multi-pronged approach when attempting to resolve any issue.

In conclusion, education is indeed a key factor in improving the poor state of affairs and problems that the modern world faces. Education brings enlightenment, enriches the mind and empowers people to make a difference. It is for these reasons that many have come to believe that education is the one solution to all our problems and the corresponding reaction or response to such a belief has been to promote the use of education for anything and everything. However, if we truly ever want to solve our problems and bring about change, it is essential that we first realise the truth that education is limited in its abilities and what it can do for man. More often than not, the challenges that the world and each society face are multi-faceted, arising from the complex interplay of several factors. Naturally, there cannot only be one solution to such multi-factorial concerns and hence, education should not be treated as the sole solution to all of mankind's problems. Instead, it is crucial that more initiative is taken to complement educational policies with measures that will facilitate and perhaps even amplify the positive effects of education, while simultaneously removing the barriers that currently hinder the progress that education can potentially bring.

***Marker's comments:***

***A thorough examination of the impact of education on society. Arguments show secure grasp of key issues and are supported by extensive research and aptly chosen examples. All in all, an impressive effort, Evangeline!***



# 2013 General Paper Class Assignment

Essay  
15

How far can an individual be held responsible for crimes against humanity?

Ramkumar Pavithra | 13A01A

'Arbeit Macht Frei', meaning 'labour sets you free', was the ironic slogan that stood over, and still stands over, the gates to the infamous Auschwitz I concentration camp, a grim reminder of the suffering endured by the thousands who marched through it. While horrific regimes across the world, from the Third Reich to the Khmer Rouge are often blamed upon the individuals who stood as symbols of them, one must acknowledge the bitter truth that the only reason why such regimes even exist as a stain on our history books is because of the thousands more who stood behind such individuals, willing to follow their twisted ideals. It is convenient to blame monsters such as Stalin, Hitler, Pol Pot or Charles Taylor for the horrors of the past and present; however, without the support of ordinary men and women, such monsters could never have perpetuated crimes against humanity on the scale they did.

It is simply undeniable that individuals who spearheaded crimes against humanity are to take some of the blame. Their ideals were the spark that ignited these movements, they served as inspirations and figureheads for them, and in some cases directly masterminded them, as Hitler did when he signed the order for the 'final solution to the Jewish Question' or as Stalin did when he sent many of his comrades to the Siberian gulags. They were clearly deeply twisted individuals, and no one would argue that they do not deserve blame or punishment. One must also acknowledge that in much of human history, rather ironically, the more fundamentally flawed an individual was, the more irresistible charm and charisma he seemed to possess, and the more he seemed to be able to tell the people what they wanted to hear, as Hitler did with his fiery and passionate speeches promising unity and stability in the fractious times of the Weimar Republic. This is seen not just in dictators, but also in cults such as the Manson family, the People's Temple in the United States and Aum Shinrikyo in Japan, whose charismatic leaders compelled their followers to commit murder, suicide and release Sarin gas in a crowded subway train respectively. As the Milgram Experiment, where participants 'administered' electric shocks to individuals on the command of an authoritative man in a white suit, famously proved, even individuals who were not entirely bought over by the rhetoric of the regime may have been pressured into turning a blind eye to atrocities committed or even to play a role in the atrocities themselves. Thus, one may argue that individuals are largely responsible for crimes against humanity as even though they did receive support, their support came through the leaders' natural charisma and the inherent human inclination to bend to authority.

However, I believe that one must resist the inclination to label all supporters of cruel regimes as innocent sheep misled by a strong voice and a handsome face. To do so would be to do a disservice to the brave men and women who chose to fight against these regimes. Many of these men and women were not those who were targeted for persecution – some were even those who were actively favoured by the regime, yet chose to stand up for those who were oppressed. A key example would be the siblings who led the White Rose German anti-Nazi resistance, who were mere teenagers. They were blonde-haired, blue-eyed and fair-skinned, (i.e. the privileged 'Aryan' race) yet

they fought against the regime and gave up their lives in this battle. Otto Schindler, whose life was made into the acclaimed movie 'Schindler's List', risked his life and position to save the lives of hundreds of persecuted Jews. Thus, the very existence of individuals who were willing to resist the pressures of the cult of personality shows that such resistance was possible – those who fell prey to it, while pitiable, must bear a portion of the blame. In the Third Reich, many ordinary Germans accused the fellow citizens they disliked of harbouring anti-regime sentiments, and within Mao's regime, many officials inflated harvest figures to hide the full extent of the famine during the disastrous Great Leap Forward, for fear of censure from their superiors. Doctors who swore to "first do no harm" proved more than willing to conduct depraved experiments on humans, even children, in concentration camps during the Third Reich. Thus, while the culture of adoration for the leader and the fear and paranoia engendered during such regimes may have been a factor behind the peoples' support for such regimes, the people themselves must be blamed for being too afraid, too cowed, and too silent to be the one man who stood before the tanks, the one man who refused to raise his arm and say, 'Heil Hitler'.

Secondly, an individual's ideals gain traction with the rest of society because, at a fundamental level, they were the ideals that much of society held but never acknowledged. Hitler received audiences of thousands because he spoke to the latent xenophobia and fear of instability already prevalent with much of the populace. The injustice and oppression of the French Revolution led to the cheers of supporters at the fiery speeches of Maximilien Robespierre, cheers that continued to ring even after the French Revolution degenerated from a fight for justice to a cruel vendetta against all of aristocracy. In other cases, the populace turned a blind eye to atrocities because of what they got in return – economic stability and political stability. We see this all around the world, as the economic prosperity of nations, initially at least allowed the citizenry to ignore their brutal and bloody crackdowns as slight irregularities in an otherwise sound system. Regimes across the world also successfully co-opted many of the citizenry, especially intellectuals and the bourgeois with the greatest capacity to fight back, through the promise of plum jobs, bright futures for their children and lives free of the fear of a knock on the door in the middle of the night, as seen in Mao's China, where many former liberals were co-opted into joining the Communist Party while ignoring its darker element. While it is natural human inclination to seek the best for oneself and one's family, one's conscience also holds oneself to exhibiting humanity and compassion, an instinct which much of the populace in cruel regimes ignored for comforting words and comfortable homes.

Lastly, the continued reverence for the perpetrators of crimes of humanity shows that the perpetrators alone cannot be blamed. There is clearly something fundamentally flawed if individuals continue to support those who are essentially mass murderers despite the weight of historical evidence proving the depth of their crimes. This is seen in Russia, where Stalin continues to be revered as a great leader despite the testimonies of hundreds who suffered in gulags during his infamous purges. While some may argue that this reverence stems from the whitewashed version of history they are presented with, the very existence of those who are willing to whitewash the crimes of dictators long after their deaths shows an attitude that cannot be blamed on the dictators alone. To erase the memory of those who suffered is simply horrific, and is bitter proof that otherwise ordinary men and women are capable of forgiving and forgetting heinous acts.

In conclusion, dark as it may seem, crimes against humanity can only be partly blamed on the psychopathy of individuals. To a large extent, blame must go to the thousands who cheered their rhetoric, turned away when they saw an innocent man dragged off into the night, and chose money and prestige over the voice of their conscience.

***Marker's comments:***

***A brilliant piece yet again, Pav. This is persuasively argued and has evidence of extensive reading. Do be careful to give the right examples of crimes against humanity, however. Keep it up!***

Essay  
16

Assess this reasoning: 'The ideal knife is sharp, and would remain sharp even if all the knives in this world were blunted. So the ideal knife is not identical with any of the knives in this world. So, besides the knives in this world, there must be another knife, an ideal knife, which is out of this world.'

Jeremy Khoo Jia Hern | 14A01B

Consider this expanded form of the above argument (*the ideal knife argument*) that illuminates its implicit premises:

- (1) The ideal knife is sharp. (given premise)
- (2) The ideal knife remains sharp even if all the knives in this world are blunted. (given premise)
- (3) No knife can be both sharp and blunt simultaneously. (implicit premise)
- (4) If the ideal knife remains sharp while all the this-worldly knives are blunted, the ideal knife is not identical with any of the knives in this world. (implicit premise)
- (5) The ideal knife is not identical with any of the knives in this world. (inference from 2, 3 and 4)
- (6) If (5), then either the ideal knife does not exist or it exists out of this world. (implicit premise)
- (7) The ideal knife exists. (implicit inference from 1)
- (8) The ideal knife must exist out of this world. (conclusion)

In this form, the argument appears to be deductively valid, which means that the conclusion can only be false if one of the premises is or if there is a fault in the logic. My assessment of the argument will first concentrate on the logic of the argument to show that it uses invalid logic and is hence unsound. I then proceed to outline a revised argument in the spirit of the original that does reach its conclusion validly, and give an assessment of its soundness from different philosophical positions.

In what follows I will assume the following:

- To say that 'X exists in Y' is to say that X is a constituent part of Y. To say that 'X exists' is shorthand for 'X exists in reality'.
- Hypothetical premises imply that one statement entails another; that is, 'If A, then B' means that accepting A will also require us to accept B.

The first thing we need to do is to get a clear idea of what the 'ideal knife' is. I shall start by taking the most literal interpretation of (1),

- (1A) There exists in this world (i.e. the spatiotemporal, material world) some specific knife, the 'ideal knife', that is sharp.

Obviously, (1A) entails the physical existence of at least one knife that conforms to the specifications of 'the ideal knife'. Compare this other claim,

- (F) The present King of France is bald.

(F) is said to be untrue (the question of whether it is false or meaningless is controversial) because its subject — the present King of France — does not exist. We know this because semantically '(the) present King of France' specifies a currently living man who is the ruler in a monarchy that exercises temporal power over the geographic region of France. As far as we know, no such man exists in this world.

Similarly, in attempting to ascertain the truth of (1A) we need to know what its subject ('the ideal knife') specifies. Unfortunately, this is a lot less clear than with (F). We know there is a semantic connection between 'ideal' and 'good' where 'ideal' means something like 'maximally good'. However, 'good' and 'ideal' have a variety of meanings, not all of which seem to be applicable here; for instance, they can both be used to label something morally praiseworthy (to varying degrees), but it would not seem to make any sense to speak of morally praiseworthy knives.

We seem to be speaking teleologically when we speak of 'good' or 'ideal' knives; in other words, a good knife is good at *doing* something and an ideal knife would be maximally good, or unsurpassable, at doing that thing. Unfortunately, there seems to be no fixed purpose to the use of a knife. Knives are commonly used for cutting, but there exist knives that are not for cutting: for instance, decorative or ornamental knives, ceremonial knives and toy knives.

In fact, there is widespread acceptance that there is no objective teleological force throughout much of reality. Perhaps the only place we would allow for an objective purpose as part of reality would be in ethics (for instance, virtue ethicists maintain that the purpose of human life is *eudaimonia*). But, as already said, this does not seem to be a moral issue. So in this objective sense we may suppose there is no such thing as an 'ideal knife'.

For now, let us set aside these ontological issues and allow that in virtue of the fact that knives are commonly used for cutting, the purpose of a knife is to cut. We may conclude from this that a good knife is one that is good at cutting and an ideal knife is one that is unsurpassable at cutting. However, another issue remains in that it is not clear what exactly being 'unsurpassable at cutting' means.

To put it another way, our knowledge of 'good' knives (as in knives that are good at cutting) is the only thing that informs our knowledge of 'ideal' knives. We know that in this sense, we speak of knives that easily slice through hard materials as 'good knives'. How do we get to 'ideal' from there? We could take the hardest material we know of — say the one with the strongest atomic bonds. We could say that a knife that could slice through that material easily would be very good at cutting; would it be ideal at cutting? What if there exist harder materials that we do not know of that the knife cannot cut? Perhaps then we would not consider that knife ideal. What if that was the hardest material there was at the time but at a later time scientists synthesize an even harder one? Does that mean that it was the ideal knife at one point but not at the next? It does not seem as though we are any closer to finding out what an ideal knife might really be.

This ambiguity about the ideal knife is not, in itself, fatal to the entire argument, but with regard to (1A) the fact that we have no clear idea whether the ideal knife exists renders the entire premise incoherent.

Let's take a more charitable interpretation of (1),

(1B) If the ideal knife existed in this world, it would be sharp.

Even though the ambiguity remains, let us grant (1B) for the reason that in general, knives that are good at cutting are sharp, so it is plausible to assume that whatever else the ideal knife is, it is sharp.

Following this, (2) must also be interpreted as the conditional

(2B) If some specific knife, the 'ideal knife', existed in this world, and all knives that existed in this world were blunted, the ideal knife would remain sharp.

It is evident that (2B) contradicts itself. If a particular knife K happened to conform to the specifications of the ideal knife, and subsequently K was blunted along with all the other knives, then K would no longer conform to the specifications of the ideal knife because it would now be blunt. It is incoherent to say that in virtue of the fact that it conformed to those specifications at a particular point in time that it could not be blunted subsequently.

Furthermore, following from (1B), premises (5) and (7) would become:

(5B) If the ideal knife existed in this world, it would not be identical with any of the knives in this world.

(7B) If the ideal knife existed in this world, it would exist out of this world.

Such self-contradictory premises would seem to make the entire argument untenable. Given that the argument tries to draw a distinction between the knives in this world and the ideal knife, it would seem reasonable to suppose that despite speaking of the ideal knife *remaining* sharp, the argument is not referring to a physical knife. So, given that physically existent ideal knives are a fruitless line of inquiry, let us instead take (1) to be a proposition about concepts:

(1C) There exists a concept of the ideal knife specifying how a knife must be in order to be maximally good at cutting, and one of the qualities specified is sharpness.

We can grant this for the same reason as in (1B).

This makes (2) obviously true on the plausible assumption that the blunting of all knives in this world changes nothing about how a knife must be in order to be maximally good at cutting. Furthermore, even despite the ambiguity about the ideal knife, it does seem as though there may be some fact of the matter about how a knife must be in order to be maximally good at cutting.

The issue that remains before us, however, is the question of how the concept that specifies this fact can be said to exist. More broadly, what reason do we have to believe that concepts in general exist? This of course brings us right into the philosophical debate about whether abstract objects exist. We will return to this later; for now, let us simply hold that in order for there to be a fact of the matter about how a knife must be in order to make it maximally good at cutting, there must exist a concept of

the ideal knife which grounds this fact as a truth in reality and hence (1C) is true.

According to (1C), we can know that a knife K is sharp in virtue of the fact that it conforms to the specifications of the ideal knife. Quite obviously, if K is sharp then it is not blunt. It is the case that if K is blunted, it no longer conforms to the specifications of the ideal knife. In other words, when K is blunted, the concept of the ideal knife remains the same but the properties of the knife K (the physical object) have been altered. A knife K may conform to the specifications of the ideal knife at one point in time and be a blunt knife at another point in time, but the very concept of the ideal knife, which specifies how a knife must be in order to be maximally good at cutting, is not subject to change. This distinction is important, as we shall see.

We interpreted (1) as (1C) because once it is allowed that 'the ideal knife' refers to a concept, it no longer makes sense to claim that (1) is *literally* true. If 'sharp' is understood as an adjective describing an object that possesses the quality of sharpness (like a knife), it is not clear what a sharp concept would be. On this account, (1) is just a manner of speaking, and what is really meant is something like (1C).

However, this would imply that we mean two different things by 'is sharp' when we assert (1) and when we assert

(5) The knife is sharp.

With regard to a specific, physically existent knife, we no longer mean something like 'The knife specifies the quality of sharpness.', as in (1C), but instead 'The knife possesses the quality of sharpness.'

Hence, taking 'remains sharp' as a specific case of 'is sharp', we can see that what appears to be a valid deduction in the original premises is actually invalid because it commits equivocation. Given the truth of (1C), premises (2) – (5) should be read as such:

(2C) It remains to be the case that (1) even while all the this-worldly knives begin to possess the quality of bluntness.

(3C) No knife can simultaneously possess the qualities of sharpness and bluntness.

(4C) If (2C) is true, the concept of the ideal knife is not identical with any of the knives in this world.

Therefore:

(5C) The concept of the ideal knife is not identical with any of the knives in this world.

It is eminently obvious that (4C) is untrue because (2C) does not entail any such thing. The original reasoning seemed sound because it appeared that the argument relied on only a single sense of 'is sharp' when in fact the premises were equivocating between two different senses. Maintaining that 'is sharp' *only means* 'possesses the quality of sharpness' (and concomitantly maintaining that 'the ideal knife' refers to a physical knife), as in (1A), results in the first premise becoming incoherent. Even if those problems are sidestepped with a hypothetical, as in (1B), the rest of the argument no longer makes sense. On the other hand, maintaining that 'is sharp' *only means* 'the quality of sharpness is specified by', as it does when (1) is interpreted as (1C), means that (3) no longer makes sense because physical knives do not specify sharpness like

concepts do. It is clear that two different senses of 'is sharp' are relied on to make all premises seem plausible and coherent, but equivocating between the two renders the logic invalid.

Despite this, on a charitable interpretation, (5C) can be established from (1C) given the highly plausible additional premise

(C) The knives in this world are not concepts.

If 'the ideal knife' is a concept and none of the knives in this world are concepts, then obviously the two are not identical. (5) is hence true.

However, even if we accept that (5C) is true, the argument still does not manage to establish (8). Over and above the earlier problems is a second equivocation. The entire argument thus far has relied on two different senses of 'knife' — 'knife' as in a physical knife and 'knife' as in a knife-concept. In order for (6) to be true, we must make the assumption that both physical knives and knife-concepts are the same kind of thing, 'knives', whatever this might mean.

In other words, in order for (6) to be true, (5) must entail

(E) If the ideal knife exists, and the ideal knife is not a knife in this world, the ideal knife is a knife in another world.

For (5) to entail (E), we have to accept a highly controversial assumption. It is plausible that besides all the knives in the world, we have concepts about knives. That is simply not the same thing as supposing the existence of a unitary category of 'knives' that both knife-concepts and physical knives are part of. The logic only seems valid because the fact that we are using the same linguistic label, 'knife', for both physical knives and knife-concepts obscures the fact that we have no reason to think they belong in a unitary category.

Take away this assumption, and (6) now reads

(6C) If (5), then either the concept of the ideal knife does not exist or it exists as something other than a knife in this world.

Even given that

(7C) The concept of the ideal knife exists,

we still do not arrive at the conclusion that the concept of the ideal knife must exist out of this world because it may be that the concept exists in this world as anything other than a knife. In other words, even granting that (1C) is justified in assuming that concepts exist and extending as much charity to the argument as possible, the original argument still does not manage to move to its intended conclusion.

To get to (8), we need to add a premise, (9C). Let us call this formulation the *revised argument*.



(1C) There exists a concept of the ideal knife specifying how a knife must be in order to be maximally good at cutting, and one of the qualities specified is sharpness.

(9C) If concepts exist they are non-spatiotemporal and non-material objects.

Therefore:

(8C) There exists a concept of the ideal knife that is non-spatiotemporal and non-material (i.e. it exists out of this world).

Notice that this revised formulation does not turn on any fact about the sharpness (in any sense) of knives. I believe that the flaws in the form of the original argument, as detailed above, are crippling, and hence the original logic has to be discarded. The original idea, however, that the fact of the matter about what makes an ideal knife corresponds to some part of the fabric of reality (that we call a concept), has been preserved.

There are four main philosophical positions on the issue of abstract objects that we can use to evaluate the revised argument. Take the proposition that besides all the knives, there are also the knife-concepts, or concepts about knives. We have already accepted that (5C) and (6C) are true. Thus, we have two choices: either the concept of the ideal knife does not exist or it exists as something else other than a knife in this world. Antirealist take the first choice, accepting that the concept of the ideal knife does not exist; realists maintain that it exists as something other than a knife in this world (i.e. realists maintain that something to do with knives other than the physical knives themselves are a part of reality).

The antirealist position on this proposition (*nominalism*) is that the existence of concepts is illusory. Knives exist, and we share common notions about knives, but concepts do not exist — they are not part of the fabric of reality. With specific regard to the ideal knife, nominalism denies (1C). The relevant nominalist objection to the existence of abstract objects in this case is an ontological line of argument that relies on Occam's Razor and claims that there is no need to postulate the existence of abstract objects;

if one can show that certain concrete objects can perform the theoretical roles usually associated with abstract objects, one should refrain from postulating abstract objects<sup>1</sup>

As elaborated earlier, (1C) is justified by a particular theory of truth (the *correspondence* theory): that is, in order for there to be a fact of the matter about something that fact has to correspond to some part of the fabric of reality. With regard to the ideal knife, the nominalist may simply deny this theory of truth and hence deny (8C).

Realist positions are further divided: *platonism* maintains that concepts exist, and that they are non-spatiotemporal (hence, they exist out of this world); the remaining positions — *immanent realism and conceptualism* — maintain that concepts exist but as spatiotemporal objects (i.e. they exist in this world). Platonists and nominalists are both happy to maintain that (9C) is true, which lends their views credence given that (9C) is *prima facie* highly plausible. Platonists are likely to accept (1C) and hence concur that the revised argument is sound; however, nothing about platonism entails the correspondence theory of truth that is used to establish (1C). Immanent realists and conceptualists simply reject (9C).

Given that the philosophical debate over these positions continues, the question of which the correct view is is beyond the scope of this analysis. I have only attempted to assess the validity of the ideal knife argument in general as well as its soundness in light of the main philosophical positions. While the original argument is flawed, the revised argument, formulated in the spirit of the original, is valid, and whether or not one accepts it will be dependent on one's philosophical positions on a range of fundamental issues. The revised argument may well be useful in showing the relationship between the correspondence theory of truth and platonism.

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<sup>1</sup>Rodriguez-Pereyra, Gonzalo, "Nominalism in Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2011 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/>>.

<sup>2</sup> According to a survey of philosophical opinion among professional philosophers, there is a statistically significant correlation (coefficient = 0.198) between accepting platonism and accepting the correspondence theory of truth.

Bourget, David; Chalmers, David, "The PhilPapers Surveys: Highest linear correlations", URL = <[http://philpapers.org/surveys/linear\\_most.pl](http://philpapers.org/surveys/linear_most.pl)>.

### Essay 17

#### *Question stimulus*

If you have launched a bigoted and misinformed attack on John Maynard Keynes for being short-termist because he was gay and childless, then surely the best thing to do is to retract it quickly and completely; except, now that Niall Ferguson has done so, it's immediately apparent that it's almost impossible to believe that he's being sincere.

Let's consider the possibilities here. He could be expressing views he does not truly believe. It's also possible that after his speech, he had a conversation in a bar that profoundly transformed his attitudes towards gay people or those without children. But leaving those preposterous scenarios aside, there are really only two options. Either Ferguson didn't believe what he said, but just said whatever he thought his audience wanted to hear; or he believed it then and still believes it now. Both reflect poorly on him.

The same doesn't seem to apply, interestingly, when what's being apologised for is behaviour, rather than beliefs. I have no idea whether Tiger Woods or Bill Clinton truly felt contrite for their extra-marital adventures, but it's clearly possible to believe that infidelity is wrong, yet succumb to the temptation. You can sleep around, then sincerely regret it, in almost the same moment. Short of the sudden-conversion scenario above, can you sincerely hold a belief, then instantly regret holding it, too? That doesn't seem to make sense.

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

## 2013 Knowledge and Inquiry Year 5 Common Test

### Essay 17

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

Caleb Chiam | 14S06O

In this argument, the author puts forth the conclusion that it does not make sense that one can sincerely hold a belief, then instantly regret holding it, too.

He does so by considering the specific example of Niall Ferguson, who launched a bigoted attack on John Maynard Keynes for being short-termist since he was childless and gay. Ferguson quickly retracted his statement, but it is immediately apparent that "it's almost impossible to believe he's being sincere". The author reasons this by pointing out there are only a few possibilities here. Either he believed otherwise about Keynes when he was making his speech or he believed what he was saying during the speech and still believes it now. The first scenario does not make sense, as he has little reason to make a speech to attack someone when he does not believe in such an attack in the first place. The second scenario would mean that the retracting of his statement is insincere. There is also a third possibility that he believed what he said during his speech, but radically changed his mind shortly after, but this seems too implausible for consideration. So we are left to conclude that he cannot be being sincere here. In other words, he cannot sincerely hold a belief, and then instantly regret it too. This is the conclusion the author reaches.

Despite reaching this conclusion, the author questions why the same reasoning seems to fail when what's being apologised for is behavior, rather than beliefs. In the case of Tiger Woods or Bill Clinton, it is seemingly possible to believe that infidelity is wrong, yet succumb to the temptation and then sincerely regret it, in almost the same moment. In this way, the author calls into question his own stand. Nevertheless, he asserts that ultimately, it does not seem to make sense that one can sincerely hold a belief, then instantly regret holding it too.

The argument is logical and well-reasoned. The author has clearly shown how Ferguson cannot possibly be sincere, and by extension, this shows that one cannot sincerely hold a belief, and then instantly reject it too.

That being said, there are a few possible scenarios that could possibly show that Ferguson is sincere, as the author mentioned: he could have radically changed his beliefs since the time he made his speech. Nonetheless, I agree with the author that this scenario is too implausible for consideration. The possibility remains, but it is far more likely that one of the other two scenarios was what was really the case. The author also made a valid deduction in refuting the first scenario and accepting the third, thus logically showing his conclusion that it does not make sense to hold a belief, then instantly regret holding it, too.

As for his third paragraph, which is an argument seemingly contrary to his position, I would argue that there is in fact no contradiction. The examples of Tiger Woods and Bill Clinton are, in essence, analogous to the first scenario. In these cases, we can see a clear reason for why they would act against what they believed, that is: sexual desire. If Ferguson was shown to have some reason forcing him to make a speech

despite what he believes (e.g. coercion or bribery even) then we would likewise take his retracting of his statement to be sincere. Thus, we see that the author's reasoning is consistent here, and hence I do accept the author's conclusion.

### Essay 18

'Knowledge that is certain is very limited. Knowledge that is useful is unreliable. Knowledge is either useless or unreliable.' Discuss.

Caleb Chiam I 14S06O

"Knowledge that is certain is very limited. Knowledge that is useful is unreliable. Knowledge is either useless or unreliable." This statement puts forth several issues. Firstly, that knowledge that is certain is very limited. For the purpose of this essay, I will define 'knowledge that is certain' to be knowledge that is self-justifying and able to resist the infinite regress of justification. Secondly, that knowledge that is useful is unreliable. I define 'unreliable' to mean that the knowledge cannot be relied or depended upon. Thirdly, that knowledge that is very limited is useless, and fourthly, that knowledge is either useless or unreliable. I contend that the first issue is true, but that the second, third and fourth are problematic and debatable.

Firstly, knowledge that is certain is very limited. Philosophers such as Descartes have attempted to find out which of their beliefs about the world can be considered to be certain or indubitable. To do this, Descartes applied a 'Method of Doubt' in which he questioned all of his beliefs that he would otherwise normally consider to be true, and regarded them as false until he could prove them conclusively by reason. In doing so, he found the cogito, or cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am). He reasoned that one of the things he could be sure of was that he existed. What 'he' actually was (flower, mushroom, leaf, chicken) he could not actually know but that that there was a consciousness (i.e. himself) carrying out the process of doubting was necessarily true for 'doubting entails a doubter,' thus he found certain knowledge. He ascertained other things through such transcendental arguments, such as that 'language exists', 'I am aware of having sensory experiences' and so on, where the attempt to doubt such prepositions would be self-defeating as the process of doubting it provides the conditions for the proposition to be true. For example, to doubt that language exists would necessitate one to consider the proposition (in language in our minds) and to formulate an argument against it would necessitate the use of language, thus the proposition is proven to be true. From such arguments, indubitable beliefs could be found, and this knowledge is termed a priori knowledge (knowledge that is known prior to experience). Other examples of a priori truths are analytic propositions, which are recognised to be true simply through examination of the terms involved. For example, 'a bachelor is a man' is an analytic proposition as an understanding of 'bachelor' shows to a person that 'a bachelor is a man.' Finally, there are also mathematical and geometric truths (e.g.  $1+1=2$ , a triangle has three sides).

It is also worthy to note that philosophical sceptics have also shown that most of what we know requires further justification and is thus not certain. They employ the reasoning of the 'infinite regress of justification', where the reasons provided for our beliefs, in turn, require further justification for said reasons, and this goes on ad infinitum. For example, to know that I cannot fly, I might appeal to the fact that the law of gravity exists, and as to how I know this, I would have to say that my science teacher told me so and she is reliable, and the reason she is reliable is because her knowledge is based on what scientists have proven, and so on. In other words, to know that we know something would require us to justify an infinite number of other things, thus the sceptic concludes that we cannot know anything with certainty.

However, Descartes has argued that he can stop the infinite regress by appealing to self-evident beliefs: beliefs that require no further justification. As mentioned previously, these self-justifying beliefs are the indubitable and analytic truths he has found. Following the traditionalist structure of knowledge, where knowledge is split into foundational beliefs (beliefs that form the basic building blocks in our structure of knowledge) and superstructural beliefs (beliefs which are supported by the foundational beliefs, we know the world by reason (rationalism).

The problem with rationalism, however, is that there is a gap between our superstructural beliefs (e.g. the sky is blue) for we cannot see how these foundational beliefs which consist of indubitable beliefs, mathematical truths, and analytic statements could logically lead us to conclude that the sky is blue. This is because the truths revealed by reason are necessary truths; they could not be any other way (e.g.  $1+1$  could not be 3). Knowledge about the world consists of contingent truths, truths that could be otherwise. For example the sky could be yellow, or the gravitational constant could have been something other than  $6.67 \times 10^{-11}$ . In this way, we see that this certain knowledge can only give us necessary truths, but it gives us no knowledge of the world, which is based on contingent truths. Hence, knowledge that is certain is very limited.

Secondly, for the statement that knowledge that is useful is unreliable, I contend that knowledge that is useful is by definition reliable. The reasons for such a position might be that knowledge that is useful is basically knowledge about the world, which is based on contingent truths. The fact that we cannot justify them with our self-justifying beliefs serving as the bedrock means that the sceptics' 'infinite regress of justification' has not been countered, and thus this knowledge that is useful is uncertain and thus unreliable. On the contrary, when we say that something is useful, it must mean that the knowledge in question has aided us in our daily lives in one way or another. In other words, the knowledge must have been shown to work for it to be applicable in daily life. The fact that it has shown to consistently work (i.e. useful) does mean that this knowledge can be relied and depended upon. Hence, in response to the assertion that certainty is needed for reliability, I contend that we have no reason to make this link as we do not need to know that we know in order to have knowledge. For example, the fisherman who uses the stars to guide his way home may not know why this works (or know that he knows) but we say that this knowledge is useful and reliable nonetheless simply because it has been shown to work. The fact that this knowledge cannot be derived by reason may make it uncertain, but that is not the same thing as it being unreliable. Hence, it is untrue that knowledge that is useful is unreliable.

For the third issue, the third statement can be considered to be true as the indubitable knowledge that we have identified earlier does not tell us anything about the world, and if we accept that 'useful knowledge' is knowledge about the world, then yes, knowledge that is certain is limited to necessary truths, which do not give us knowledge of the world and is in that sense, useless. However, to say that this certain knowledge is completely useless is incorrect as we can use mathematical axioms and truths to aid us in our understanding of the world. For example, the laws of addition or that a straight line is the shortest way between two points, while being necessary truths, are still applicable and useful in our interactions with the world since the world obeys these rules.

Finally, we can see that knowledge can be divided into two categories: certain knowledge and uncertain knowledge. I have shown that certain knowledge is limited but that it is not completely useless despite it telling us truths about the world. Uncertain knowledge, which is knowledge about the world, is not unreliable, as I have shown. Hence, the statement that knowledge is either useless or unreliable is completely untrue.



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## Notes









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