

2023 Prelim Paper 2 Suggested Answer Scheme

Passage 1

1. What is the author's definition of meritocracy in paragraph 1? **Use your own words as far as possible.** [1m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| that an individual's position in society should depend on his or her combination of ability and effort . | <p>A person's success/progress/status in society should be based/reliant/contingent on/ defined/informed by a mix/blend of their skills/talent/prowess and hard work/labour.</p> <p>DNA: 'willpower/determination/ commitment/ contributions/ work' for 'effort' DNA: 'role'/'value'/'worth' for 'position' (notion of hierarchy or progression is required) DNA: 'represented by' for 'depend'</p> |

2. State **three** reasons why meritocracy is 'so popular' (line 7) to most people today. **Use your own words as far as possible.** [3m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| First, it prides itself on the extent to which people can get ahead in life on the basis of their natural talents . | <p>a) Meritocracy allows people to progress/succeed due to their innate/inborn skills.</p> <p>DNA: "head start", "potential" for "talents" DNA: 'their own'/'personal' for 'natural'</p> |
| Second, it tries to secure equality of opportunity by providing education for all . | <p>b) It ensures everyone has the same prospects/chances through schooling/dissemination of knowledge.</p> <p>B.O.D.: "give everyone learning resources"</p> |
| Third, it forbids discrimination on the basis of race and sex and other irrelevant characteristics . | <p>c) It disallows unfair treatment/prejudice on the pretext of colour/ethnicity and gender.</p> <p>DNA: "strongly against", 'prevents' for 'disallows' DNA: "segregation", "ostracised", "exclusion" for 'discrimination'</p> |
| Fourth, it awards jobs through open competition rather than patronage | <p>d) Jobs are not assigned to people on the grounds of associations/ lineage/family connections/recommendations and to those who</p> |

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| and nepotism | <p>have shown support through financial aid, but instead to the best talents/fair challenge.</p> <p>Accept paraphrase of “patronage and nepotism” collectively, through some notion of “privilege”.</p> <p><i>Any 3 points for 3m</i></p> |
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3. Explain the author’s use of the metaphor ‘palace of illusions’ (line 22) to describe meritocracy. [2m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p>However, some argue that meritocracy is now the opposite of what it was intended to be: a way of transmitting inherited privilege from one generation to another through the mechanism of elite education... This palace of illusions is also a factory of misery.</p> | <p>a. (Literal meaning) <u>Just as</u> a palace of illusions promises grandeur / holds great allure but is ultimately false, [1m]</p> <p><i>Note: notion of ‘grandness’/‘greatness’ is required for point A. DNA: ‘delusion’; ‘romanticised’ (by itself)</i></p> <p>b. (Contextual meaning) meritocracy promises fairness/equality but does not actually deliver on that promise. [1m]</p> <p><i>Note: ‘Meritocracy’ must be mentioned in answer for point B. The notion of ‘fairness’/‘equality’ is inferred from the passage. Other similar ideas can be accepted as well.</i></p> |

4. From paragraph 4:
On what basis do meritocracy’s advocates argue that it does a better job than its alternatives? [2m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p>They argue that it does a better job than the alternatives of reconciling various goods that are inevitably in tension with each other – for example, social justice and economic efficiency and</p> | <p>They do so by highlighting/stating the premise that</p> <p>a. Meritocracy is able to bring together/ harmonise/ synthesise/ integrate/ accommodate / allow for / strike a balance between / resolve conflict between / seeks agreement between [1m] DNA: “solve problem”/“heal”/ “reuniting”/“reconnecting”/“rebonding”/ “putting together” (values are in conflict) / “joining”</p> |

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| individual aspiration and limited opportunities. | <p>b. inherently/naturally/innately/ inescapably/unavoidably...</p> <p>opposing/conflicting/ clashing...</p> <p>value systems/ societal values/ ideologies/goals/aspirations/ideas/ concepts [1m]</p> <p>DNA: 'undeniably' for 'inevitably'</p> <p>DNA: 'needs'/'factors'/'aspects'/'benefits'/' issues' for 'goods'</p> <p>DNA: 'in contrast', 'polarising' for 'in tension with'</p> |
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5. From paragraph 6:
Why does the author mention the fact that women make up more than half of university places in Western countries and Kamala Harris is vice-president of the United States?
[2m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p>Discrimination on the basis of race and sex is now illegal across the advanced world. Women take up more than half of the places in most Western (and in many emerging country) universities. Kamala Harris, a woman of Jamaican and Indian heritage, is vice-president of the United States, and may well follow Barack Obama to the Oval Office. None of that would have been possible without the meritocratic idea.</p> | <p>He does so to</p> <p>a. [Function] strengthen/reinforce/emphasise/underline/highlight his claim OR demonstrate/support/illustrate/prove/provide evidence for the idea (1)</p> <p>DNA: "to show"</p> <p>b. [Context] that bigotry / unfairness / inequity / intolerance predicated on ethnicity or gender is against the law in developed nations OR that meritocracy was instrumental in ensuring that gender or ethnic minorities were treated fairly/ were able to achieve the fairest/ most equitable outcomes. (1)</p> <p><i>Note: Point A must be attempted for Point B to be awarded.</i></p> |

Passage 2

6. According to the author, in what way is meritocracy *commonly perceived* as an ‘even playing field’ (line 3)? **Use your own words as far as possible.** [1m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p><i>Politicians across the ideological spectrum continually return to the theme that the rewards of life - money, power, jobs, university admission - should be distributed according to skill and effort.</i></p> <p>The most common metaphor is the ‘even playing field’ upon which players can rise to the position that fits their merit.</p> <p>Conceptually and morally, meritocracy is <i>presented</i> as the opposite of systems such as hereditary aristocracy, in which one’s social position is determined by the lottery of birth. Under meritocracy, wealth and advantage are merit’s rightful compensation, not the fortuitous windfall of external events.</p> | <p>Meritocracy is regarded as an ‘even playing field’ because an individual attains success based on his/her hard work/ability/talent <u>instead of luck.</u></p> <p>OR</p> <p>Meritocracy is regarded as an ‘even playing field’ because, under it, an individual attains success based <u>mainly/ solely/purely</u> on his/her hard work/ability/talent.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Meritocracy is regarded as an ‘even playing field’ because, under it, an individual <u>ought to attain success based on his/her hard work/ability/talent.</u></p> <p>DNA: “skill”/ “effort” / “rise” (lift)</p> |

7. From paragraph 2:
Why does the author use the word ‘intervenes’ (line 10) to describe the role of luck? [1m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p>the belief that merit rather than luck determines success or failure in the world is demonstrably false. This is not least because merit itself is, in large part, the result of luck. Luck intervenes by granting people merit, and again by furnishing circumstances in which merit can translate into success.</p> <p>Many have merit, but few succeed. What separates the two is luck.</p> | <p>a. (Meaning) The author uses the word ‘intervenes’ to emphasise/draw attention to luck as an interfering/external/disrupting force</p> <p>DNA: “luck decides”</p> <p>AND</p> <p>b. (Context) which reduces the significance/role of merit in determining one’s success/ doing well (the idea of achievement needs to be clear)</p> <p>DNA: “interferes with system of meritocracy”</p> <p><i>Both points needed for 1m</i></p> |

8. From paragraph 5:
Explain in your own words, the ‘paradox of meritocracy’ (line 26). [1m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| Yet researchers found that, ironically, attempts to implement meritocracy lead to just the kinds of inequalities that it aims to eliminate. | <p>It is contradictory that meritocracy creates/perpetuates the exact/very/same social unfairness it has tried to or has successfully eradicated.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>It is contradictory that meritocracy seeks to eradicate social unfairness, yet perpetuates the exact/very/same unfairness.</p> <p>DNA: marginalisation (not inequality as shown in context)</p> |

9. From paragraph 6:
What does the word 'self-congratulatory' (line 31) imply about meritocracy? [1m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| However, in addition to legitimisation, meritocracy also offers flattery. Where success is determined by merit, each win can be viewed as a reflection of one's own virtue and worth. Meritocracy is the most self-congratulatory of distribution principles. Its ideological alchemy transmutes property into praise, material inequality into personal superiority. | <p>It implies that meritocracy is an exercise in vanity / a vainglorious system / boosts self-importance</p> <p>DNA: 'self absorbed', 'self obsessed' (more about one's own <u>interests</u> rather than self perception), 'self-gratifying', 'narcissism', 'selfishness', 'feel good about oneself/ one's life'</p> <p>OR</p> <p>It implies that meritocracy is a system in which people think that their success is justified/the result of their own value.</p> <p>OR</p> <p>It implies that people do not deserve the recognition that they receive in a meritocracy. (Must mention meritocracy as an agent.)</p> <p>Note: negative connotation is required <i>Allow lift of "self", "praise"</i></p> |

10. According to the author in paragraph 7, why should meritocracy be abandoned? **Use your own words as far as possible.** [3m]

| From the passage | Suggested paraphrase |
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| <p>Despite the moral assurance and personal flattery that meritocracy offers to the successful, it ought to be abandoned both as a belief about how the world works and as a general social ideal.</p> <p>a) It is false, b) and believing in it encourages selfishness, c) discrimination and d) indifference to the plight of the unfortunate.</p> | <p>It should be abandoned because</p> <p>a) it is wrong/ flawed/untrue/ fake/invalid, Accept: deceptive</p> <p>b) boosts/ spurs/ motivates/ fuels self-centredness/egotistical/entitled behaviour, DNA: 'diminish selflessness', 'unwilling to share'</p> <p>c) bigotry/ intolerance/unfairness/inequality/ inequity/prejudice/biasedness, and DNA: injustice/ judgement/ judgemental</p> <p>d) apathy to the predicament/ sorry state/ sad state of the underprivileged/ unlucky/impoverished/poor. DNA: "those struggling" for "plight of the unfortunate" DNA: 'unempathetic', 'ignorant' for 'indifference' Accept: 'nonchalance' for 'apathy'</p> <p>1pt: 1m 2-3 pts: 2m 4pts: 3m</p> |

11. Using material from paragraphs 3–5 only (lines 14-28), summarise what the author has to say about why meritocracy is detrimental and why its detriments may be surprising. (8)

Write your summary in **no more than 120 words**, not counting the opening words which are printed below. **Use your own words as far as possible.**

Growing research suggests that...

| | From the passage | Suggested Paraphrase |
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| Paragraph 3 | | |
| A | believing in meritocracy makes people | putting faith / trusting in meritocracy renders one |
| B | less self-critical | More complacent / easier on one's own faults DNA: self-reflect |

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| | | DNA: less aware Must capture element of judgement |
| C | more selfish, | Heightens self-centredness / increasingly ego-centric DNA: proud/arrogant DNA: self-indulgent, self-interest (does not show selfishness) DNA: reduces selflessness, less generous DNA: only care about themselves (cannot be absolute) |
| D | and even more prone to acting in discriminatory ways | And increasingly predisposed / have a higher tendency towards prejudiced/biased behaviours DNA: exclusive, bully, mistreatment |
| E | Meritocracy is not only wrong ; | Meritocracy is misguided / erroneous / problematic / incorrect DNA: untrue, false (context), improper (degree), inaccurate |
| F | it is bad | And harmful / detrimental / corrupting DNA: evil, horrible, terrible |
| Paragraph 4 | | |
| G | simply holding meritocracy as a value seems to promote discriminatory behaviour . | Regarding it as a virtue encourages unfair actions. |
| H | in companies that explicitly held meritocracy as a core value , | In corporations/organisations that overtly regard meritocracy as a fundamental/essential virtue/principle , |
| I | managers assigned greater rewards to male employees over female employees | bosses gave higher merits to men over women Acceptable lift: male, female DNA: "benefits" for 'merits' |
| J | with identical performance evaluations. | with similar/equal work results / similar output/ productivity/contribution assessments . DNA: abilities |
| K | This preference disappeared where meritocracy was not explicitly | This favouritism vanished where meritocracy was not openly embraced/practised as a virtue |

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| | adopted as a value. | |
| Paragraph 5 | | |
| M | impartiality is the core of | unbiasedness lies at the heart of |
| N | meritocracy's moral appeal | meritocracy's ethical attraction |
| O | The 'even playing field' is intended to avoid unfair inequalities based on gender, race and the like | Meritocracy is supposed/designed to prevent/ thwart unjust discrepancies |
| P | Yet...attempts to implement meritocracy lead to just the kinds of inequalities | Despite this, executing meritocracy creates exactly the types of disparities |
| Q | that it aims to eliminate . | it resolves to eradicate |
| R | explicitly adopting meritocracy as a value | Openly embracing meritocracy as a virtue |
| S | convinces subjects of their own moral worth . | assures people of their own ethical value |
| T | Satisfied that they are just | They take comfort in their righteousness/ morals DNA: "breeds complacency" alone; "they are right" |
| U | they become less inclined to examine their own behaviour for signs of prejudice . | and are more unlikely to judge their own actions for traits of discrimination . |

20 points in total

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| Marks | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
| Points | 1-2 | 3-4 | 5-6 | 7 | 8-9 | 10-11 | 12-13 | 14+ |

Suggested answer:

Growing research suggests that **trusting** in meritocracy **renders** one **complacent**, **heightens self-centredness** and **increases the predisposition** towards **prejudiced behaviours**. Meritocracy is **misguided** and **harmful**. **Regarding it as a virtue encourages unfair actions**. **Corporations** that **overtly regard** meritocracy as a **fundamental principle** gave **higher merits** to **men over women** with **similar work results**. This **favouritism vanished** where meritocracy was **not openly embraced as a virtue**. This is **unexpected** as **fairness lies at the heart of meritocracy's ethical attraction**. Meritocracy is **supposed to thwart unjust discrepancies**. However, **executing** meritocracy **creates the disparities it resolves to eradicate**. **Openly embracing meritocracy as a virtue assures** people of their own **ethical value**. They **take comfort** in their **righteousness** and are **more unlikely to judge their own actions for discrimination**. (120 words)

12. Adrian Wooldridge argues that meritocracy should be embraced, while Clifton Mark argues that it should be abandoned. How far do you agree or disagree with the views expressed in these **two** passages? Illustrate your answer with examples of how you and your society regard meritocracy.

R1: Reference to the authors' claims

R2: *How far* do you agree/disagree

R3: you and your society

| R1 - Passage/ Paragraph: Claim | R2 - Strongly Agree | R2 - Strongly Disagree |
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| 1 / 2: Meritocracy's success in crossing boundaries – ideological and cultural, geographical and political – is striking. | Reflective of the strength of fairness that comes from the system, meritocracy's allure and adoption can be seen worldwide. Given that it can be applied to many different political systems and governments, Singapore has smartly latched onto this system and it has clearly led us to success in the past decades, especially after we gained independence. With our rather volatile conditions faced initially in the past, especially with racial tensions, and the fact that we were a small yet multi-racial and multi-religious nation, this was the ideology that served us well then in face of economic and political turmoil, thanks largely to the fairness of the system. | Admittedly, meritocracy's transnational allure and benefits have helped Singapore rise from a Third-World country into an economic and technological powerhouse within 50 years. However, in recent times, frays have started to appear in this system. Many Singaporeans, tired and unhappy about the large and increasing income gap as well as stressful and competitive environment, have started to question the benefits and indeed, legitimacy of the system. So much so that MP Indranee Rajah had to come out and speak about its importance in the midst of these complaints a few years ago. Hence, it is a stretch to say that its success has been crossing boundaries, especially in recent years. |

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| <p>1 / 5: Meritocracy succeeds because it does a better job than the alternatives of reconciling the two great tensions at the heart of modernity: between efficiency and fairness on the one hand, and between moral equality and social differentiation on the other.</p> | <p>Because meritocracy aims to ensure that success is determined by one's efforts and achievements, it effectively ensures that those who work the hardest and contribute the most to society receive the greatest rewards, therefore ensuring a fair distribution of resources within society to those who are most deserving.</p> | <p>In practice, meritocracy is undermined by differences in social standing and privilege. The primary means of determining one's merit is one's accomplishments - academic or personal. However, in today's society, one's social class can restrict the opportunities available to achieve those merits or provide massive advantages over less socially privileged individuals - advantages which do not arise from the individual's merit while in turn making it easier to achieve new merits.</p> <p>Example -> Singapore: MYE removed, but tuition centres offering mock exams at a rate of anywhere from \$20-\$95 per subject: more mid-year practices == more confidence == advantages in exams == higher likelihood of attaining merits.</p> |
| <p>1 / 6: The meritocratic idea made the modern world, sweeping aside race and sex-based barriers to competition, building ladders of opportunity from the bottom of society to the top, and electrifying sluggish institutions with intelligence and energy.</p> | <p>Arguably, meritocracy made Singapore, and Singapore would not have come this far as a nation without it. Meritocracy as a principle was, and continues to be, a pillar of our society as it is the fairest means of identifying, rewarding and retaining talent. Meritocracy is particularly crucial in a resource-scarce country which cannot afford to lose its most valuable resource – human talent – as it motivates people to do their very best, making it possible to get to the very top by virtue of one's exceptional achievements, regardless of one's family background, gender, race, language or religion. Indeed, it has been an electrifying force in Singapore, propelling individuals and institutions alike</p> | <p>This claim is skewed in its overly optimistic view of meritocracy ('sweeping aside barriers', 'electrifying sluggish institutions with intelligence and energy'). Were institutions in Singapore that sluggish that they needed the particular intelligence and energy associated with meritocracy in order for the young nation to succeed? Surely, most Singaporeans were a hardworking lot who did their best without the extrinsic rewards promised by the meritocratic idea.</p> <p>The claim also fails to take into account the unintended but very real consequences of the meritocratic ideal in Singapore, namely, the propagation of inequality. Its veracity is questionable, and one cannot agree with it.</p> |

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| | to maintain the heights of achievement that we have come to be known for. | |
| 2 / 2: Although widely held, the belief that merit rather than luck determines success or failure in the world is demonstrably false. This is not least because merit itself is, in large part, the result of luck. | <p>The allure of meritocracy as aforementioned is the fairness that it holds firm as a major pillar in its tenet. This fairness is a result of the belief that in such a system, everyone has an equal chance to succeed, regardless of upbringing, social status and circumstances as long as hard work is put in. However, as rightly pointed out by the author, such a tenet and by extension, system, is flawed at a fundamental level as it has mistakenly assumed that hard work solves all issues of inequality and makes everything a level-playing field. Indeed, it cannot be further from the truth. As time is money, those with multiple avenues of resources - be it tuition, money to donate or affiliations and thus having a foot in an organisation - be it a school or company - all points towards the fact that meritocracy in many countries (or at least in Singapore) cannot be said to be fair at all, as luck dictates who gets born into a richer, more influential and well-connected family. As much as we say we value equality in our pledge and systems, we cannot deny that elitism, favouritism, the widening income gap, are still present in our society, which goes to prove that meritocracy is based more on the luck of the draw of which family one is born into, rather than the hard work put in.</p> | <p>The allure of meritocracy as aforementioned is the fairness that it holds firm as a major pillar in its tenet. This fairness is a result of the belief that in such a system, everyone has an equal chance to succeed, regardless of upbringing, social status and circumstances as long as hard work is put in. But is it the case that merit is borne out of luck? Granted, though luck can play a part in granting a person more talent than another, we all know that talent can - and indeed, has been shown to be something more honed than god-given - is a thing that must be practiced on over and over again, in order to be better and to maintain such high levels. Moreover, luck factors in every aspect of life - but that does not mean that hard work is negated or factored out. In this light, this argument is not applicable to Singapore, or any other country. In fact, because Singapore's government puts so much emphasis on educational opportunities for all, it is not a question of luck but hard work and resilience that rules the day for Singaporeans.</p> |
| 2 / 5: Impartiality is the core of meritocracy's moral appeal. [...] Yet researchers found that, ironically, attempts to implement meritocracy lead to | Humans often dislike admitting mistakes, and therefore the prevalence of meritocracy as a widely-accepted ideology can serve as an easy excuse for an | This statement assumes that the vast majority of humans are unwilling to admit their mistakes, which is a sweeping generalisation. Moreover, this ignores the |

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| <p>just the kinds of inequalities that it aims to eliminate. They suggest that this 'paradox of meritocracy' occurs because explicitly adopting meritocracy as a value convinces subjects of their own moral worth.</p> | <p>individual to make a decision based on non-merit factors while justifying it as being made on the basis of the subject's merits. This process may even be subconscious, while the easy justification disincentivises further introspection regarding the basis for the decision.</p> <p>This issue is compounded by the arbitrary nature by which merit is assigned - the value of an individual's achievement and the extent of their responsibility for it is often determined by the evaluation of another individual - an evaluation that is, necessarily, not free of the influence of human irrationality.</p> | <p>possibility of quantifying the value of an individual's achievements via some standardised mode of evaluation, which can serve to remove the element of human irrationality and/or inconsistency from the process of evaluation.</p> <p>For example, in education and standardised testing, the level of a student's achievement is codified and standardised across the country, in the form of quantitative grades and educational attainment. In these instances, with all students judged on the same criteria and (in the case of high-stakes national examinations) grading performed by external parties who have never come into contact with the students, the students' merits can be objectively evaluated, thereby avoiding the potential danger of arbitrary assignment of merit or demerit, in turn allowing for an objective assessment of a student's ability and effort.</p> |
| <p>2 / 6: In addition to legitimisation, meritocracy also offers flattery. Where success is determined by merit, each win can be viewed as a reflection of one's own virtue and worth. Meritocracy is the most self-congratulatory of distribution principles.</p> | <p>It is undeniable that this self-congratulatory system of meritocracy in Singapore has not only bred elitism, but exacerbated social divisions as a result of such elitism. It has engendered snobbery among the elite, with their old-boy networks, country-club memberships and mansions in prime districts, rather than empathy for the average Singaporean, let alone the underprivileged, effectively creating two Singapores. One can understand why the elite would want to continue to pat themselves on the back for a 'job well done' and perpetuate this closed system of continuous privilege.</p> | <p>While meritocracy may be self-congratulatory and flawed, it does not seem fair to claim that it is the most self-congratulatory of distribution principles. Surely, other distribution principles that are inherently far more unfair would also be even more self-congratulatory?</p> |
| <p>2 / 7: Meritocracy ought to be</p> | <p>Any belief system that</p> | <p>It does not seem wise or even</p> |

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| <p>abandoned both as a belief about how the world works and as a general social ideal. It is false, and believing in it encourages selfishness, discrimination and indifference to the plight of the unfortunate.</p> <p>* Teaching point: This claim is more controversial than that in para 3, and a more worthwhile claim for evaluation.</p> | <p>encourages selfishness, discrimination and indifference to the plight of the unfortunate ought to be abandoned, as it would be unconscionable to do otherwise. In order for Singapore to truly progress and be truly inclusive, an alternative governing principle must be sought, and the idea that Singapore has “no other viable alternative” ought to be discarded. There should be no half measures, no tweaking of meritocracy, in order to achieve the societal goals of equity and equality, and to do what is morally right.</p> | <p>pragmatic to completely abandon meritocracy on the basis that it skews one’s view of how the world really works, and has failed as a general social ideal. Notwithstanding its flaws, meritocracy has enabled Singapore to get to where she is today, and the government is not entirely blind to the needs of the less fortunate. In fact, the government has attempted to create a more compassionate meritocracy through more inclusive policies, particularly in public housing, education and healthcare. It would make sense to continue tweaking meritocracy in Singapore such that it evolves into a much more compassionate meritocracy, such that the needs of the least fortunate are seriously considered in the formulation of public policies, and the unfeeling hyper-competitiveness that has resulted from meritocracy as we know it, is significantly reduced.</p> |
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