

KALEIDOSCOPE

Issue 1 2019

AN IGLOBE PUBLICATION

Editor's Foreword

There is a French saying that goes, "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose", or, "the more things change, the more they stay the same". As the Kaleidoscope transitions from a hard copy publication to a digital one, this statement is especially pertinent—here's why.

Let me first introduce the new Kaleidoscope format. Kaleidoscope is now a soft copy PDF that can be downloaded online, onto whichever device you would like to read it on, whenever you would like to read it. You are welcome to print it out, too. It will be released periodically, such that the best essays, largely written under timed conditions, will reach readers more expeditiously. While these are major overhauls, the quality of the essays, the rigour of the editorial work and the sheer dedication of the editorial team will remain unchanged. Moreover, the purpose of this essay compilation remains constant. The Kaleidoscope does not just strive to showcase the best of the college's writing, but also to dare us to expand our limited horizons, and then to channel our thoughts into words. In a world of fake news and unfounded opinions, true intellectual curiosity and discourse is more precious than ever. Thus, simply put, the Kaleidoscope challenges us to discover and recognise what we stand for, and then to express ourselves in the best way possible.

The medium may be different, but the message remains the same: your pen is your voice. Use it wisely.

Yours sincerely,
Lau Yong Yee, Chloe
Chief Editor of iGlobe



VJC IGLOBE

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ARTS & CULTURE

"The purpose of art is washing the dust of daily life off our souls." - Pablo Picasso

"Pop culture is a reflection of social change, not a cause of social change." - John Podhoretz

"Music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife." - Kahlil Gibran

'For the majority of people, the Arts are a waste of time.' How true is this of your society?

Erin Tan (17S32)

Many Singaporeans will fondly remember their first exposure to 'the Arts': happily splashing paint on a canvas in primary school in an unconscious attempt to become the next Van Gogh or Cezanne. However, as time passes and Singaporean children grow into teenagers and adults, there is a growing disillusionment with the artistic disciplines of painting, sculpture, music, drama, literature and the like. Today, it is the common perception that many Singaporeans view the Arts as something useless and insignificant, something easily cast aside in favour of other, more 'worthy' pursuits. However, I would beg to differ; the Arts can offer us so much more, and it is simply not true that, for the majority of people in my society, they are a waste of time—to many diverse groups of people and stakeholders, the Arts do truly offer great value.

Firstly, in the education sector, the government does recognise that the Arts are an important way to build creativity and innovation in the young. Initiatives like the Creative Arts Programme, which caters to students in secondary school and junior college, aid in the recognition and cultivation of creative thinking in students who are so inclined. Specialised institutions like SOTA encourage self-reliance and individualism in ideation, whether it be working on coursework for exams, or performance pieces to showcase publicly. Beyond the realms of secondary and pre-tertiary education, the government has sponsored competitions like the Golden Point Award, which commends the outstanding work of local, amateur authors. This consistent policy of rewarding and encouraging creativity and artistic ability shows the great stock the government places in the Arts as a vessel to cultivate such essential, and oft-overlooked skills. Such an outlook is well-received as well. It is generally recognised that in the fast-changing landscape of today's volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world, with disruption and change becoming the new normal, Singapore needs innovators and entrepreneurs to drive further growth and keep Singapore's place as one of the most advanced and developed nations in the world. Such qualities, while not entirely exclusive to purveyors of the Arts, are important qualities that an Arts education confers on its acolytes—the ability to think out of the box, and ideate in a creative manner. Hence, it is generally recognised in Singapore that an Arts education can play a vital role in shaping the kind of leaders we wish to see in the future.

Additionally, there is much appreciation shown by the general public for the ability of the Arts to act as a platform for the showcasing and raising of awareness of important issues. For instance, productions by local theatre and drama companies like Wild Rice and Pangdemonium portray and bring up issues that are pertinent in Singapore today, such as the suffering of stroke patients, the plight of the invisible poor and the generation gap. Such issues are presented in a manner that appeals to the public, and drama can spread the intended message and awareness of the message in a way that touches the hearts of many. After all, it is generally recognised that performances of the Arts are often eloquent in a way words cannot hope to capture, appealing to the better parts of human nature and persisting in our minds long after the conclusion of such a performance. Furthermore, in Singaporean society where both government and self-censorship are quite commonplace, works of art often offer a refreshing new perspective in a manner meant to promote understanding of contentious issues and thought, and not simply to stir controversy for better sales, like the works of trashier authors. A case in point is the anthology *Telltale 11*, a collection of works by popular local writers like Jeffrey Lim, which touches on issues at the forefront of the Singaporean psyche—capital punishment, censorship, Western corrosion of local identity and so on. In such a way, the Arts encourage us to take a step back from our petty, mundane, day-to-day lives, and acquire the

helicopter vision that allows us to appreciate issues that are bigger than us, and yet affect our lives in a very real manner. These merits of the Arts are well-appreciated by many, with much readership and viewership accorded to the above-mentioned works and productions by local purveyors, especially given the rarity of such issues being tackled in the spotlight, in the heavily censored and regulated Singapore of today.

Despite these two observations of Singaporean society, there may be some truth to the assertion that many view the Arts as a waste of time, and favour other pursuits viewed as more 'worthy', and as producing more tangible and physical results. Many parents abhor the thought of their children entering the arts stream or taking an arts degree, favouring the more conventional disciplines that are more likely to guarantee one a stable job with a steady income. Even for parents who press endless music and art lessons on their beleaguered children—whether the children want them or not—are not doing so to truly encourage their offspring to pursue the Arts as a career, but rather, to cultivate a 'classier' hobby that also looks good on their portfolio. With the top earning graduates from 2017 being from Computer Science, and other similar STEM disciplines, many see little economic value in the Arts. In light of the high cost of living in Singapore, many therefore dismiss the Arts, and turn to more viable ways of eking out a living in the cutthroat business world.

Furthermore, there is the common perception that only artists can appreciate art, lending an elitist connotation to the Arts that may cause many of its more timid admirers to shy away. For many, art is considered a pastime best left to the experts, resulting in them finding little meaning in the Arts, and turning elsewhere to find recreation.

However, in spite of the reservations put forth by many a Philistine in opposition of the Arts, times are changing, as are perceptions. Singaporeans are becoming more aware of the myriad of benefits the Arts can offer to society and to the individual, whether one is part of the so-called 'hoi polloi' or a true-blue connoisseur. The recent exhibition of famous Impressionist works at the National Gallery this year attracted massive crowds. These were not only from the upper echelons of society—many a 'normal' working-class family was attracted to the beautiful works of great masters like Monet, due to the timeless, classical beauty of such immortal works. Such is the nature of the Arts, which appeals to people from different walks of life and interests, who will interpret and respond to these works differently.

Furthermore, much effort has been made today to make artistic productions more accessible for the common man, with productions like Shakespeare in the Park bringing the works of the Bard off the stage and into avenues accessible to all, whether young or old, whether an expert or not. The Singapore Symphonic Orchestra no longer confines their performances to theatres like the Esplanade, venturing to schools and the Botanic Gardens even, to bring the cadences of classical music to everyone. Thus, through the efforts of many, the Arts have become more popular among the masses, bringing entertainment and aesthetic appreciation to many in Singapore.

Additionally, those who dismiss the Arts and cast it aside in favour of other more scientific pursuits are blinded in their single-mindedness, and cannot see one very important compromise: students of the Arts and students of the Sciences can coexist and cooperate. While it is true that one trained solely in, say, theatre or music could never hope to build a rocket ship or find a cure for cancer, the qualities conferred by their education in the Arts—creativity, appreciation of aesthetics, global awareness and the like—could teach scientists how to utilise new research and technologies

discovered. Already, Singaporeans are becoming more cognisant of the virtues extolled by the Arts, with more banks hiring more Arts graduates for instance.

In conclusion, while the common perception is that most Singaporeans are purely pragmatic and see the Arts simply as a waste of time that could be better spent elsewhere doing more 'worthwhile' things, this view is simply not true. Many Singaporeans today are aware of the beauty and social awareness that the Arts can bring to our lives, and the important values and skills it cultivates in us. Perhaps it is now time for us to reflect on the halcyon days when first we laid our hands on our paintbrushes under the watchful eyes of our primary school teachers, and recall the simple joy and beauty brought to us by the laying of paint on paper, to create a beautiful, lasting image.

Comments:

A well-organised piece of writing, with evidence of insight and depth of analysis. Well done! Examples can be evaluated more thoroughly at times. Overall, a highly effective discussion.

"The arts should not offend." Comment.

Jedidiah Tan (18S42)

When we think of the arts, we think of aesthetic, pleasing masterpieces, be it song, dance, art or prose. Naturally, we would think that such masterpieces are simply meant to be enjoyed, and are displays of the artists' mastery of their crafts. So, if the arts are meant to be appreciated by the masses, why should they offend? This view, however, comes with the bold assumption that artists create their works solely for the enjoyment of others. In truth, historically, this has not been the case, and is in fact a relatively rarer occurrence than most people think.

Of course, many renowned masters of old and even artists of today create art for the enjoyment of others. The "Mona Lisa" is a good example. With no hidden or deeper meaning, the painting was Da Vinci's effort to show off his extensive knowledge of techniques while painting. It is as simple as that— nothing but a means of displaying his skill, yet it is now arguably the most famous artwork ever made. Going deeper, there are the classical composers and their patrons. Patrons were usually nobles, and they usually had certain composers attached to them. Patrons were essentially the sponsors of such composers, giving them large sums of money in return for pieces about them, or dedicated to them. Often, whenever a composer requested money, their patron would oblige, and their composers would write them pieces to show their gratitude. A classic example is the famed classical composer, Joseph Haydn. The composer requested money to buy two new oboes for the patron's personal orchestra. The patron gave Haydn way more than what was needed, and Haydn celebrated by writing a prominent oboe solo in a symphony he was working on. Naturally, the relationship between patron and composer was mutually beneficial, and the two were sometimes even treated as equals, where composers would write song about their patrons as close friends, rather than as employers. Moving on to today, many pop artists commercialise music; they find successful songs, study the factors behind those successes, and replicate them to create new songs in order to make money. A famous example is Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas is You". News company Vox made a video about the hit, analysing it and proving how its chord progression and song structure was nearly identical to that of another Christmas hit song from 1950. In all these examples, it is clear that the artists mentioned intended for their work to be enjoyed by everyone, be it for profit or to show off their skills. All of these cases are examples of inoffensive art, widely accepted and praised. However, while such artists created works for others, many artists have used art for other purposes.

Many artists use their art to convey subliminal messages, be it as a form of personal expression, a way to convey an important message or even as a form of dissent. Art, when it reaches the masses, has the power to influence. It has been used as a form of activism for a long time, and for good reason. Art draws people in. While people may voice their opinions or campaign about something, their methods can be very detached from the audience. Students in Europe are now on the streets, protesting climate change. Despite it being spread on social media and being quite a prominent topic in the news, what about people in other countries? They may be uninterested or even unaware of such events going on, as evidenced by the lack of participation outside Europe. News is less captivating, but rather more informative. Even with shocking headlines, good photography and quality journalism, there is only so much news can do as people can become desensitised to tragic news. Art, on the other hand, can draw people in. People may hear a song they like, give it a good listen, and they will absorb what the lyrics are about. Or a band may write a socially conscious song, and their fans will take the message more seriously due to their love for the band's music.

Maybe it is a bold claim to say that art is superior to news when it comes to conveying messages, but it is undeniable that it has an appeal that news does not. People may be curious about the news, but they will never be invested in it in the same way as they are in their favourite artist. The impact and outreach that artists can have is immense. Metallica's hit song 'Master of Puppets' is essentially a warning about cocaine usage. To this date, that song has been heard by hundreds of millions of people all over the world. The band 'Rage Against the Machine', in their short yet successful existence, exclusively wrote songs that carried anti-government messages. Another big band of the 80s, Megadeth, has famous songs like 'Peace Sells' with the lyrics "peace sells... but who's buying?", or 'Holy Wars... the Punishment Due' with the lyrics "killing for religion, something I don't understand". Both songs carry strong anti-war messages that have been heard by millions. Better still, Pink Floyd's 'The Wall' is a song criticising Western education for its flaws. A mass of South African students used it in their protest against their schooling system, resulting in the song being banned in South Africa. The point is, art has always been a platform for advocacy, where many influential artists have conveyed strong, controversial messages through their songs. In such cases, the Arts should offend in order to provoke the audience's thoughts. Often, when we consider art offensive, it is due to it being about certain uncomfortable, harsh truths. Even if it was not already, advocacy through art has to be offensive in order to truly impact the audience, and make it stick in the collective memory of the general public.

Finally, art should be offensive as it can be an indicator of progress. As with most societal changes, there is bound to be some conflict between the conservatives' old way of thinking and the liberals' new way of thinking. Art is no exception. Art is all about pushing boundaries, reaching new heights and new standards. Art is also about creativity. As art progressed, people got more and more creative, and at times that creativity was considered too radical. A famous example is the ballet 'The Rite of Spring'. Composed by Igor Stravinsky in 1913, its unusual use of musical technique and composition proved to be shocking. A riot broke out during its premiere, and some even felt cheated as ticket prices that night were double that of normal concerts in the same venue, and they paid to listen to what they thought was utter nonsense. Despite its disastrous premiere, it is now widely recognised as the most important and influential composition of the 20th century. It is now a staple in professional orchestras' repertoires, and music schools worldwide teach it as one of the very first pieces that a music student learns. Gustav Mahler was a composer in the late 19th century, and his symphonies which were perceived as unusual at the time, fell into obscurity. It was not until a hundred years after his birth that people started appreciating his works. Now, several of his symphonies are in the top 20 symphonies of all time, as established by a BBC survey of over a hundred professional conductors worldwide. While these examples are those of artists pushing artistic boundaries, there have been others that challenged societal norms instead. In the early 20th century USA, the black community invented several new dances, one of which was the Charleston. These new dances had a purpose: their wild, energetic and highly mobile movements were intentional, to directly oppose the stiff etiquette of the former generation. These dances were, of course, highly controversial as it was part of the famous 'flapper' culture. That, as well as the development of jazz and swing music, was the linchpin for decades of an increasingly liberal society, as well as artistic development for the US. In fact, the Charleston is so iconic that it is still taught by dance schools today, and also found its way into the Game of the Year 2018, Fortnite, amongst other modern dance moves. In all these examples, the radical nature of these works led to controversy at the time, but are still popular and widely accepted today. Clearly, by pushing the boundaries, art has progressed and evolved. Although it may be too philosophical to wonder what the purpose of art is, it is clear that many pursue an endless journey of perpetually perfecting their

craft and reaching new heights. Without being regarded as offensive by current standards, art cannot progress to new heights in the future.

In conclusion, art should be offensive. The inoffensive art is nice, but its existence is merely aesthetic and superficial. To have art be purely inoffensive would be to limit its potential. As shown, offensive art is a driving force for good, be it advocacy, pushing artistic limits or even helping shape society. Art and society are inherently tied together, and extensively so. It has been seen many times in history that art has progressed society. If it contributes to society, then art should be offensive.

Comments:

Examples used were highly relevant and widely ranged, although slightly excessive in some areas. However, some examples are lacking in proper explanation. The point regarding the arts as not being offensive is merely superficial or for entertainment purposes is too narrow in outlook, as inoffensive art can be inspiring and powerful as well.

"The arts should not offend". Comment.

Kieron Seven Lee (18S46)

John F. Kennedy once said, "If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him." Indeed, artists should be given the freedom to express themselves however they want. When people only view and experience works of art that do not trigger them or challenge their belief systems, they would not know how to respond to offensive content in a healthy manner and may even feel personally attacked, feeling contempt and malice instead of appreciation for the artwork and the artist. In today's globalised and interconnected world, having a narrow-minded world view would only breed misunderstanding and prejudice. Hence, the arts should offend, but the degree of offensiveness depends on its audience and the purpose it serves.

The arts should offend if it serves as social or political commentary as it promotes healthy civil discourse. Freedom of expression is a core tenet in the creation of art, and the artist may provide social commentary or express his views on contentious issues through his works in a manner he deems fit. However, artists tend to have a more liberal view of the world and the issues brought up or ideas being challenged by them may seem to clash with the majority's mindset in a conservative society. Wild Rice Theatre had its funding cut a few years back after criticisms that its works promoted alternative lifestyles such as homosexuality, before the discussion of repealing section 377A was set in motion. This shows that offensive artwork may bring about civil discourse only if citizens in society have the maturity to recognise and understand different viewpoints. In addition, political cartoons have long been used as a medium to poke fun at politicians or actions made by countries. They may be offensive to some as these cartoons utilise caricature and puns to draw parallels with the real world. These serve to highlight unpopular or frowned upon actions by politicians, such as the calling out of the hypocrisy of US President Donald Trump, or the immigration policies of German Chancellor Angela Merkel. During the Gulf War, political cartoons were effective in pointing out that US interference was due to the prospect of securing oil, challenging the beliefs of many that their intervention in international affairs was to protect smaller countries and secure the moral high ground. These go to show how the arts can shed light on social and political issues and it should be offensive to grab the attention of the masses and generate healthy civil discourse.

Despite artists having the freedom of expression to create offensive artwork, there should be a purpose behind it and self-regulation is needed to ensure that artworks do not cross the line and become crass, distasteful or obscene. The arts should not offend if artworks do not serve a beneficial purpose to society or humanity's growth as a species. For instance, cartoonists may cross the line and play on racial stereotypes to pander to extremists or bigots. French cartoon magazine Charlie Hebdo used offensive depictions of Mohammed in its comics that served no purpose other than to enrage the Muslim community and gain supporters who are Islamophobic or against refugees in their country. Society may thus be further divided along racial lines and distrust could be bred amongst people. Artists may also express themselves in extremely disturbing or crass ways, where the viewer is unable to understand the artist and feels uncomfortable instead. Often, the artist expresses or promotes extreme alternative lifestyles or deviances that offend many, such as pedophilia, necrophilia or bestiality. Modes of expression such as Chinese artist Zhu Yu challenging the forbidden notion of cannibalism by cooking and eating a human foetus only brings

about shock and abhorrence and does not benefit society. Hence, the arts should not offend if it is too extreme and cannot be understood by the viewer.

Opponents to the argument might claim that the purpose of the arts is to appeal to the masses and they should not offend to protect the viewer and increase their appeal. In order to receive grants, fundings or achieve massive ticket sales, artists often have to self-regulate and censor their works of art to ensure that they are suitable for the public's consumption in Singapore. "The Life of Charlie Chan Hock Chye", a comic by Sonny Liew about life in Singapore during the 1950s, had its funding of \$8000 from the National Arts Council cut due to its portrayal of the government in an unfavourable light, despite winning 3 Eisner Awards later on. Similarly, Les Miserables, a box-office hit play, had to remove a scene where two men kissed to conform to the strict regulations by local authorities. However, mature thinkers and consumers of art would understand that certain offensive elements in works of art are there solely for comedic or entertainment purposes and would not take such works of art personally. Appreciation of the arts requires viewers to understand and respect the thought process and viewpoint of the artist, and this is impossible to achieve if consumers are constantly protected from offensive works of art. By altering works of art to make them less offensive and more appealing to the masses, the message that the artist is trying to convey is not fully encapsulated and critical thinking is not provoked. Hence, the arts can be offensive if consumers are mature enough to appreciate the arts and not feel offended.

In conclusion, the arts should be offensive if it serves as a platform for the artists to voice out their opinions on social and political issues as it promotes healthy civil discourse and critical thinking among mature viewers. However, some works of art offend just for the sake of enraging viewers, creating social divide or promoting human deviances, and they neither enrich our lives nor benefit society. Thus, they should not offend.

Comments:

Excellent introduction with the use of an attention-grabbing hook. There is a wide and appropriate range of examples and arguments were clearly and thoroughly expressed, though there could be more evaluation in the conclusion.

Assess the view that pop music today is frivolous.

Luke Lee (17A13)

Prince, Michael Jackson and George Michael. These are just a few renowned pop artists who have contributed greatly to the genre of pop music, which has permeated the music industry and become the most popular genre of music, hence its name. While society today holds the artists of the late 20th century in high regard, the same cannot be said for the artists of today as pop music has morphed into a variety of new sounds, a few of which are deemed frivolous and lacking in emotion compared to the hits of the past. While it is not incorrect to deem certain aspects of pop music today as trivial and meaningless, I feel that pop music today is not frivolous. This is as it is still able to perform the functions it has performed since its conception, which led to the growth of the industry and the enjoyment it has bestowed upon many listeners.

There are those who may say that pop music today is frivolous and lacking in any form of value due to the repetitive nature of songs that plague the top music charts. This is not an unfair statement as many pop artists utilise similar rhythms, chords and lyrics across their songs. Given the number of pop artists in the industry today which likely amounts to hundreds of thousands, the songs being pushed out may begin to sound like manufactured, soppy love stories rather than heartfelt tunes. The famous pop tune of the '80s, "Total Eclipse of the Heart", boasts emotional metaphors in its lyrics along with its rich chords performed with actual instruments. However, in the present day, a love song such as "Treat You Better" by Shawn Mendes moans about his seemingly obvious superior ability to take care of a girl compared to another guy in a simple three-chord song. Pop music today is seen to be carrying over the similar ideal of writing emotional love songs like in the past, but has marred its emotional value through artificial, repetitive tunes and whiny lyrics.

Pop music today is also viewed as frivolous when compared to other genres of music. In the genre of punk rock, lyrics tend to deviate towards heavier topics that affect people at a deeper emotional level and at a greater scale. Frontman of indie rock band Nothing But Thieves, Conor Mason, struggles with anxiety and this has led him to channel his difficulties into the band's songs, resulting in heavy use of metaphors in reference to drug use which has allowed him to reach out to listeners who face similar difficulties. World famous rock band Green Day has been writing songs that serve as political commentary since the early 2000s, with their most recent album criticising the presidency of Donald Trump and the lack of gun control in America. Thus, in comparison to the material present in other genres of music that discuss topics of significance, pop music has restrained itself to the world of breakups and heartache.

However, it is wrong to categorise pop music as the repetitive beats and love tunes that make it seem frivolous. Pop music has branched out into different sub-genres of music that do not possess the usual formula of writing songs with standard chord progression and lyrical content. Renowned alternative pop band Twenty One Pilots infuses elements of rock, hip-hop and reggae into their music, which creates a unique sound for each of their songs despite being pop overall. Furthermore, frontman Tyler Joseph completely ignores the audience appeal of love songs and delves deep into heavy imagery depicting one's struggles with insecurity. While one may think that the band's use of concept albums and constant allusions to the Christian faith may deter many pop listeners, the converse is actually the case as they have gained a huge following due to their honesty towards topics that may be considered taboo. Thus, they are an example of pop music not being frivolous, as they have touched the lives of many through their lyrical content while utilising the foundation of pop music with electronic beats and catchy rhythms. Another example would be The 1975, a pop band

that mixes smooth electric guitar riffs with ambient electronic instruments. Their use of funk and '80s pop sounds have allowed them to mirror the revered tunes of David Bowie and Joy Division, capturing the unique essence of past pop tunes that was seemingly lost by the 21st century. Similar to Twenty One Pilots, frontman of The 1975 Matthew Healy explores his own struggles with substance abuse in his songs and has subsequently undergone rehabilitation in order to shake off his addiction, thus inspiring listeners who face such a deep-seated issue to do the same. Thus, pop music today cannot be labelled as frivolous, as there are other famous artists in the pop industry who have demonstrated their musical ability through a diversity of tunes and their ability to empathise with audiences who face problems that are not to be taken lightly.

Furthermore, pop music today cannot be considered frivolous as it has still retained its function in delivering catchy rhythms that are enjoyed by the majority of music listeners. While the way in which lyrics are written and the sounds in songs differ from the past with changing world views and technology, pop music has merely evolved and its meaning has not eroded by any means. Pop music in the past has had its fair share of love songs, such as Air Supply's "All Out of Love" and George Michael's "Careless Whisper" which are considered classic hits, and the same can be seen today. The famous slow echo-snare beat of the past has evolved into piano chords and simple guitar plucking, such as Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" and "Thinking Out Loud" which became massive hits amongst pop listeners and are top picks for songs to be played at weddings. Despite the simplicity in the chord progression and lyrics, these songs have become meaningful heartfelt messages to those in love. Millions in the '80s were able to appreciate the four chords and simple lyrics about love in songs that are considered classic hits and millions today are exactly the same. Pop music is not always generated from a simple money-making formula and sometimes is just true to itself—the cheesy love songs written from the heart are what many people deem as meaningful and worth listening to. The same can be said for many other popular hits of today—if many people can find meaning in electronic bass drops because they truly enjoy the tune or because such songs are simply good for party playlists, pop music is not frivolous as it has stayed true to its purpose of entertaining the masses, no matter how simple and meaningless it may appear to others.

Music bears an extensive history and pop music is definitely an important aspect in its present as well as the in course of its future. Since its conception from classic artists like Elvis Presley and The Beatles to current stars like Taylor Swift and The Chainsmokers, the audience for pop music is steadily increasing and shows no sign of stopping. Pop music may be seen as trivial and artificial in the present day, but pop music is popular for what it inherently is and many are able to find meaning in it, proof being its many listeners, and thus is not considered frivolous.

Comments:

Discussion of the styles of music and the relevance to listeners makes this essay a stronger one. You could also consider if most of the top artists of today fall more in the 'frivolous' category.

POLITICS, ECONOMICS & HISTORY

"Loyalty to country ALWAYS. Loyalty to government, when it deserves it." - Mark Twain

"The first lesson of economics is scarcity: there is never enough of anything to fully satisfy all those who want it. The first lesson of politics is to disregard the first lesson of economics." - Thomas Stowell.

"he best prophet of the future is the past." - Lord Byron

"In today's world, we do not need charismatic leaders, only pragmatic politicians."

What is your view?

James Rodrigues (18S64)

Politicians play an integral role in a country as they are the representatives of the population chosen to make informed decisions and policies for the country. These political leaders possess many qualities like pragmatism and charisma. However, some people feel that charisma is not an essential trait of politicians and that we only need pragmatic politicians. I feel that this view is too absolute and in today's increasingly educated world, we not only need pragmatic politicians, but also charismatic leaders.

In developing countries, the main role of a politician is to solve the pressing bread and butter issues in the country. In this case, pragmatism, and not charisma, is the important quality needed to solve these nagging issues. In these third-world countries, most of the population is usually uneducated and impoverished. In Africa, more than 2 billion people are living on under \$2 per day. They live every day worrying about food, shelter and safety as they are trapped in the vicious cycle of poverty. Only a pragmatic leader who makes practical and well-informed decisions to help the country can eliminate the plight of the people. Charismatic leaders seem redundant in these countries as the citizens are too concerned about their own issues to bother about who is in charge of the country. For example, in the past, China used to be plagued with both poverty and corruption. However, their new incumbent leader Xi Jinping was very pragmatic in solving the root causes of these problems and was successful in eradicating corruption in China. Although some people criticise him for his iron-fisted approach which lacked charisma, his pragmatism helped to further revolutionise China to the bustling economy it is today. Thus, in developing countries, pragmatic, not charismatic leaders are needed for economic growth in the country.

However, this point is only applicable when the country is developing. To say that charismatic leaders are not needed is an oversimplification. There are many other cases where not only pragmatism, but also charisma is needed for the politician to effectively lead their country. In an educated country, too much pragmatism can make the government lose touch with the society. Hence, there is a need for charismatic politicians to interact and connect with the people, dispelling the myth that charismatic leaders are not needed. When the government utilises a top-down approach to manage the country, the people will feel disconnected from the government as the authoritative government is making all the decisions for the country. These politicians do not show any charisma to convince the people about their policies and will eventually lose the confidence of the populace. Especially in an educated society where citizens can make their own informed decisions, politicians have to be charismatic to gain the trust of the people. For example, in the 2011 General Elections, the PAP recorded their lowest percentage of votes, 61%. This was due to their top-down approach when managing Singapore and Singaporeans felt that they were disconnected from the society and were not solving the issues faced by the people. Thus, PAP started to become more open, with politicians interacting with the people through mediums like the Our Singapore Conversation where citizens can directly share their problems with politicians. These initiatives gave Singaporeans a sense of the charisma displayed by the politicians, thus allowing them to grow more confident about the policies implemented by the government. This can be seen in the 2015 General Election, where the PAP had a percentage of 69.9% of votes. Thus, in developed countries, politicians have to be both charismatic and pragmatic to gain the trust of the people.

In the election process, politicians have to be charismatic to attract the attention of voters and to show that they can effectively manage the country if they are chosen. During the election process, there will be many candidates running for the same spot of President. For politicians to stand out from the rest, they have to show their charisma to the people. During their election speeches or campaigns, they have to be confident and lively to gain the trust of the voters. This charisma can help to instil a sense of hope in the people that the politician can help to change the country for the better. Without charisma, the politician will be virtually invisible in the sea of other candidates and will not be able to effectively convey their political promises and messages to the masses, as nobody is listening to him or her. For example, the former President of US, Barack Obama, was a very charismatic person and his speeches were effective in convincing the people to vote for him as President. His "Yes We Can" campaign was integral in making the populace feel confident about him as their leader. Even the current president of US, Donald Trump is charismatic in his own way with his social media presence and controversial opinions which attracted a lot of attention. Their charisma was indispensable in attracting the attention of the people which led to their success. Thus, charisma is needed for leaders to win the trust and confidence of people to earn the mandate to rule.

In conclusion, politicians, when making decisions for the country, have to be pragmatic to ensure that their policies are beneficial for the society. However, I feel that charisma is also a valuable trait for the politicians to win the trust of the citizens, and only then can the policies be effectively implemented. Thus, in today's world, both pragmatic and charismatic leaders are needed for the continual development of a country.

Comments:

Generally thoughtful and there was a clear effort to address the keywords of question (i.e. pragmatic, charisma, need) in every paragraph. The points raised in the essay are also nuanced, which is good. Work on crafting a powerful introduction next. Choice of examples, such as the use of Our Singapore Conversation to highlight the charisma of local politicians, could be improved upon.

Should profit be the only business of business?

Lim Xin Yi (18A15)

While rather crude and cruel, the phrase "money makes the world go round" is often used when we ponder why businesses often seem so profit-driven and ruthless in the pursuit of more and more business growth. Although, pragmatically, the core purpose of businesses is to make money so that they can be responsible for the employees under their care, it should not be their only purpose. In a multifaceted society with multitudes of possibilities, it would be a shame if businesses failed to use their social potential and connections as a springboard to build more intellectual, cohesive societies or to shape individuals to be the best that they can be. On top of that, it is the responsibility of businesses to ensure environmental sustainability. After all, to extract resources from our environment is a privilege, to give back is their duty. Of course, this does not mean that businesses must channel all their resources into contributing selflessly back to society; rather, it is more of a balancing act in which profits as well as social and environmental responsibility are considered.

There is no doubt that the profit-driven motivations of businesses are highly important in society because they keep countries working, societies functioning, and people moving. More often than not, money is one of the greatest daily concerns of people around the world, including those who are unemployed, employed, or employers. Profits are vital in improving the material standard of living of people and helping them attain their wants and needs. The Singapore 1000 (S1000) companies generated a combined profit of S\$182.8 billion in 2018 compared to S\$165.4 billion in 2017, an increase of 10.5 per cent. In turn, real wages in Singapore rose by 3% in the same year, and the median gross monthly income grew by 3.5 per cent a year from 2013 to 2018. The growth in individual income levels can be attributed to the growth in businesses in Singapore. Given that the profits of businesses directly impact their employees, profits are certainly essential to the lives of many workers who rely on them to provide them with this boost. Not only was the rise in wages beneficial for the lower-income earners in helping them secure their basic needs, such as housing, food and transport, it also allowed them to devote more of their income to entertainment and recreation to boost their quality of life and happiness levels. In a world built on material desires and goals, it is undeniable that businesses will and must focus on increasing their profits.

However, beyond profits, the fact that businesses connect with millions of people each day means that they have the potential to enact social change. While interactions between businesses and consumers can still yield profits, the profits can be earned while building a foundation of learning, compassion and mobility. For instance, the Thought Collective in Singapore is a social enterprise that aims to build Singapore's social and emotional capital through educating young Singaporeans and helping them to broaden their perspectives. In order to be self-sustainable, they adopt business models and also aim to earn profits, but their underlying goal remains people-centric. Using a wide range of services, such as magazine publications about global issues and local tours around Singapore, the company uses their daily connections with consumers to tie profits to social education. This is perhaps one of the most admirable forms of business. Many may think that there is always some sort of dichotomy: to be selfish for profits or selfless for society. Yet, perhaps this is not a dichotomy at all as long as business owners are able to hit the sweet spot and find something that helps them achieve the best of both worlds. Businesses have the potential to change society for the better, as the Thought Collective has shown. If they do not tap on this potential, much would be lost in the advancement of human capital, including social mobility,

cohesiveness, intellect and morality. Though invisible and intangible, these are things that ground society and shape its future.

Furthermore, businesses have the potential to change individual lives. We often forget that the people who are involved in businesses are not just consumers and business-owners. They also include millions upon millions of employees who work tirelessly each day. They are often overlooked because profits are prioritised over employee welfare, and because of this, it is evident that businesses still have much to do to ensure that they benefit from their work far beyond financial aspects. Any relationship can only be fully efficient and sustainable if the effort is put in to help it flourish as an interdependent connection. The same goes for the relationship between business owners and their employees. Since one cannot survive without the other, it is all the more important that they help one another achieve their respective goals of seeing their business thrive and reaching out to more consumers, and earning a simple living. Although this may seem idealistic, it is not impossible. In Singapore, the food-and-beverage chain Eighteen Chefs makes it a point to hire ex-convicts to offer them training and a chance to reintegrate into society. Their business is thriving because consumers have realised that this often marginalised group of people have the potential to contribute and work, just like anyone else. In Brazil, the Association for Protection and Assistance to Convicts (APAC) prisons have been set up to help inmates turn over a new leaf and be better citizens upon their release. To do so, inmates are taught different skills ranging from baking and selling bread to local schools to making plastic car parts that can be sold on the market. In their woodwork space, inmates who have been convicted of more severe crimes are taught that if they broke something with their hands, they must make something beautiful with the same pair of hands. On the surface, these prisons are earning profits to fund their services and maintain their facilities, but their greater motivation is to change lives and help their inmates become better people. Businesses will create jobs for most people, and hence, provide employees with a chance to grow and teach them new skills. Employees are just ordinary people, no different from you and I. Profitability is a big part of businesses, albeit a rather materialistic one. When businesses have so much labour in their hands—so much potential, soul, heart and intellect, certainly, they must do something with it. Through the activity of businesses, we can and should see people grow from within and bloom with the right opportunities and guiding hands from their employees.

Some might argue that businesses may use such motivations unethically to boost sales and ultimately generate more profits. For instance, thousands of food and beverage brands market their products as "all-natural" even though they are not so. This is known as "greenwashing", an insidious form of advertising that plays to consumers' desires to live a green life without necessarily creating a sustainable product. Under the facade that their products are environmentally- and health-friendly, such brands attempt to attract more consumers who perceive their products as superior to the rest. Fiji Water, for one, is guilty of this. Their advertisements often include greenery and waterfalls coupled with gentle narration promoting its naturalness in an attempt to get people to purchase their products, even though the best way to save the environment is perhaps just to consume less. Furthermore, it attempts to hide its true environmental footprint, which includes miles of transportation from Fiji and the production of non-biodegradable plastic bottles, behind claims that it is "bottled at the source, untouched by man" and that purchasing Fiji Water can help the company "reduce carbon emissions and save the Fijian rainforest". Fiji Water tells us a one-sided story that appeals to consumers' moral conscience, when in reality, their product is inextricably tied to pollution. What we perceive to be brands offering us something more than a product, be it a chance to conserve the environment or help

others in society, may in actual fact, simply be a ploy to get us to spend more to boost their profits.

However, I beg to differ. We should not allow such unethical businesses to mar our impressions of businesses who go beyond business and put a stop to the potential of business activity. Of course, Fiji Water may be guilty of exploiting the environment for both material resources and advertisement credit, but there are many environmentally-friendly businesses that are breaking such distasteful sentiments through authentically selling their brand. Package Free Shop, based in New York, for instance, promotes a trash-free lifestyle amongst consumers who are interested in being greener. Their products are sold without packaging, which is a big contributor to waste, and are also all biodegradable and/or chemical-free. Instead of false advertisement, the business proves its reliability to its consumers through action in their stores and is able to authentically promote sustainable consumption. Additionally, being eco-conscious should be a responsibility for all businesses, not just those which focus on being environmentally friendly. As they take from the environment in one way or another, they need to recognise that they must give back or ensure environmental sustainability for future generations. If the environment deteriorates and cannot support our children, what use is there in being rich and wealthy with profits?

All in all, businesses are profit-driven at the core, and it is important that they are so because employees and themselves rely on profits for survival. Yet, all businesses have the potential to go above and beyond, to improve society as a whole or to help individuals grow as people. They have the ability to impact employees, whose potential can be unlocked, and consumers, whose dollar votes can be used to advance a good cause. Furthermore, they must be conscious of the implications of their business; one such aspect is to be eco-conscious and reduce harm to the environment. In a multi-faceted society with lots of room to bloom and grow, businesses can be the ones to fill in some of those gaps. Why stop at gaining profits when they can be so much more?

Comments:

Be concise in your explanations: paragraphs tend to be too long and descriptive at times. Consider the role of profits as a basis for sustainable business practices. Issue of unlawful/unethical business practices needs to be clearly substantiated with relevant examples.

How far does the state have the right to restrict the freedom of the individual?

Nicholas Giancarlo Canete (17542)

The watershed passage of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act in Singapore's legislation stipulated that press in the country would be subjected to close scrutiny by the government and that newspapers were required to obtain permits to publish. While liberals around the world have disparaged this policy, citing that it represents an unjustified curtailment of freedom of speech that all individuals should otherwise be entitled to, the government maintains that it is necessary to hold together Singapore's social fabric. This discourse over the rights and freedom of the individual is especially pertinent in an era characterised by the inexorable proliferation of Western liberal values globally. Thus, while I concede that states are sometimes justified in restricting individual freedom to maintain social order and crack down on extremist political views that undermine political stability, the risk of states using it as a blank cheque for abuse to maintain religious and political orthodoxy in an authoritarian regime is far more dangerous. Thus, the state seldom has the right to restrict freedom of the individual.

Firstly, the state is sometimes justified in restricting individual freedom through censorship when it is intended to depoliticise and curb extremist views to protect political stability. The increasing interconnectedness of our world today through print and televised media and social media has cast a perennial sheet of danger when it has become so easy for extremist views to be heard. The risk of the permeation of these views is that it gives rise to palpable support of rebel movements and terrorism that threatens to undermine political stability. In these cases, it is necessary for the government to restrict individual freedom through censorship, to prevent these extremist views from prevailing. For instance, in Singapore, a female infant-care teacher was taken by the extremist political cause of terrorist group ISIS in 2017, and had become radicalised through social media. Singapore thus invoked the Internal Security Act to crack down and censor extremist webpages and curtail the ISIS campaign in Southeast Asia. In Germany, discontent over Angela Merkel's open-door policy, which allows refugees from the Middle East to enter, led to some taking to the internet to galvanise the Pegida movement in 2014. This movement organised destabilising and violent protests that undermined Merkel's administration. In cases where virulent, extremist political views threaten to propagate through media and undermine stability, states are justified in restricting freedom through censorship.

Furthermore, states sometimes also have the right to restrict individual freedom in the name of maintaining social order in the nation. The use of legal means to restrict free speech entails cracking down on intolerant and invidious views of one community group towards others, thus preventing friction that threatens the social fabric of the nation. The restriction of potentially dangerous, discriminatory views is useful in preventing the crystallisation of a "them-against-us" mindset. For instance, Singapore's long history of using the Sedition Act to take action against racism has arguably contributed to a generally more tolerant society. This was seen in the infamous case of Amy Cheong who was fined for her racist remarks over Malay weddings, when the government chastised her for inciting social friction between races. The government's hardline stance on racism has undoubtedly influenced the Singaporean community when many responded to the Little India riots with nuanced moderation in response to xenophobic furore from a vocal minority. When states have a long history of utilising legal means to protect social order, its people will get behind the cause even if it means compromising their own rights like free speech. Thus, states are justified in restricting individual rights so long as it is used to maintain social order.

However, the power of the state to restrict individual rights will not always be accompanied by innocuous intentions, especially when states use this to maintain political orthodoxy in an

authoritarian regime. The restriction of political and educational freedom in a bid for authoritarian regimes to hold on to power risks creating a close-minded populace and subjugating individual rights, which is unjustifiable. For instance, in North Korea, the state requires its population to adhere to the Juche ideology, restricting all forms of outside media, and imprisoning and executing all deemed to be dissidents. In China, the Xi Jinping administration censors its tumultuous national history, blocking all forms of media referring to the Tiananmen Square Massacre, where the government used tanks to kill protesters in a bid to engender the trust of the people for the government. In Turkey, the Erdogan administration blocked off Wikipedia to prevent the spread of dissent towards his government. All these abuses and the restrictions of individual freedom have contributed to the creation of a close-minded populace who is subordinate to the will of their governments and is predisposed to being abused. Thus, the state has little right to restrict individual freedom in a bid to maintain political power.

Furthermore, the restriction of individual freedom to maintain religious orthodoxy is also unrighteous and morally appalling. Systemic impositions like laws and policies that force the populace to conform to one set of beliefs, and that give rise to restriction of individual freedom, have removed the right of the individual in these states. For instance, in Iran, in adherence to religious principles of Islam regarding gender roles, women who pursue education beyond the secondary level are heavily chastised. In Malaysia, Syariah courts in the countryside have given those who convert to religions other than Islam heavy punishments like imprisonment and caning. Thus, states that restrict the freedom of the individual in the name of religion have essentially erased their freedom of personal choice and belief.

In conclusion, states seldom have the right to restrict individual freedom. This issue presents a double-edged conundrum for many governments, where there is a delicate balance between the desire to maintain order and stability vis-à-vis the appeal of centralising power towards the state. The restriction of individual freedom is only justified when states maintain the innocuous intention of maintaining social and political order in a way that does not compromise the rights of the individual, and states must be careful to only remain accountable to the people and not let self-serving political interests corrupt their policy.

Comments:

A pity the conclusion ended rather abruptly. Nonetheless, it was a worthy effort with strong and nuanced arguments overall and relevant examples provided. An enjoyable read!

Should profit be the only business of business?

Rajkumar Prabanjini (18S45)

The last century has seen the rise of corporations as never before—broad-based across all sectors, coupled with and propelled by automation and other technological advancements. Capitalists and utilitarians encourage this growth, eyeing the profits and monetary gains that come with it. Environmentalists and ethicists are vastly more dubious about this new era of industrialisation, due to the environmental and ethical compromises being made in the interest of earning more. All in all, I believe that profit should not be the sole aim of businesses due to the detrimental impacts this poses, and because there are other goals that businesses should strive towards, such as remaining competitive and achieving what they sought to do in the first place.

Some businessmen may posit that money-making should be the one motive of running a business, as money is what allows the operations of the company to be maintained. Companies run largely on the money they earn, which is required to cover operating costs such as rent and wages. Apart from money being essential to making ends meet, profits are necessary to drive businesses to greater heights, spurring innovation and research as corporations have more money to invest in these areas. This is absolutely crucial for the continued progress of businesses. Due to a lack of profits and revenue to cover operating costs, only 35% of small and medium enterprises eventually succeed. Therefore, profits should be the sole driving force of businesses as this will enable them to be sustainable in the market in the long-run.

However, not considering the wider impacts that profit-driven businesses have on society would make this argument myopic. The desire to earn profits comes at devastating cost to the environment, and therefore profits should not be the only business of businesses. Firms become so blindsided by their furious desire to make more money that they ignore their unsustainable methods of production that pollute the environment and harm the people living in it. There are numerous examples of large corporations setting up factories right next to small villages, such as Tata Motors in India. These factories release toxic fumes and waste into the rivers and air, greatly compromising the health and well-being of villagers. In the agricultural sector, rapid clearing of the Amazon Rainforest, the world's largest carbon sink, has exacerbated the effects of global warming. Profit-driven firms focus only on lowering their costs of production such that they make more money. The most extreme of such firms even ignore the long-term detriments for short-term benefits. Given the context of today's volatile environment, firms should not only focus on profits but also on employing environmentally friendly ways of production. They can then be sustainable in the long run and not adversely affect future generations.

Furthermore, as corporations start to solely pursue profits, they may compromise ethics and moral values in their research and testing, which is an unfavourable impact of profits being the only business of businesses. Corporations not only produce consumer goods but are also key players in society that act as role models to demonstrate what is right and what is wrong. Companies compromising ethical values send out a message, to consumers and other growing companies, that such immoral deeds are acceptable. The African trafficking of diamonds dubbed "blood diamonds", due to the violence and cruelty involved in obtaining the gems, is a perfect example of how profit-driven firms compromise moral values in order to make money. They put numerous lives at risk in order to obtain the diamonds. Another case in point would be animal testing by cosmetics companies, which is not yet banned in many countries. Companies dehumanise themselves as they

make profits their only motive in running their businesses. They should not sacrifice their basic morals and humanity just to make more money. Profits, therefore, should not be the only business of businesses if it compromises ethics and values. Companies should also focus on whether their actions are morally acceptable, before pursuing any profit-making measures.

Finally, firms should focus on other areas, such as research and development, if they want to sustain themselves as a business, and not just on profits. Innovation is key for a sustainable business that is able to remain in the market for a long time without having to shut down indefinitely. A case in point would be the Silicon Valley conglomerate, Apple, which is now a monopoly in the consumer technology industry. Apple's ability to constantly innovate and establish a brand for itself enables it to maintain its status as a Fortune 500 company that has one of the most valuable stock market shares in the world. The sunrise prosthetics industry has also constantly innovated to produce artificial limbs that are akin to real limbs. Focusing on innovation not only brings profit, but also assists in the development of mankind. It pushes the boundaries and capabilities of society further, such that the standard of living and quality of life of people keep rising, while simultaneously ensuring the competitiveness of companies. Therefore, profits should not be the only driving force of companies, but should also be coupled with other key factors such as innovation and development.

All in all, profits should not be the only business of businesses, as it results in detrimental impacts to the environment and compromises ethical values. There are other key factors that should be focused on to ensure a sustainable business. While most businesses today are certainly highly profit-driven, they should realign themselves by internalising the costs that they are imposing on society, such that the rise of corporations is sustainable.

Comments:

This is a strong essay with a wide spectrum of salient points that are well-explained using concrete examples.

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

"Technology feeds on itself. Technology makes more technology possible." - Alvin Toffler , Future Shock

"Science knows no country, because knowledge belongs to humanity, and is the torch which illuminates the world." - Louis Pasteur

"Science and technology revolutionize our lives, but memory, tradition and myth frame our response."
- Arthur M. Schlesinger

In this digital age, is it possible to have any privacy?

Advait Bharat Deshpande (17S49)

With every passing moment in the digital age, it becomes easier to draw parallels to George Orwell's 1984. This is a tale of surveillance gone wrong, where the people trade their privacy for a supposed 'better life'. With every piece of technology we use, we implicitly give up a slice of our privacy as part of the terms and conditions hidden away in the fine print, for the sake of our comfort and convenience. While this has inevitably made our lives far more satisfactory and convenient, we must stop to think about whether we have fallen too far down the slippery slope of giving up our privacy for an improved material standard of living. Privacy, which is our right to keep certain information from others, may be entirely lost in this digital age. As the advancement of technology allows for information to be collected at a breadth and depth that is inconceivable to us, we have lost complete control over our privacy, as it can be snatched away without us even noticing. Furthermore, with information technology being increasingly woven into our lives, it may be too impractical to pursue the ownership of any degree of privacy if we want to live with minimal disruption or inconvenience to our daily routine. This is why I believe that it is not possible to have any privacy in this digital age.

In opposition to this stand, some may argue that it is still possible to have some privacy, given that the question is about whether we can have any privacy at all, not complete privacy. This can be explained partly by measures that large IT firms have put in place over the last couple of years in response to the discussions over privacy. Many would point to Google's offer to consumers to opt out of their services' data collection schemes, an example of which can be seen from how users now have the ability to turn off the location tracking feature in Google Maps. They have even gone so far as to offer users the ability to erase themselves from the Internet. Google's competitors have also followed suit, with Apple and Microsoft offering similar options to give users some control over the information they put online. However, the issue with this argument is that the privacy such measures grant us is negligible in the face of how advanced monitoring systems have become. Furthermore, once you go online, you can never get rid of your digital footprint because of how vast the Internet is; it is so vast that even Google has not been able to index the whole of it, despite working at it for more than a decade. If even the top tier tech firms cannot control the information they supposedly manage, how can we have any privacy when there will always be a way to breach it? To have 'any' privacy, we must have complete control over at least a small amount of what we wish to conceal, but even that is not possible in the digital world. Today, we have to remain connected to pursue our dreams, so going completely offline, as some may suggest, is not a viable option either. In the end, even the options to erase ourselves from the internet are not what we may perceive them to be, because there is always a way to retrieve that information, and we may not even be aware of it.

Furthermore, as stated earlier, to pursue our dreams we must remain connected. It is simply impractical to put in extensive effort for some privacy when we have to give up the convenience and safety that the digital world can provide. One has to be very short-sighted to desire privacy from surveillance in our neighbourhoods and cities, for example. This is because in a world with growing social tensions, our safety and security are often at risk of being compromised, and it is this surveillance technology that allows potential threats to be nipped in the bud. For example, the National Security Agency (NSA) of the United States has become infamous for extensive surveillance and violations of privacy. However, such organisations are the ones that identify

potential threats as they grow in our society, by collecting data to find patterns of behaviour that help to sieve out criminals, to name one application. Similarly, intelligence firms in India were the reason that the terrorist attacks in 2008 were swiftly dealt with. They had to closely profile every immigrant to be able to immediately name the perpetrators of that attack. This shows us how giving up our privacy can be for our own good, and that it would realistically be impossible to have any privacy as doing so would compromise the security effort of our nations. This allows us to live life and pursue our goals in safety. In addition, the wealth of technology we now have that allows us to conveniently collaborate with others requires similar data collection to give us the very experience we desire. As we become increasingly reliant on such services, it quickly becomes a hassle to break free of them without being an inconvenience to those we work with. For example, students rely heavily on platforms, such as Google Docs and Gmail, to work with peers on assignments and communicate with teachers respectively. However, to have access to such services, one must create a Google account, through which their conversations, emails and data are collected by the firm to 'improve' their offerings. To break free from this hold on our data, we would have to stop using the services entirely, which would be detrimental to the work we need to do. In the students' case, it could affect their grades. Hence it is not possible to have any privacy in the digital world due to this dilemma.

Lastly, we will never be able to grasp how far technology has come in its ability to monitor our data and thus violate our privacy, and so we will never be able to have any control over it, because we cannot foresee the measures we need to take in the first place. While many of us may think that our privacy can be breached any time due to how everyone has a portable camera in the form of their phones, it is naïve to think that this is where it ends. Every time we hear of a new data breach, it shows us that the technology to breach organisational and individual privacy far outpaces the technology used to preserve it. As can be seen by how everyone was taken aback upon finding out that Google devices recorded our voices and stored these recordings without us even knowing till much later, we do not know about the technology we use. Another example is of how the non-profit organisation 'Wikileaks', which is known for its ability to 'leak' sensitive data, has been able to leak data so consistently and accurately that it earned itself the status of a 'whistleblower.' Google, being one of the most advanced software giants, has been breached a countless number of times, evidenced by the large number of users having to be informed to change their passwords repeatedly to retain their account security. From these examples, we can see how even firms with advanced measures to maintain data privacy struggle to defend themselves, and it is thus evident that the means by which our individual privacy can be breached are evolving at a rate we cannot deal with. Thus, it is next to impossible to have any privacy in such a case.

In conclusion, mankind has already crossed the point of no return when it comes to whether it is possible to have any privacy today, due to our reliance on digital products and how surveillance technology has grown rapidly. Perhaps the time has come for us to embrace this era of information, where all the knowledge we may ever need is at our fingertips. Knowledge is power after all, and our privacy is the price we pay for it.

Comments:

Strong arguments have been put forth in this essay and evidence is explained adequately. However, the line of argument can be a little difficult to follow at times.

Is science the enemy of religion?

Chloe Pua Kai Yi (18S32)

Karl Marx once said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." The debate about the clashes between religion and science is a perennial problem, especially since more than two-thirds of the world's population find themselves affiliated to a religion. As science progresses rapidly with new inventions, theories and discoveries at every corner, some might challenge the highly venerated holy texts that have existed since the beginning of mankind as we know it. I believe that science and religion do indeed clash, as they seem to be the opposite of each other. Science is based on proven facts and tried-and-tested, verifiable truths, while religion is based on faith in the unknown, the intangible God. However I do not agree that science is the enemy of religion, and vice versa, rather the two opposing forces simply challenge each other, which is necessary for progress.

Religion has been the cause of much strife against science in the past, as science seeks the answers to the unknown, pushing boundaries and always doubting the status quo. Scientists have proposed the Big Bang Theory, challenging religious beliefs like the Christian belief that it was an almighty, all powerful higher being, God, that created in earth in 7 days, or the Hindu belief that the Earth was formed from a unique mass. Proving either side completely right is impossible, and it is difficult to reconcile the differences between the theories. This has caused tensions as the religious organisations seek to debunk theories and prove that their beliefs are the only truth. This is best exemplified by Galileo Galilei, who theorised that the Earth orbited around the sun, going against what was previously known that the sun orbited around the earth. This angered the Church, and Galileo was interrogated and shunned for pursuing this study. However, we know that Galileo was in fact correct, and there is definite proof that it is the earth that orbits around the sun. This shows how religion can be an obstacle to science, creating tensions between the two communities and shutting down hypotheses.

However, it can be argued that the quelling of scientific discoveries that go against religion is not universal. Rather, it is the fault of a few power hungry individuals that seek to destroy anything that may topple their power. For the religious leaders to maintain their influence and control over the masses, they must ensure that the masses have full faith and trust in their teachings. Casting any seed of doubt is a threat to their community and the strength it holds. However, this may not be universally true, as there are many religious people who venture into science. Doubts and questions are the best way for progress in society, and many religious institutions do not shun or dispel new theories. Rather, they support and reconcile differences. For example, the Church believes in Creationism, and how their God created every animal, while Darwin theorised evolution and how humans descended from apes. While the two theories do not agree, it is widely accepted by the Church that Darwin's theory has some truth to it, accepting the truth of natural selection as an evolutionary process. Therefore religion does not always condemn science.

As science and technology advances rapidly in today's ever-changing context, many ethical and moral issues are brought to the surface by religion. When the concept of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) was first conceived, the ethical basis was challenged heavily by the Church. "Why play God?" was a common argument, deeming it unnatural and therefore wrong. As time went by and a clearer understanding of the process was reached, many religious people turned to IVF to have children and are not completely opposed to it. There are still staunchly religious people that disagree with its use, but on the whole the use of IVF has been normalised. In the same way, issues currently

causing strife between the communities are genetic modification, abortion, cloning and stem cell research. Based on religious morals, all these are condemned and deemed immoral as well. The ethical issues surrounding these topics mainly centre around the creation and modification or termination of life, which is controversial. This can be seen in stem cell research, as to obtain embryonic stem cells, the early embryo has to be destroyed, potentially destroying human life. Anti-abortion campaigns and protests have been organised, especially by the Christian community, after the New York abortion bill in 2019 that allowed late term abortions. However, I believe that it is the lack of deeper understanding that clouds the judgement of the religious, who have their minds set on their beliefs. Many religious people do turn to abortions when fatal complications arise, to save the mother. In that context, with understanding and empathy, science and religion can coexist. Therefore, more often than not, it is not merely a question of religious morals and ethics, rather a larger picture must be seen. Religion functions like a system of checks and balances, making sure that science does not get out of hand. This, however, does not mean that they are enemies, rather they work hand in hand to ensure the ethical advancement of humankind.

Science and religion can even work in direct partnership. Many religious people often pray for a medical miracle, believing that the God they believe in will provide healing. However, praying is oftentimes not enough. Other than faith, medication must still be consumed to fight the infection or virus on a physical level, while religion helps to fight the illness mentally and spiritually. Many cancer survivors credit their remission not only to the medical measures taken, like chemotherapy, but also their religion for keeping them strong in spirit. Religion does not debunk science by saying that God will heal them without the need for modern medicine, rather a partnership is formed to fight the battle together. Science and religion can therefore come together in a partnership, where each complements the other, and religion can assure the patient of the high chance of medical success. This shows how science and religion are not enemies, but allies.

Science and religion can be said to have a symbiotic relationship. Neither discipline advocates the condemnation of the other, and peaceful coexistence is key to curbing tensions. Although science and religion appear to contradict each other heavily, a mutual understanding through communication must be forged for these two forces to work together. Both camps must be open to doubts and questions to be able to advance as a society. In Lee Strobel's controversial religious book, he pointed out many loopholes in scientific theories and research, reconciling them with his own religious beliefs. Instead of responding in defensive anger, scientists accepted it and challenged the community to create more watertight theories. This shows how contradicting forces can come together in harmony for the general betterment of humankind.

The late Pope John Paul II once said, "Science can purify religion from error and superstition. Religion can purify science from idolatry and false absolutes." This perfectly encapsulates the symbiotic relationship that science and religion have. As much as they contradict, it does not mean that they are enemies, as long as both sides approach each other with respect and understanding. The perfect harmony is not achieved yet, but would be an ideal standard for a better society.

Comments:

The quotes in the introduction and conclusion create engaging hooks that draw readers' attention. The stance is also clearly defined early on and the points are relevant in answering the question. However, the essay would benefit from more concrete examples and better explanations of often-controversial, unsubstantiated one-liners.

Has global interconnectedness made the world a better place?

Dyllan Gan (17544)

As we approach the end of the decade, the debate on digitalisation, the Internet of Things and even greater interconnectivity has picked up avid partisans and critics all around the globe. The Fourth Industrial Revolution is well on its way to catalyse another wave of globalisation through the digital age. In light of this, it would be appropriate to pause for a moment and reflect on how exactly the erosion of geographical borders and rising connectivity between nations have affected us. Has globalisation really been a godsend to our planet? Some are optimistic about the effects, claiming that it has indeed made the world a better place, citing its ability to congregate like-minded individuals to resolve social and environmental issues, burgeoning prosperity and the peace in recent times as clear symptoms of a better world. I espouse the view that interconnectedness has been a blessing to mankind, and agree that it creates facets of a better world as aforementioned.

Detractors of global interconnectivity, however, opine that globalisation has provided the power for unscrupulous individuals and organisations to propagate transnational problems, rendering it a curse for humanity. For example, we are all too familiar with the spawning of terrorist groups like ISIS, using social media, a tool for connectivity, as a means to instigate fear among the international community and recruit hapless and gullible victims for their dirty biddings. They utilised hashtags like #AllEyesOnISIS to capture the attention of the public eye whilst luring in other members through the Internet. Ill-intentioned members of these organisations wield the power of globalisation to carry out immoral activities, thus generating warranted pessimism over the nature of globalisation. Cybercrimes have also been a trend that has gained traction over the years. Against the backdrop of prolific unemployment and deeply rooted traditional beliefs, the introduction of the Internet has bred a whole new culture of Internet fraud known as Sakawa. Youths, frustrated with the state of the country, turn to the mystical powers of the monitor screen, simultaneously worshipping practitioners of Juju, a set of traditional religions in Africa linked to witchcraft and dark magic. The adage "The devil finds work for idle hands" is true in this case, and the interconnectedness provided from globalisation has in fact extended the long arm of the devil. The proliferation of these crimes has convinced many that globalisation has generated a plethora of problems for governments to handle and for citizens to suffer. Therefore, they do have reason to believe that interconnectedness has made the world a more sinister and dangerous place to be in.

However, the very thing that has generated these issues has also offered a panacea for governments to resolve them, hence making the world better via enhanced cooperation. The interconnectivity provided by globalisation has given governments in ASEAN the means to ameliorate and address problems such as transnational terrorism. The sharing of intelligence between regional neighbours made it a lot more manageable for states to capture and incarcerate terrorists from organisations like Jemaah Islamiyah. The gauntlet of interconnectedness is once again in the hands of governments, blessing them with the ability to share information at lightning speed, a feat never before fathomable by generations before us. Thus, while interconnectedness has generated problems, it has also given states the opportunity to work together to resolve issues, fostering greater camaraderie between nations. Therefore, I resolutely refute the claim, simply because it is only a one-sided account of the failures of globalisation.

On the other hand, some claim that global interconnectivity has exacerbated inequalities worldwide, drawing a stark division between the rich and the poor, creating discord and disunity that is characteristic of a fractured and less sought after world. The poverty cycle has gained notoriety over

the years, where transnational conglomerates and multinational corporations (MNCs) exploit labour provided by less developed nations, enslaving them only to improve their bottom line. Even the term "Developed Countries" and "Less Developed Countries" highlights such a blatant and abhorrent stigmatising of less well-off nations vis-à-vis affluent and powerful countries. The benefits of globalisation have only been cast on the wealthy, and have been a tool for further marginalisation and exploitation of other ones. Greedy and gluttonous MNCs and developed nations only seek to find victims by looking towards countries like Cambodia for menial labour and the Philippines for migrant workers. The stark division drawn due to globalisation has thus made us no better than the days of slavery and colonialism in the past, making the world worse off.

However, while it is true that interconnectedness has been the impetus for galloping inequality in today's world, the seriousness of the issue has been dramatised by critics of globalisation. Not everyone in the first world are monsters waiting to pounce on weak and feeble nations. The interconnectivity has generated more venues for the championing of rights for the marginalised. Singapore, for example, regularly holds events to show our appreciation to the migrant workers from other countries. Events like these highlight the sizeable portion of society, willing to stand up for other nations. When the news of Nestle utilising child labour from less developed nations promulgated the web, it drew widespread condemnation from the international community, again showing the softer side of humanity. Community work in less wealthy countries regularly attract thousands of volunteers from all over the globe who have the means to travel via globalisation, to help rebuild homes and provide education for the impoverished. Taking into account these developments, I choose to stay sanguine on the situation of inequality today, because there is a growing majority of those in developed countries advocating for greater equality and meritocracy worldwide. Therefore, while the view that interconnectedness has some adverse effects is truthful to some extent, there are brighter sides to the picture that have to be emphasised to bring to light the way globalisation has benefited mankind.

Conversely, transcending borders has accelerated efforts in mitigating prominent social and environmental issues, contributing to a more liveable world. In the sphere of environmental activism, many of the activists have taken to the web to connect with other budding supporters of environmental protection. Greenpeace is an international organisation which gathers its supporters from all over the globe, initiating protests to clamour for environmental protection and educating the public on the dangers of wasteful practices. Evidently, connectivity has forged partnerships around the globe to fight for, literally, a better Earth. The Ocean Cleanup Foundation is also another example of globalisation at its best. Fed up with the accumulation of trash in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the NGO was set up to quicken the pace of research on solutions to resolve environmental issues. They initiated their prototype and witnessed tangible results on the clean-up of the ocean. Due to the aforementioned, interconnectivity binds us all together, creating the platform for citizens of different races and languages to helm causes, and achievement merely chimerical for people of the past. Thus, I believe that globalisation has made the world better as it unifies us to build a better Earth together.

Lastly, interconnectivity has bred harmony and peace among nations, granting cooperation between states. For example, the formation of ASEAN has enabled territorial disputes in the South China Sea to be peacefully settled, due to greater diplomacy and room for negotiation in the regional bloc. These bodies are signs of connectivity and dialogue between states, promoting unity and harmony. Furthermore, the interconnectivity has secured deals bilaterally between nations. Singapore has been eager to invest in and provide expertise for other nations, like the relatively inchoate Burmese economy, allowing them to rise up the economic ladder and generate prosperity for its people. These

all would not have been possible without the advent of connectivity to enhance bilateral relations and regional bodies, enabling different nations to cooperate with one another and ensure peace globally. Thus, interconnectedness has made the world better, because of the level of support between nations generated by globalisation.

Overall, I firmly believe that global interconnectivity has constructed a better world in recent years, due to its sheer capacity for enhanced cooperation to resolve thorny social issues and ability to advocate for peace and prosperity internationally. While the boons of globalisation up till today are apparent, it would be wise to remind ourselves of the potential pitfalls of new forms of connectivity. This is paramount to ensure humanity progresses in unity and solidarity as we forge through the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Comments:

A well-informed piece that thoughtfully weighs both sides of the issue. At some points, the link to the point about interconnectedness could be clearer. Otherwise, this was a commendable effort.

Is science the enemy of religion?

Ernest Yong (18S43)

Since the conception of civilization, humans have had a propensity to associate themselves with some aspect of the supernatural. Historically, religion has provided us with a sense of comfort in the knowledge that life does not end with death, but rather a progression onwards into the afterlife. This has characterised our conception and view of our purpose of being on Earth. Yet, modern-day advancement in the field of our inquiry into the nature of the universe has seemingly caused the influence of religion to fall out of favour, for if human beings themselves have the ability to play God, what should one make of the invisible omnipotent entities that have served as the guiding principle in our lives? However, despite the advancements and headway made in science, religion today has evolved into something more than some sort of fanaticism with the supernatural, and hence, we often find that science may seemingly be a threat to religion. Despite this, a closer inspection would reveal that science has rather broadened our perspectives and views of religion, allowing for both science and religion to coexist, and even enhancing our understanding of religion.

It may seem that science is a threat to religion because scientific discoveries are often at odds with our understanding of religious texts, which may undermine the faith and belief we place in religion. Indeed, scientific discoveries over the years have seemed to disagree with what we know of religion from historical documents such as the Bible. From the conception of the Big Bang Theory to the theory that the Earth revolved around the Sun and finally to our inquiry into the existence of extraterrestrial life forms, it would seem that science has been out to disprove religion. If religions, such as Christianity, held the belief that humans were the race chosen by God, then the fact that our universe was not created, but had instead simply appeared, and that humans were not at the centre of the universe, but merely a subset of a wider unknown, is ostensibly why many feel that science has the potential to undermine faith and readings of our religious texts. These concerns are not wholly invalid, for while religions oftentimes demand a faithful adherence and blind trust in what they preach, science offers a methodological and rational explanation as to the origins and reasons behind what would otherwise be phenomena. In fact, this was essentially the argument behind the whole Intelligent design debacle in the United States, for while the religiously affiliated assert that the complexities of nature and of human beings suggest an omnipotent creator, the logical rigidity of science demands a rational approach to such claims. Science mandates that if things are claimed, those claims have to be proven. The rise of Pastafarianism then, as a mockery of religion, reveals the ways that science has cast a shadow of doubt over how we view religion. Science will not merely accept the explanation: "Because God said so."

Yet, this surge in the knowledge of science and of the workings of our universe has ultimately broadened our views and perspectives of religion, and subsequently, our understanding of what religion is about. Unlike the past, where we heavily relied on our spiritual leaders for religious knowledge, a greater wave of education and inquiry into discovery has prompted us to question our own interpretations of religion, which leads us to define religion for ourselves. What this tells us is that we no longer live in the Dark Ages, where things were merely accepted. With greater revelations into how things work, partially brought about by science, we have now become empowered with the ability to interpret religion for ourselves, which is what has allowed science and religion to coexist. For example, it is a widely held belief in the United Kingdom that the Bible is not meant to be taken literally, and that the people who formulated the texts did so based on

their understandings and observations of the universe at the time. This has contributed to greater moments of creativity, as people no longer see the Bible for what is stated literally, but rather how the Bible communicates with them on a personal level. This helps to bring them closer to God and makes religion more intimate and personal as opposed to having religion defined by an impersonal committee, such as the Catholic Church. Hence, this knowledge brought about by our pursuits in science has helped to contribute to our affinity with religion.

Consequently, science should not simply be branded as the enemy just because it opposes our initial conceptions of what we define religion to be. The beauty and scope of religion in being a subjective and malleable entity means that we do not have to be confined to what we think religion is, but instead see what religion can be. Science has inspired that change by helping us define how we perceive the world as well as who we are as humans, which has very much achieved what religion has sought out to do for years. For example, the current hot topic of research is stem cell research and its benefits for mankind. While this has certainly had its moments of contention, especially with Catholicism in the Vatican City and even in Singapore, where there was public outcry over the use of stem cells from Catholics, other religions such as Islam and Hinduism have welcomed that change. This is contingent on the belief that such research can aid more people in the long run in terms of curing debilitating diseases. It would be folly to simply dismiss the benefits of science in promoting goodwill by helping other humans. Science achieves just that, albeit in more advanced and even 'unnatural' ways.

Finally, science has opened up venues for philosophical questions which shape how we see religion. The idea now is that religion has more utility than simply being affiliated with the ecclesiastic, in that religion often provides us with a platform for emotional solace and comfort in times of distress and dire need. Science, for all its advancements into genome-editing therapy as well as in determining when an embryo can be declared a foetus, has helped to enforce the need for religion as only religion provides answers to such ethical dilemmas. Religion, for all the humanity it inspires, is consulted when such questions pop up over time, and it is a known fact that every board of ethics includes at least one leader of each religious organisation when deciding on the most humane way to deal with such concerns. In such cases, science helps to enforce religion by affirming our sense of humanity, which can only be defined in relation to God or our meaning and purpose in life. Thus, science is not a threat to how we view religion in our modern day era, but rather an equal and a defining structure in enforcing our view of religion.

In conclusion, science is not necessarily the enemy of religion despite going against our religious knowledge at times. Rather, it serves as a platform for us to openly communicate the role and value of religion in our lives, transforming it into a guiding principle we can live by. Science and religion are not mutually exclusive, and their ability to coexist shows that science and religion can instead cooperate to expand our knowledge of humanity.

Comments:

A smooth and coherent essay with well-developed points that are sufficiently explained. Examples are varied and relevant, although sometimes not substantiated. Although language is generally fluent, ideas were not always clearly linked.

Do social media platforms truly promote diversity of opinions?

Joey Tan Jia Yi (19S61)

On 15 March 2019, a gunman entered the Al Noor Mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand and opened fire on attendees indiscriminately, killing a total of 42 people. This senseless hate crime was live-streamed on Facebook Live for 17 minutes—the entire duration of the attack, from the drive to the mosque to the drive away. After the attack, copies of the livestream were propagated through other sites such as YouTube, Reddit and Twitter, while at least 1.5 million uploads of the video and images were detected and blocked by Facebook. Incidents like this reignite the debate over whether social media platforms truly promote diversity of opinions, and what can be considered to be diverse. In my opinion, social media platforms are indeed places where fruitful and nuanced discussions and exchanges can occur, as they encourage the sharing of diverse opinions and are built on a fundamental belief in free speech. This is evident in the broad content guidelines on most social media platforms, the role of social media platforms in key issues around the world and recent trends in the types of content found on these platforms.

Firstly, most social media platforms have broad and vague guidelines in their terms of service regarding the type of content users are allowed to upload and share, hence allowing for the free sharing of diverse opinions without regulations or limitation. Take for example, Twitter's media policy which only regulates three broad categories: graphic violence and adult content, media depicting deceased individuals and intimate media. Even so, Twitter does not outright ban such content, placing a warning message on "sensitive media" from the three categories instead, to help those who do not wish to view such content make informed decisions. Besides the lenient and often poorly-enforced regulations, Twitter and other social media platforms generally allow users to post and share any type of content and do not actually filter uploaded content nor censor users' posts. As such, users are given the freedom to voice their opinions without fear of persecution or judgement, creating an environment in which a diverse range of viewpoints and opinions can be exchanged and shared. Even on contentious issues like abortion rights and immigration policy, people on both sides of the issues can voice their thoughts freely, making for nuanced discussions involving a wide variety of ideas and beliefs. The very fact that Planned Parenthood, a pro-choice organisation, and pro-life U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops can co-exist on Twitter and share their content freely is a testament to the diversity of opinions that social media not just allows for, but encourages by imposing minimal restrictions on content uploaded to their sites.

Secondly, I believe that social media platforms do promote diversity of opinions as they serve as a means of communication between diverse groups of people. In an increasingly interconnected world, social media platforms have become a key way of bringing people of all convictions and from all walks of life together. When these platforms build up such diverse user bases, it is only expected that an equally diverse multitude of opinions will be found on social media platforms. As of January 2019, Facebook is the most popular social network worldwide, boasting a whopping 2.27 billion monthly active users and a global usage penetration of 35 percent. One just has to look at the top 10 countries with the highest numbers of users to see how diverse social media platforms are—countries within the list such as India, the United States, Brazil, Mexico, Turkey and the United Kingdom span four continents on their own. When such vast numbers of unique individuals of various races, ethnicities, nationalities, gender identities, ages and political alignments come together, social media platforms become hubs of diversity. As such, I am of the view that the interconnectedness and communication social media platforms allow for create diverse communities of unique individuals, in which diverse opinions can be shared freely.

Thirdly, it is evident that social media platforms do promote diversity of opinions, when we look at recent trends in the types of content shared on these platforms. During the 2016 Presidential elections in the U.S., both candidates spent \$81 million on Facebook advertisements for their campaigns, and digital advertisements on Facebook and Google quadrupled in the 2018 U.S. midterm elections as compared to 2014. In 2018, the #MeToo movement took over social media sites globally as victims of sexual harassment voiced out and spoke openly about their personal experiences to call attention to the issue. Since its first appearance on social media platforms in 2013, the Black Lives Matter movement has found successful amplification through social media and five years later, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag is still being used an average of 17 003 times per day on Twitter and has since been used nearly 30 million times. At 1 742 333 likes, a tweet by K-pop boy band BTS was the most liked tweet of 2018, followed by a post by former U.S. President Barack Obama celebrating what would eventually be known as the March for Our Lives movement against gun violence in schools. This is just a sample of social media content, and it already ranges from politics to civil rights to pop culture. Social media platforms have become a colourful space where all subcultures, interest groups, political movements and local communities have come together. The variety in content found on social media platforms, and the uncountable number of revolutions and debates they have allowed for, speak to their promotion of diversity of opinions.

On the other hand, some may argue that social media platforms do not genuinely promote diversity of opinions, with certain groups making accusations of censorship and restriction of free speech. Prominent right-wing personalities in the U.S., like conspiracy theorist Alex Jones for example, have accused YouTube and Facebook of censoring his news outlet Infowars, and conservatives claim that tech companies like Twitter have an “anti-conservative bias” that leads to “shadow banning” of senior Republican politicians and censorship of conservative viewpoints. Although it is true that social media sites have regulated and removed content from their sites, and still do so today, I would argue that their intentions lie not in reducing diversity of opinions, but in protecting users from potentially offensive content and language. As these platforms work on better methods and algorithms to detect and remove offensive content, it is inevitable that they will make mistakes and unintentionally remove content that is not actually offensive. These are isolated cases, in my view, and do not substantiate claims of censorship and bias sufficiently. Social media platforms promote diversity of opinions within certain parameters and are constantly improving their ability to provide an environment in which diverse opinions can be shared freely without turning toxic or offensive. In the process, there will be unintentional consequences and missteps, but as a whole these platforms are centred on the idea of free speech.

In the 21st century, social media has become an integral part of many aspects of society, be it politics, pop culture or personal beliefs. At the same time, society as we know it is becoming increasingly diverse in many ways as well. Social media’s role in the sharing of diverse opinions and discussion of pressing societal issues will become increasingly important and society will likely need social media to promote such exchanges to prevent the formation of echo chambers and factions within communities, as well as to foster greater social cohesion.

Comments:

A well written essay with ample coverage of pertinent points. Although some points may be somewhat simplistic, arguments are largely well supported by a sufficient number of detailed examples. The hook in the introduction is effective as it is relevant and current.

‘Contrary to popular belief, artificial intelligence will not improve our lives.’ What is your view?

Koh Ru Hui (17S32)

Technology has improved by leaps and bounds over the past few centuries, from the use of landlines and telephones to handheld smartphones, localised Intranet to globalised Internet. The continuous advancement in technology seeks to bring about greater convenience and productive efficiency to the human population. In recent years, the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been highly discussed, with many singing praises about its creation. However, there are also people who feel that AI brings about more harm than good, as it possesses threats to the human population, worsening our lives. I agree with both sides of the argument to a certain extent, but I believe that as long as regulations and enforcements are put in place, the benefits that we can reap from the use of AI will be greater than its cons, thereby improving our lives.

Firstly, a portion of people may feel that the creation of AI leads to the substitution of human workers in the workforce, thereby putting human employment opportunities at risk. The use of AI has become more prevalent in recent years, with many private firms and government sectors employing the use of it. One example would be Hospi, an AI robot that works in Singapore’s Changi General Hospital. It is part of the hospital’s porter management system, and helps to move medical documents as well as drugs and specimen. These are tasks previously performed by hospitals’ support staff. Hence, the implementation of Hospi is seen to be a threat to the support staff in the healthcare industry. In addition to this, AI possesses data analytical skills, which are used to create algorithms for role designation. AI can assign tasks to company workers that best perform the particular jobs, based on past experiences as well as the strengths of the individual worker. This thus ensures that the tasks are assigned to workers that best suit the job, thereby increasing the productive efficiency of the firm. Certain firms in the United States also employ AI to analyse the data and particulars of interviewees when recruiting new workers. The judgments made by AI are seen to be more objective, with no personal emotions nor bias involved. However, some may view this rising task-allocation phenomenon by AI a huge threat to those working in the human resource department, as well as those in the managerial positions, since these tasks were previously performed by these personnel. Hence, from this point of view, AI worsens our lives as it brings about threats to the workers in the workforce, risking their positions in the company.

Furthermore, AI can also threaten the well-being of the human population. People against the use of AI argued that the rapid advancement in AI may cause human beings to be substituted, with AI eventually gaining superiority over us. Jack Ma, the creator of Alibaba, as well as the late famous scientist Stephen Hawking, both warned that AI may eventually transcend human capabilities in the world of business and scientific development. AI possesses the “deep-learning” ability, and just like humans, they are able to learn and gain new insights each time they are tasked to perform a particular role, with the difference being that they are able to absorb new knowledge at a much faster pace compared to that of human beings. When the human population can no longer keep up with the advancement of AI, we may eventually become subservient to it. Scenes in the movie “Terminator”, with robots taking control over mankind, may no longer remain science fiction. One incident worth highlighting would be the Facebook chatbots that started speaking in a language that even its creators could not comprehend. While this chatbot system was quickly shut down by Facebook, we cannot be sure that such an incident would not be repeated in the future, possessing detrimental effects on the human population. Hence, contrary to popular belief, AI will not improve our lives, but instead, may bring about catastrophic consequences to our well-being.

However, many in the society still believe that AI will continue to improve our lives in the future, just as how it already does as long as regulations and enforcement are put in place. Most of the AI programmes are created with specific tasks to perform, and it is us, the human engineers, that decide the starting inputs that are to be keyed into these AI programmes. As long as human do not abuse AI, we can harness an unimaginable treasure trove of benefits from it, resolving problems such as the manpower crunch that is rising in many countries with ageing populations such as that of Singapore and Japan. Moreover, when AI does get out of control, such as in the case of the Facebook chatbots, the engineers can simply shut the programme down in time as long as surveillance has been put in place. Hence, AI does not possess harm to mankind as long as it is well-regulated, and can allow us to become better than before, improving the quality of our lives.

AI allows for biomedical advancement. While there is a limit to what human scientists can learn and do, the ability of AI to do so is unfettered. Through “deep-learning”, AI can be employed to study the most specific aspects of the human anatomy, benefiting the medical industry and hence human population greatly. For example, the AlphaGo programme that was used to beat the world Go champion is currently being used to study the protein folding mechanism in the human body, hoping to create cures for cancer. Many other AI programmes are also used to gain knowledge on different aspects of the human body, and the first cure for Human Immunodeficiency Virus may soon be invented by AI. As such, AI, when used appropriately, can allow scientists to better understand the human anatomy and create medical treatments that can be used to cure our illnesses, improving the quality of our lives.

Moreover, AI can be used to perform mundane and monotonous tasks, freeing the human employees up for higher value-adding tasks while improving the productivity of the firm. For example, Twitter has employed the use of both big data and AI to help filter the comments that its users make, ensuring that inappropriate content is deleted, preventing the spread of warped and explicit content. These tasks were previously performed manually by human workers, but with more than 300 million active monthly users, such jobs, when performed manually, are taxing on the workers. Furthermore, the efficiency of the company would be compromised as well. Hence, the introduction of AI helps to free these workers up to perform jobs that are mentally and emotionally less demanding, more rewarding, while at the same time, improves the overall productivity and efficiency of the firm. Thus, this benefits both the firm and its employees, and it will improve our lives.

All in all, as long as the use of AI is well-regulated and not abused by those with malicious intent, the negative impacts brought about by AI can be mitigated and kept within human control. In fact, the benefits harnessed from the use of AI can be used to improve our lives in terms of standard of living, productivity as well as efficiency, at a pace faster than we can ever imagine.

Comments:

A confident personal voice that is well reflected in your response! Consider the ethical implications of using AI more clearly, as well as the issue of whether robots can truly replace human workers. The idea of ‘contrary to popular belief’ should also be better examined. On the whole, insightful and detailed analysis of ideas.

Is science the enemy of religion?

Teo Anwen Hannah (18S53)

Many perceive the scientific world to be completely separate from the world of religion. Scientists see religion and faith as abstract concepts, while those of religious faith see scientists as a group of people without the divine knowledge of life and the universe. However, despite the fundamental battle of logic versus faith in the war waged between science and religion, they do not necessarily have to pit themselves against each other as enemies. They can learn to coexist and look past their differences. In a world where science is the basis of all technological advancements, one may even be used to further the other. The belief in one may not lead to an immediate dismissal of the other. After all, if this were so, many scientists of the past would not have discovered what they had in their traditional and religious societies. As such, while science and religion may seem to be on opposite ends, science is not always the enemy of religion.

The bulk of such debates pitting science and religion against each other are based on ethical complications that come with further progress in science. The religious often have a fixed set of beliefs that they are obligated to follow. When ethical issues arise from the furtherance of science, they are often not in agreement with scientific procedures that clash with their beliefs. One of the most prominent arguments is the debate on abortion. Scientists came up with this procedure to improve the lives of women impregnated unwillingly. However, religious communities, such as the Muslim community and the Catholic Church, posited that the ability to end human life should be in the hands of the Creator of life. As such, there were many ethical arguments thrown around as the disagreement grew and clear lines were drawn between the two factions. While it may seem that in cases such as these, science is in fact the enemy of religion, we must also recognise the value of conflict resolution, which is used to mediate between parties in the political arena. Disagreements are a daily occurrence, and the case of science against religion is no different. Managing conflicting arguments between the two, while tricky, is not absolutely impossible. If managed well, both science and religion may coexist peacefully in the same universe. This may be seen in the issue of stem cell research, another hot topic that entrenches the cleaved border between the two camps. On the internet, countless arguments propagate stem cell research as something wonderful and full of potential. However, one would also find an equally-sized pile of arguments from the religious that vehemently suggest otherwise. Despite the slew of arguments from both sides, it seems like no one has the right answer. The clash comes from the scientists' duty to heal the wounded, which they would like to do with stem cells, and the religious' duty to protect the sanctity of life. Of course, this is when the ethical argument of whether life starts from an embryonic stem cell enters. This issue, just like the issue of abortion, seems unresolvable. However, in Singapore, it was resolved. In a society where both science and religion are highly valued and protected, conflict resolution enabled stem cell research scientists and the Catholic Church to coexist peacefully. Despite the initial opposition from the Catholic Church in Singapore against the funding of stem cell research, the government was able to swiftly intercede and make peace between the religious and the scientific. As such, we must recognise the value of both sides, and take on a stance that would allow for the peaceful coexistence between the two. Evidently, despite the many ethical disagreements, science does not have to end up an enemy of religion.

As a matter of fact, science may be used to further the interests of the religious. Many religions strive to expand their so-called "populations" and recruit as many people to the same cause as possible. In the age of scientific discoveries and modernisation of technology, such advancements

come with many new inventions—the steam engine, improved cell phones that have become “smart”, and the Internet. The list is non-exhaustive. People in the modern world capitalise on all these inventions to make their lives better, and this includes the religious. In today’s age, many religions use tools such as the Internet to propagate their faith and invite many to join their cause. Even new, non-traditional religions, use the Internet to raise awareness of their religion, such as the religion of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Even more traditional and institutionalised religions such as Christianity use these scientific advancements to further their own causes, as seen in the many evangelists who use online platforms to spread the word of the Christian Bible. Even scientific advancements in the area of sound technology are being used by organisations such as Hillsong, who produce Christian worship music and uses the Internet to share their music with the rest of the world from one tiny studio, propagating their message to the masses through the employment of technology, which would not exist without science. Thus, science may not always be enemies with religion, but may even serve as a useful tool in furthering the religious cause. It would be very wrong to confine science to the status of an enemy. After all, enemies would not help one another, only friends would.

Finally, on a fundamental basis, both science and religion seem to be at odds due to the disparity between their most basic principles. The very basis for science is founded upon the principle of logic. Only logical arguments may be used for science, and any belief other than that serves as anti-science, simply due to the fact that it cannot be logically proven. On the other hand, religion is built on faith. The concept of believing in the invisible is fundamentally opposed by the scientific need for logical and visible proof. While this may seem to be the case, if one digs deeper, it may be surprising that in many cases, scientists use science to prove components of their religion. This may seem counterintuitive, or even paradoxical. However, there is no shortage of scientists out there who proclaim their status as religious scientists, and use scientific theory and findings to prove religious theories. For instance, scientists such as Professor Freddy Boey from NUS, study the theory of evolution, and engage in research that eventually concludes its unlikelihood. Religious scientists may also produce an alternate scientific argument that presents facts that debunk the Big Bang theory. Instead, logical arguments may even be used to prove or suggest the likelihood of a religious theory, such as that of the theory of the beginning of the universe. The Watchmaker Theory, which states that if something as complex as a watch had a creator to design its mechanisms, it is all the more likely that an extremely complex earth with specific mechanisms that sustain life would have a creator, is also often the most logical method of proving that there was a creator of the universe, a God, which is the fundamental belief of most religions. There are many such arguments for the pro-religion camp that take on more logical and scientific approaches. There are also scientists who use scientific research to prove the validity of claimed events in the Christian Bible, such as the parting of the Red Sea. Scientists researched the archaeological findings of a golden chariot in the ocean to scientifically prove its status as the Pharaoh’s chariot that capsized during the parting of the Red Sea. As such, it is evident that science may even be used to prove the validity of religion. As such, science is definitely not an enemy of religion.

Science and religion are constantly perceived to be contradictory. The existence of one seems to immediately prove the invalidity of the other. However, it must be recognised that these two concepts do not oppose one another. They may disagree at times, but that does not pit them against one another as enemies. In fact, in the right hands, they may coexist and even serve to support one another.

Comments:

Essay is written with confidence, conviction and sophistication. Thoughtful response that is consistently argued, reflecting depth in evaluation. The only problem is the angle of argument. Instead of showing why and how religion and science seem incompatible but can coexist, science should have been positioned science as a threat, being the enemy and challenging religion.

SOCIETY

"Society knows perfectly well how to kill a man and has methods more subtle than death."

- Andre Gide, Autumn Leaves

"The spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom -- these are the pillars of society." - Henrik Ibsen

"Kindness is the golden chain by which society is bound." - Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

'Affluence is as big a problem as poverty.' Do you agree?

Hong Ai Ling (18S55)

In the long history of mankind, man has always striven for a greater quality of life. The most common and logical perception surely is that affluence will bring about a higher standard of living. Therefore, people trudge on in an endless journey in pursuit of wealth and more wealth. While we look up to the seemingly glamorous and liberating lives of the affluent, we simultaneously sympathise with the poor. Poverty, the perennial problem of the poor being unable to afford sufficient daily necessities to meet the minimum standard of living, seems like more of a concern than affluence. However, the fact that affluence is one of the main factors in a widening rich-poor gap is rarely addressed. Few consider the perspective that the issue of poverty does not stand alone, but is instead an outcome of social immobility fueled by widening income inequality. Furthermore, as humans, we are all vulnerable to the pervasive and tempting power that money holds, which leads to other worrying problems in politics and society. Thus, I believe that affluence is just as big a problem as poverty.

Most consumers of mainstream media would agree that affluence is not as big an issue as poverty, highlighting that poverty causes much more severe consequences such as starvation and death, especially in less developed countries such as South Africa. Affluence, in contrast, is often dismissed as a 'happy problem' in society, for how much harm can affluence bring in comparison with poverty? However, the mainstream media does not adequately highlight the problem of the rich being too rich. More often than not, they announce blatantly the problems of the poor, pointing fingers at geopolitical and cultural issues. Take Indonesia for example, where a report has shown that the richest 10% of its people hold more than half of the country's wealth. The jaw-dropping wealth gap between the rich and the poor is one of the reasons restricting the upward social mobility of the poor. As the poor are often the ones losing out, people tend to focus on the problem of poverty, concurrently missing out on the bigger picture which shows that the other end of the spectrum that is causing the increasing wealth and income gap.

Affluence leads to a widening income gap because the subsequent generations of the rich are able to access better and more resources to achieve financial success. As intergenerational wealth is passed on, the result is an accumulation of wealth for the rich while the poor continue to struggle to catch up with the dynamic changes of society. This applies to First World countries such as Singapore and fast-developing countries like China. In Singapore, the meritocratic system has been heavily criticised in recent years for constructing an unlevel playing field. Children of wealthy families are able to attend tuition classes and to hone and develop themselves in non-academic areas like music and art since young age while the poorer children can only rely on themselves as they are not granted access to such privileges. As a result, the rich gain more chances of excelling in both academic and non-academic areas. Rapidly-developing countries like China also face similar problems after a few decades of mass industrialisation and technological advancement. People from rural provinces in China find themselves stuck in poor living conditions, with less developed educational systems and relatively worse job prospects. In contrast, those in larger, more prosperous, cities march at the forefront of technological change. From an economist's perspective, increasing wealth for only a selected few leads to worsening equity and welfare for the whole of society, hence affluence is an issue that is as severe as poverty.

Unbeknownst to many, affluence can also lead to problems such as political and legal manipulation. While poverty is concerning, political manipulation by the rich is just as big an issue as it severely impedes the progress of society. When the most affluent in a country can control the

government with wealth alone, its people will suffer from biased and unfair policies created by the rich. It is even more worrying when leaders of a country themselves are blinded by money and material satisfaction, inappropriately abusing their political powers to obtain more wealth. Former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib is infamous for his involvement in the 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal involving as much as 2.6 billion Ringgit. 1MDB was supposedly established for the development and progress of Malaysia. As a consequence of the revelation that shook the nation, angry protestors took to the streets, demanding a justifiable outcome. Therefore, not only does a government lose the trust of its people, the country is also prevented from progressing economically when its higher-ups are commanded by wealth.

Affluence is also as big a concern as poverty because of the power of money. In the current world where people worship money, money in the wrong hands spells disaster. When people become increasingly affluent and are brainwashed by the extravagant lifestyles and mindsets of the wealthy, their moral compass may go haywire as they claim superiority over those who are not as rich. A cogent example would be the recent Burning Sun scandal in South Korea, where K-pop idols such as Big Bang's Seungri, also known as 'K-pop's Great Gatsby' were exposed to have been involved in prostitution and rape incidents. It should not come as a shock that some of the victims were newbies in the entertainment industry who were striving to gain popularity. Exploiting this weakness—this drive to succeed—are those with wealth and social standing who can easily bend the rules of the game, disregarding any moral restraints which seem insignificant as compared to the exclusive power they hold. What is even more worrying is that international fans still support and defend them, religiously believing that their idols could not be demons as portrayed by the media. This is partly because we naturally associate wealth with social status, and with this people overly worship those who are wealthier. The wealthy, in this case, can then take advantage of their social status and wealth to break and disregard the law. The Gangnam Police Station had allegedly been bribed by the rich officials involved in the Burning Sun scandal so as to keep them out of their unlawful business. Poverty, on the other hand, does not create such problems. Instead, people living in poverty lead a more simplistic life and may even be happier. Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, also scores the highest in the happiness index and has a relatively low crime rate. Hence, affluence is as big a problem as poverty as it poisons the minds of those who are extremely wealthy.

Poverty is a vicious cycle and so is affluence. Without affluence, there would be no such gaping difference between the rich and the poor. Affluence in the wrong hands brings severe consequences to the economy and the progress of a country. Affluence can also brainwash the holders of wealth into thinking that they can be above the law. With this plethora of negative implications that are widely overlooked by society, affluence definitely poses as great a threat as poverty. As countries strive to reduce poverty rates in the future, there will be more and more harmful incidences where affluence is at play. Hence, affluence may emerge to become an even bigger problem than poverty in many years to come.

Comments:

Examples used were very apt and relevant, though explanations are occasionally insufficient as they do not link back to the arguments made. Good that there were consistent comparisons between poverty and affluence.

“Environmental conservation is a lost cause” Discuss.

Loh Jie Rong Ryan (17S31)

According to the late scientist Stephen Hawking, as well as many other notable figures such as Elon Musk, humans will have to colonise another planet in the near future. This is due to the rate of environmental degradation, which is occurring at an unprecedented speed today. As a pessimist, I believe that environmental conservation is indeed a lost cause as we are unable to find viable substitutes for energy resources, our efforts to protect nature are ineffective and our efforts at conservation are misjudged.

Environmental conservation is a lost cause as humans cannot find and effectively utilise viable alternatives to fuel our energy consumption. Ever since the industrial revolution, fossil fuels have been greatly used to drive our machinery and technology. However, the process of extracting fossil fuels such as coal, oil and natural gas, as well as their consumption, is extremely pollutive. Even until today, as technology becomes increasingly sophisticated and more efficient to produce less waste and pollution, it is seen in global trends that our environment is becoming increasingly degraded. This is evidenced by the increase in carbon dioxide levels contributing to global warming, and the increased incidence of pollution. To curb this problem, there has been increasing research and investment into cleaner energy alternatives to fuel our energy wants, such as wind energy, geothermal energy and solar energy. These alternatives were designed to become the metaphorical silver bullet to eliminate the threat of environmental degradation. However, in reality, these efforts, although virtuous, have not reaped any significant success. What makes it so difficult to effectively use these alternatives are the attitudes towards their implementation. Even though many countries are aware of the benefits of investing in and using alternative energy sources instead of fuel, many of them are unwilling to do so due to the costs involved. These alternatives are often very expensive, and require enough land and appropriate conditions to be effective. This is what causes many countries, especially those with developing economies, to shy away from such alternatives and focus on using fossil fuels instead to achieve economic growth. This is seen in the case of countries such as India, which eschewed climate agreements. India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, has said that India will not sacrifice its economic progress for the environment, as other western developed nations had achieved success from the use of fossil fuels. He argues that India should be allowed to do the same. Therefore, the use of fossil fuels in our world today remains a pertinent issue, and we are unable to find and use viable sources of energy, making environmental conservation a lost cause.

Also, environmental conservation is becoming hopeless as our current efforts for the conservation of our natural world are ineffective. On the international stage, many countries came together to agree and pledge to protect our natural environment. This includes our rainforests, landscapes and oceans. However, what makes such agreements largely ceremonial is the fact that they are not effectively carried out. Even though areas with diverse ecosystems are protected by law, the problems of corruption and ineffective policing are faced by many countries. Even when areas are protected, many corporations and syndicates are not deterred from carrying out activities which ultimately lead to environmental degradation. This is acutely seen in the case of Indonesia, where even though it is against the law to carry out “slash-and-burn” tactics commonly used in farming, the smog that enveloped multiple Southeast Asian countries in 2015 was caused by many farmers' uncontrolled burning of forests to make way for farmlands. This is due to the ineffective monitoring of Indonesia's forests that emboldens corporations to use farmers to break

environmental laws. Furthermore, in the case of the Amazon Rainforest in Brazil, even though it is considered to be protected, logging and mining activities continue in the rainforest today, as the Brazilian government is ignoring it, even reaping monetary benefits from such activities. These cases are only a few of the many problems the world faces. This problem is difficult to solve since societies are becoming increasingly apathetic and are resigned to the status quo, which believes that such problems of inefficiency and corruption are unsolvable. Hence, this makes our current efforts to protect natural environments useless.

Furthermore, what makes environmental conservation a fruitless cause is the misguided efforts that we pour our resources into. Today, the environment is a big part of the majority's awareness. This is due to the attempts to raise awareness about the current state of the environment. This is especially true in developed economies, where the education system teaches students about conservation, and public awareness programmes by multiple governments and non-governmental organisations promote environmental consciousness. In the aspect of awareness, countries can be said to have significant success. However, what has been stopping these minor successes from making environmental conservation an even more powerful cause, is the misjudged efforts that we make. We celebrate Earth Hour annually, where we cut off all electricity to reduce our usage of energy resources. Even though it is indeed a thoughtful event, it occurs for only one hour per year, so people tend to forget to make conservation a daily affair. Furthermore, multiple environmental organisations such as the World Wildlife Fund concentrate on the protection of endangered animal species. However, their main mascot is still the panda, when, as of 2017, pandas are no longer classified as endangered. What led to the focus on protecting pandas is the fact that it has commercial value due to its cute appearance. As such, other animals such as the black rhinoceros and elephants continue to face the threat of extinction, as organisations focus on conserving animals that are popular. What makes this issue so significant is the wrong mindsets of the people, who believe that we should find ways to change our current situation without decreasing our consumption significantly. However, it is indeed human consumption and wants that have brought many of the problems we face today, and countries should focus on decreasing consumption, instead of continuing our misguided efforts that make environmental conservation so unsuccessful.

In conclusion, environmental conservation can be considered a lost cause due to the inability to acquire viable substitutes for energy, ineffective efforts to protect nature and our ultimately misguided efforts to conserve. Even though these reasons paint a bleak image of the future, one can still remain hopeful that someday, all these will change for the better. To make a projection, it is possible that humans' mindsets towards environmental consciousness will change, as a few countries including Costa Rica and Sweden are already doing so. It is still not too late to make a difference today, for our survival in the future.

Comments:

Insightful response that synthesised your understanding of the efforts in environmental conservation with what you believe in.

Is there truth to the claim that inequality is the greatest threat to your society today?

Siow Mein Yeak (17S44)

"To build a democratic society, based on justice and equality..." These words, enshrined in our national pledge, depict the ideal society that Singapore has ever been striving toward. Yet, with rising inequality and the whirlwind of discourse around it sparked by sociology professor Teo You Yenn, some have named inequality as the greatest threat Singapore faces today. To analyse the truth in this claim, this essay first discusses the gravity of this issue, before further discussing other important threats to society and then concludes whether inequality is indeed our greatest threat.

On one hand, there is definitely truth behind the claim that inequality is the greatest threat Singapore faces today as inequality, if left unchecked, risks destroying the very ideal that the country was founded upon: meritocracy. Inequality has reared its ugly head again in Singapore, as seen from the recent Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey on societal divisions. The IPS survey found that it is now socioeconomic class that drives Singaporeans apart, instead of race being our main divisor, as commonly thought. Indeed, the survey showed that lesser Singaporeans from elite schools have friends from non-elite schools, and that lesser Singaporeans who live in private housing have interactions with those who live in public housing estates. Inequality in socioeconomic status (SES) has created class divisions in education and housing. In education, richer parents who can afford tuition for their children for the Primary School Leaving Examination leverage on their wealth to provide advantages for their children. This has led to the increased funnelling of high SES students into elite schools like Raffles Institution (RI) and Hwa Chong Institution (HCI). Socioeconomic inequality has been argued to have led to elite schools becoming closed circles where social mixing with neighbourhood school students is rare. In time, these elite school students could very possibly pass on their social capital to their own children, just as their parents did, entrenching class divisions and creating a society where the well-off possess no empathy toward those of lower SES and express disdain toward them. Were that to occur, inequality could in the words of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, "cause our politics to become vicious and society to fracture and wither". Almost paradoxically, our meritocratic education system could systematically breed inequality through a generation of the nouveau riche who understandably only want the best for their children. If meritocracy fails and becomes a dirty word, Singaporeans would lose faith in the very basis of our systems and instead turn against each other and tear our societal fabric apart. Hence, inequality can be argued to be our greatest threat today.

Yet, it is not all doom and gloom when it comes to inequality. Importantly, the presence of our still-strong meritocratic institutions ensure that despite rising inequality, no child who is deserving of success will be denied the chance to achieve his or her fullest potential regardless of socioeconomic background. The fundamental pillar of our education system still holds firm. Moreover, the Government has been responsive and decisive in ameliorating the negative effects of socioeconomic inequality too. In the realm of education, community organisations such as the Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC) have put in great effort to ensure children from less advantageous backgrounds have a fighting chance at succeeding too. The "Planting grass and growing trees" (种草, 植树) strategy provides support for lower-income students through subsidized tuition classes, which are also conducted in smaller groups to help students. Such initiatives thus go a long way in ensuring no child is left behind and that good schools continue to have diversity in student background. In housing, the Government has also combined Residents' Committees and the private housing equivalent into Residents' Networks (RNs), where residents across housing types can work together to

enliven their shared spaces. RNs could prove instrumental in bridging the public-private gap in housing, promoting mutual understanding and empathy and ensuring that Singaporeans are not divided into closed circles of neighbours of the same SES. The strength of our existing institutions, coupled with a responsive Government thus prove that inequality may not be as threatening and damaging to society as predicted.

To evaluate whether inequality is our gravest threat or not, we must also discuss other important threats to our society such as terrorism and an ageing population. Terrorism is a grave threat we face as well. Situated in a Southeast Asian hotbed of fractious religious divides with Muslim-majority neighbours like Malaysia and Indonesia, the threat of terrorism is real and incredibly potent. Indeed, it is "not if, but when", and when a major terrorist attack does occur in Singapore, there will be tremendous loss of life. Our society may very possibly fracture across religious lines just as in the United States post-9/11. The consequences of a terrorist attack are far more damaging to society than inequality itself, and can be argued along this vein to pose a more significant threat than inequality.

Another threat that is equally as great as inequality, if not more so, is our rapidly greying population. The Silver Tsunami could prove calamitous for Singapore in the near future and our stagnant and low birth rate would mean that there will be an acute lack of support for older Singaporeans who have no children or younger working relatives to support them. There is great weight in the argument that our ageing population is our greatest threat because before we consider protecting Singapore from the evils of inequality and terrorism, we must first ensure there is actually a Singapore left for us to safeguard.

In the final analysis, inequality is not the greatest threat to Singapore today. Though inequality if left unchecked will pose insidious and long-lasting consequences in Singapore, we must acknowledge that there have already been concerted and proactive efforts in managing inequality through a combination of grassroots and top-down initiatives. Inequality is not the greatest threat, but neither are terrorism nor our ageing population. Rather, these threats constitute a complex and mixed bag of challenges that Singapore must grapple with moving forward. A recent Channel NewsAsia survey on youths showed that their chief concern is inequality. Perhaps, our best course of action is to simply have faith in this promising new generation already very concerned with and committed to combating the threats we face, and that these future inheritors of the nation will continue to ensure Singapore is still a democratic society, based on justice and equality.

Comments:

Some nice turns of phrases and good knowledge of the issue at hand. Perhaps a little descriptive in parts such as your second paragraph and some points could have been explored further with clearer explanations. Nonetheless, there was a good evaluation on the whole.

Is an ageing population necessarily a ticking time bomb?

Tan Guang Xin (17S64)

A silver tsunami is looming upon developed economies around the world. As an increasing number of citizens continue to age, the clock is ticking for governments and societies to deal with the thorny issue of an ageing population before the burden becomes too great to bear. I agree that the ageing population is a ticking time bomb as there will be an increased need to provide for its needs. Moreover, the rapidly ageing population places increased pressure on a country's ability to further its economic development. Lastly, the risk of social issues developing due to a rapidly digitising world would only increase in the future. However, others may find that the ageing population poses a smaller threat to societies as the needs of the elderly can be met using technological solutions.

Those who argue that an ageing population is not necessarily a ticking time bomb claim that technology can help reduce the burden of an ageing population. For instance, wearable tech can be used to monitor the health status of the aged, allowing medical conditions to be monitored by doctors in real time. This helps reduce the burden on public healthcare institutions that are often overstretched to begin with. Technology can provide new, efficient solutions to help the elderly to deal with their needs in a more efficient fashion as compared to current practices that are in contrast less efficient. The use of technology can help societies deal with the issue of an ageing population more effectively, while reducing the burden borne by governments and citizens. If used appropriately, technology can negate the costs associated with providing for an ageing population.

While technology may indeed provide us with ingenious ways of dealing with an ageing population, it is not a silver bullet. As populations continue to age at an increasing rate, the burden that societies can expect to bear will only increase. For instance by 2030, one in four Singaporeans will be made up of the elderly. With the population of the aged projected to rise over the years, we can only expect the burden of meeting their growing needs to rise and rise. Technology would have only a limited effect on reducing this burden. In the long run, even with the aid of technology, the burden borne by societies will probably continue to rise.

As populations start to age, there will be an increased need for resources to be channeled to the provision of services to meet their growing needs, placing an ever increasing burden on society. As populations age, it is likely that there will a rise in chronic illnesses associated with old age, such as high blood pressure, kidney failure, or heart ailments. These chronic illnesses often require long term and expensive treatment plans. This will place a greater burden on public healthcare institutions, that are often overstretched to begin with. In order to foot the growing healthcare bill, government funds would probably need to be redirected to the provision of subsidised healthcare services. Not only does this incur an opportunity cost, it also necessitates greater taxation to fund such spending. Not only will governments bear greater costs, individuals would also suffer from increased taxation. For instance, goods and services tax rates in Singapore will rise from 7% to 9% to help raise government revenue for social spending in sectors such as healthcare for the aged and various social security packages, such as the Pioneer Generation and Merdeka Generation packages. This would place an increased burden on societies, which would only be set to rise in the future.

Moreover, as countries age, there will be an increased pressure on their ability to drive economic development, placing pressure on the long term economic developmental prospects of nations. As populations age, the number of retirees would certainly increase. This causes the size of the

workforces to shrink over time. The reduction in the size of the workforces limits the ability of nations to increase their economic output. Moreover, tight labour markets may even make countries unattractive to investors due to high labour costs. This places the economic stability and growth of nations in jeopardy in the long run as their economic capacities are continually reduced by a shrinking workforce. For instance, the Japanese labour force has continued to shrink over the years, limiting not only its ability to stimulate economic growth, but also the ability of its firms to innovate and stimulate growth. With a smaller population size, domestic consumption is set to fall too, while a lack of innovation causes a country's economy to stagnate. In the long run, an ageing population would probably hurt a country's economy, causing their long term economic status to be increasingly uncertain.

Lastly, as nations age, there would be an increased threat of social issues developing as the ageing population may struggle to keep up with a rapidly digitising world. In today's world, many key services are going digital. Digital literacy is an increasingly important ability to possess in the digital economy and society at large. Digital technology has become indispensable in today's world. It is used to keep in touch with friends, colleagues and the world at large. Employers increasingly require their staff to be proficient in basic IT and digital skills. Even accessing many government services requires the ability to operate a computer. The ageing population poses a threat as the elderly who are digital migrants and may not be familiar with such newfangled technologies. This puts them at risk of being increasingly isolated and decoupled from society at large. Such social isolation would certainly be problematic for a country, with an increasing number of elderly in Singapore developing mental illnesses or resorting to suicide due to their social isolation. A rapidly changing world that is disorienting to the elderly would prevent them from fully integrating into today's world, making social issues a real threat in the future, thereby threatening the social stability and social cohesion.

In many cultures and societies, the elderly are often seen as a source of wisdom and knowledge. In reality, the increased elderly population seems to be a burden to society that would only worsen over time. There is an increasing need for governments and civil society to work together and mitigate these challenges by encouraging and facilitating the active aging of seniors, by keeping them economically active to tap on their vast wealth of experience.

Comments:

An insightful response to today's demographic problem. You would need to explain the contributions of older workers and their qualities too. The issue of fertility rates (and population policies) should be discussed. Scope of examples could be broadened, as the examples used are mainly focused on Singapore, though this is not necessitated by the question.

MISCELLANEOUS

"Knowledge is power. Information is liberating. Education is the premise of progress, in every society, in every family. " - Kofi Annan

"The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses." - Malcolm X

"Law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and when they fail in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress." - Martin Luther King

Are museums in your society considered relics of the past?

Grace Wong Kai Li (18A11)

The word 'muse' in 'museums' denotes the role of a museum, which is to provide one with the space, time and access to works of art and past archives, allowing the individual to contemplate and ponder. As such, one is able to understand the intent behind a particular exhibit, gaining greater empathy, which is always relevant in the world. However, museums may be considered irrelevant currently as the proliferation of online material makes educational museum visits unnecessary. Yet, the appeal of museums still remains as seeing an exhibit on screen can never replace first-hand interactions with it. Sadly, in our fast-paced society, museum visits are not the first of many people's priorities, and little time is delegated specifically to it. In spite of all these, it would be unfair to reduce museums to mere relics of the past, especially since the government recognises its value in educating the people and raising national consciousness. Therefore, museums in my society are not necessarily considered relics of the past.

Museums are not mere relics of the past as they increase societal welfare by teaching one empathy. Though there are a couple of museums in Singapore that specialise in history and hence their displays mainly consist of archival material and symbols of the past, that is not to say that such exhibits only reflect our history. The purpose of visiting museums and exhibitions that detail our past is to learn more about our culture, customs and values. In doing so, we can understand why certain beliefs and practices persist to this day. For example, the exhibits in the Asian Civilisations Museum that showcase our history of warfare and battle explain why Singapore needs such unwavering resilience and a strong defence as deterrence. Museums can thus be seen to serve as a commentary on the socio-political climate of the time, helping us comprehend why certain decisions are made and their importance to our country. Furthermore, the value of museums extends beyond just teaching us about our past, but allows us to put ourselves in the shoes of those in the past to understand what their lives were like. In visiting exhibitions in the National Museum such as the Surviving Syonan one, we can learn about and witness the various atrocities committed against our ancestors during the Japanese Occupation. Through this visual experience, we are better able to appreciate the sacrifices made by our forefathers and be all the more grateful for the peace and security we enjoy currently. Museums are hence a venue for us to learn to empathise and gain appreciation for our past, traits that are highly valued in our increasingly dog-eat-dog world. Museums are thus not just artefacts of our past.

However, with technological advancement, such museum visits become unnecessary as one is more able to access information online. With increasing accessibility to archival material via the Internet, the appeal of museums has decreased and instead, they are seen as a waste of the scarce time on our hands. This implies that the public perceives museums to be mere collections of artefacts showcasing a distant past, with no other value. In a modern metropolis like Singapore, where society is extremely fast-paced and advanced, museums are deemed as an irrelevant waste of time, especially when they conflict with our pragmatic goals. How would learning more about Egyptian mummies enable a breadwinner to bring food to the table? Is sacrificing time on such frivolous trips to a museum necessary when we can just read about it online? Such thoughts are undeniably rampant in the minds of working adults striving to ascend the corporate ladder in Singapore. With over 75% of our population having access to the Internet, most would much rather educate themselves in the comfort of their own homes instead of going to a museum deliberately.

As such, museums are considered a waste of time and effort, in light of other more pressing tasks, revealing how museums are now reduced to just displays of history in our society.

Yet, such a view is highly unjustified as it ignores the value of interacting with exhibits face-to-face rather than through a screen. This is a view held by educators in Singapore. One cannot deny that reading up on historical information online cannot compare to the first-hand experience with the material. When one sees the exhibit in its totality and magnitude, the information and ideas presented become much more engaging and memorable. If reading facts through a screen is so effective has the same impact as seeing it in real life, why do we pay over \$1000 just for a flight to Paris to see the Mona Lisa? Why does one take the arduous journey of travelling to the Meteora UNESCO monasteries just for the Byzantine artwork that can be viewed online anyway? Considering how travel is a common pastime of Singaporeans and that educational trips are endorsed by schools, it can be seen that our society credits museums for its valuable first-hand experiences over the dull recitation of facts to students in the classroom or the watching videos about Sir Stamford Raffles online.

Such a view is similarly shared by the government. It is undeniable that in recent years, the government has been encouraging greater participation in the arts, with subsidies for Singapore citizens rendering museum visits free. It can hence be seen how museums are perceived by the government to be more than just relics of the past, but a means to promote national consciousness. For this year's Bicentennial, which marks Singapore's 200th year since colonisation, the media has been flooded with advertisements promoting the various programmes at museums. Special displays in the museums, such as art skins in the National Gallery and Asian Civilisations Museum among others, demonstrate the government's attempts to attract more people to museums to educate the public on Singapore's history. This aims to raise awareness about our past, heighten national consciousness and develop a sense of belonging. Enhancing this sense of rootedness is particularly pertinent to a budding young nation like Singapore, where nationhood is still being established. Hence, museums are not considered mere relics of the past by governments, instead, they are a vehicle to drive national identity and unity.

In conclusion, though our real-world scenarios cause museums to be perceived as mere relics of the past, I do not endorse this belief. My stand is also shared by the governing authorities in Singapore. Instead, there has been a strong emphasis on museum visits to inculcate a sense of national pride through developing greater empathy for our past. This is extremely essential to resource-poor Singapore, where its citizens have to be a united force driving our society forward. Especially in a world where controversy is rampant and morality runs askew, the values that museums teach us guide us to navigate the grey areas of various situations. One can conclude, therefore, that museums serve a very noble purpose in our society.

Comments:

A very engaging and thoughtful essay with clear explanations and well substantiated arguments.

‘Less is more.’ Is this sound advice?

Ho Wei Hao (17S55)

Never before in human history have so many people had so much to gain from an increasingly globalised and democratic world. The rise of commercialisation, together with the increasing mobility of the masses, have allowed the common folk to accumulate so much more than our ancestors could have ever wished for, be it in the form of material goods, or the memories and lessons we experience. Yet, this poses an interesting dilemma: Is having more truly a desirable goal, or does a minimalistic lifestyle actually bring more meaning to our lives? One may recommend that having more is preferable as it lets us live a comfortable life and as it leads to wisdom through the gaining of knowledge. However, I feel that less is indeed more as it leads to greater clarity, as well as a heightened sense of appreciation for what we already possess.

Firstly, it can be argued that less is not more because having more lets us live a comfortable life. Humans come into this world fragile and easily broken, susceptible to external forces and hard to please. All humans desire comfort, and to break out of poverty, the accumulation of material goods is seen as essential. Having a more spacious house gives us space to do more of the things we want; having more toys gives children higher satisfaction. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs shows how in order for individuals to live a truly meaningful life, one must first have basic necessities such as food, water and clothing. It is impossible to tell people who lack these basic items that less is more. Even as we move up this hierarchy, we see that we also need material goods to achieve the subsequent levels. For instance, respect from peers and our social groups is often much easier to achieve if we come across as wealthier. Wealth is highly sought after in this regard. In Singapore, the pursuit of the 5Cs, such as the ownership of cars and condominiums, is so ingrained in the minds of its citizens that possessing such wealth confers on us a certain respect among our peers. Even the process of exploring who we are and what hobbies and interests define us starts with having more money to do so. Therefore, in order to lead a truly comfortable life, possessing more is essential.

Furthermore, having more allows us to accumulate knowledge and subsequently wisdom. The rise of fake news across various social media platforms has led to the masses internalising misinformation. If we merely fixate on a narrow range of sources for our accumulation of knowledge, we let ourselves fall victim to the possibility of misinformation. No one news journal or teacher is always correct. In the course of their professional duties, it is possible that those who seek to convey information to us may make a mistake, due to human error. Even worse, they may use wrong, blatantly false information to mislead us, driven by their corruption. In the 2016 US elections, which Republican candidate Donald Trump won, it had been revealed that Facebook collaborated with data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica to only present Republican news sites to voters with Republican sentiments. This brings up a second point, which is that having only a few sources of information does not expose us to other differing views. If we only hear from one news source, it is possible that that news source only presents one side of the issue. This is the case with news agencies such as Fox News or The New York Times which support the right-wing and left-wing agendas respectively. Without exposing ourselves to more differing ideas, we lose sight of the bigger picture or are unable to learn a more informed way of interpreting issues. By having more sources of information, we are thus able to not only gather a truthful worldview, but also a holistic, objective frame of mind.

On the other hand, less is more because it allows for greater clarity. Humans often fall prey to information bias, which states that more information only serves to confuse us, and that in reality, we only require a few pieces of information. With a major emphasis on higher education in Singapore, pre-university students are bombarded with higher education fair after higher education fair, mountains of scholarship opportunities and way too many courses to choose from. On the surface, it may seem like having more may lead to a more informed choice, but in the end, the students end up even more confused and undecided about their future career as they are flooded with so many options. A student may have an interest in a certain field, say engineering, and if he only receives the necessary information on the course he wants, he achieves a clear vision of the path he wants to take. Conversely, if he is bombarded with so much information, he may be overloaded, and become confused over whether engineering is truly the course he should take. This also applies to many aspects of our daily decision-making. Having more information or materials does not necessarily mean we will make good use of it. A study done by urban planners showed that adding more roads and intersections actually worsens traffic conditions, as drivers spend more time thinking about the optimal path to take. In the same regard, less is more because it streamlines our decision-making process and provides us with a clear vision on the path we should take. Having more can only bring about benefits if we use the excess information effectively.

Lastly, less is more because it allows us to appreciate what little we already have. Having more material goods does not necessarily increase the enjoyment we derive from each object. In life, we only have so much time and so much energy to give. If we are flooded with too many sources of entertainment, we eventually lose sight of each object's value. Scarcity, and, in the same regard, having less, allows us to place higher value on each object we own. This also applies to relationships. Having fewer but more intimate friendships actually improves our level of contentment, as decades of studies have shown. We are able to channel more energy and time into each friendship, leading to less superficial relations and higher contentment in life. The Buddhist way of life teaches us minimalism and freedom from the greed that dominates our consumerist lives. Buddhism emphasises the appreciation of the little things in life, such as nature or the family we already have, instead of chasing after more and more. If happiness is what an individual desires, having less declutters one's mind and fosters love for and appreciation of beauty in the few things one has. In the process, one receives more than what we can ever wish for.

To conclude, the desire to own more and take more for oneself is ultimately human nature. It can be seen to improve our lives, and widen our knowledge. However, having the self-discipline to have less leads to greater clarity in decision-making as well as an increase in the quality of our lives when we learn to appreciate what we already have. In a world that chases after gold, fame and materialism, knowing how to put aside one's ego and accept that having less can also be a blessing.

Comments:

This essay has strong and succinct points that answer the question directly. However, much of the evidence provided was hypothetical rather than concrete. Tone could be more formal.

Has the commercialisation of sport done more harm than good?

Jeff Hong (17S54)

Following the 2016 Rio Olympics and the 2018 FIFA World Cup which brought in a record number of viewers, it is evident that sports has become more popular than ever before. After a major sporting event, the front pages of newspapers are plastered with reports on it. At the same time, primetime television is dominated by coverage of key sporting events. This is a far cry from what it used to be, when sports was merely seen as a leisure activity and appeared only on the less frequently read back pages of newspapers. Firms, noticing the potential revenue that sports can generate due to its popularity, have started to employ household names from the sporting industry to help advertise their products. In today's world, almost every product is endorsed by an athlete. Roger Federer for Rolex, Usain Bolt for Puma, Lionel Messi for Adidas are some of the more famous examples that come to mind when associating athletes with brands. Despite the negative implications on the realm of sports due to the increased pressure on sportsmen and the inequality brought about by this commercialisation, the increased popularity and level of competition in sports vastly overshadows the drawbacks, and hence, commercialisation of sports has done more good than harm.

Proponents for eradicating the commercialisation of sports argue that it puts an increased pressure on sportsmen today, leading to the erosion of sporting values deemed quintessential to sports. Sportsmen today are constantly competing against one another to become the face of a brand so as to rake in the huge incomes that are promised by such sponsorships. Moreover, athletes are under pressure from brands to perform well in their respective sports. Some athletes even turn to illegal means to enhance their performance and appease their sponsors. One famous example is that of Lance Armstrong, who was stripped of his Tour de France titles after allegations of doping had surfaced. In his pursuit of more championships so as to land more sponsorship deals to earn a higher income, he took performance enhancing drugs to give him an edge over his competitors. In countries such as Russia, where doping is less strictly regulated, doping is rife, as all athletes want to have an advantage over their competitors to increase their possibility of winning. Therefore, the increased pressure on athletes brought about by commercialisation has led to less than desirable behaviour from such athletes, and hence one might argue that, in this respect, the commercialisation of sports has done more harm than good.

Furthermore, commercialisation has also increased the inequality in sports. Sports prides itself as one of the few mediums where everyone has an equal opportunity to compete and win. However, in recent years, this is no longer true. More sponsorship deals and advertising revenue brought about by the onset of commercialisation have given some teams and individuals an unfair financial advantage over their competitors. With this extra financial capability, teams and individuals are better able to get a hold of the resources necessary to ensure victory. This has caused sports to now be played out in terms of who has the stronger financial backing rather than talent, leading to greater inequality in sports as poorer teams are less able to compete. For example, Manchester United, one of the biggest football clubs in the world, is able to land a multitude of sponsorship deals, ranging from their kit sponsor, Chevrolet, to even everyday household items, such as the cup noodle brand Nissin. As such, they are able to bring in top quality footballers from around the world, recently breaking the transfer record when they signed footballer Paul Pogba, as they do not face much financial constraints. In contrast, teams in the bottom half of the league often attract sponsors that pay less. Therefore, in this regard, commercialisation has done more harm than good.

However, this is not to say that commercialisation of sports as a whole has brought more harm than good. Firstly, commercialisation has allowed for the increase in the level of competition in sports due to the revenue it generates. Teams and individuals with sponsorship deals can use the revenue earned from such deals to invest in better technology and training regimes to maximise their athletic potential. As a result, there is an increase in the level of competition, providing for more meaningful matches that poses a greater entertainment value to fans. For example, with the revenue from sponsorships, the Singapore Swimming Association was able to invest in state of the art technology, such as a slow-motion camera that captures movements underwater to help the swim team perfect their techniques. This led to one of its swimmers, Joseph Schooling, clinching the gold medal in the 2016 Rio Olympics, as he was able to compete stroke by stroke against his fellow competitors. In the National Basketball Association (NBA), league-wide increases in sponsorship deals in the last decade has led to better training facilities for players, as well as specialised physiotherapists to ensure that players recover quicker from injuries. Therefore, commercialisation benefits sports by increasing its level of competitiveness.

In addition, on a larger scale, commercialisation has also increased the popularity of sports in general, leading to more participation in sports around the world. In today's world, where firms are constantly trying to outdo one another to gain better brand exposure, many firms have turned to athletes to help them achieve this aim. This also has the effect of increasing the popularity of such athletes, and hence, increasing the popularity of the sports they play. One famous example as previously mentioned is that of Roger Federer, whose name is almost synonymous with the Swiss watch company, Rolex. Due to the increasing popularity of Rolex, Federer's face is often seen plastered on billboards and he has virtually become a household name. As such, as Federer's popularity continues to grow, tennis as a sport will also gain better exposure. This would not have been possible without commercialisation, as other more popular sports, such as football and basketball, would simply outshadow tennis. Hence, commercialisation has done sports good in this regard.

In conclusion, while the adverse effects of the commercialisation of sports are evident from the increased pressure athletes face and the growing inequality in sports, commercialisation has no doubt done more good than harm as it also raises the level of competition and popularity of such sports, leading to greater entertainment value for viewers, which is one of its primary functions. As time progresses, one can only hope that the benefits of commercialisation will become more evident as the world continues to become more globalised.

Comments:

Well-written essay with a good number of points and examples. Keep up the good work!

"Far too much attention is given to image in today's world." Do you agree?

Meg-Mel Dean (17A11)

In shaping the identity of a unique individual, there exists numerous factors for consideration. These include one's name, associations, nationality, language and/or religion, but upon first meeting a complete stranger along the streets, such information is not and cannot be made known to just yet. What we first notice is another's appearance – the way one looks, speaks, dresses, and essentially carries themselves as a packaged whole. It allows the general public a rough gauge on how much image matters to such an individual, and ultimately, it is psychologically proven that within a short 7 seconds, judgements are imposed based on first impressions as a natural human instinct. As such, although it is a common belief that an excessive and unhealthy amount of focus is placed on physical attributes and personal image in today's 21st century society, I posit that this may not necessarily be the case, for an emphasis on this matter is in fact important, and while detrimental effects of self-esteem issues and superficiality may consequently arise from it, it should not justify a need to reduce the significance and attention placed on maintaining a good and favourable image for oneself, if not others.

The greatest argument against such a stand would be the growing trends of self-esteem issues revealing itself amidst such a presumably "superficial" and overtly critical world, manifesting in the form of depression, social anxiety, as well as various eating disorders most common amongst youth. Coupled by the growing prevalence of social-media in this modern day and age, the pressures of having to look good in attempts to please or fit into an elusive societal mould of an "attractive" individual becomes too hefty to handle, only resulting in a greater dissatisfaction towards the self and all one's identity might entail. In the United Kingdom alone, almost 69% of individuals aged 13 to 24 stated that the inability to match up to the standards they see of models and other influencers online has led to an increasing sense of inferiority and depression, clearly highlighting the negative effects excessive attention paid to image in today's world may bring. The growing demand for plastic surgery also reflects such a phenomenon, for the rationale behind undergoing such surgical alteration procedures can typically be attributed to one main justification of an inherent desire to improve one's appearance. From simple double eyelid surgeries to rhinoplasties to breast implants to even the fixing of braces (which does not constitute plastic surgery but most definitely still a correction of one's supposed facial flaws), it can be observed that this attention placed on the importance of image has indeed been influencing people to turn more self-conscious with their perceived belief of self-deficiency. In the eyes of social-justice warriors and perhaps orthodox traditionalists who pride themselves to be free from superficiality and societal pressures, it is no wonder then that the claim of image being way too important in our world exists, given how even the basis of Tinder's "swipe-right" system, which allows users to indicate interest in potential dates, solely depends on one's looks and one's looks only. It appears as though society today has become built on the physical attractiveness of individuals to ascend a certain social hierarchy and acquire greater opportunities for success, but the truth remains that this is a reductionist statement grounded on an over-generalised perspective, failing to acknowledge that one's "image" can be defined as much more than just physical assets, but the way one conducts themselves as well.

Hence, while it is perhaps valid that there seems to be a heavy emphasis placed on image and appearance today, it must be recognized that this could be a necessity in giving others a good impression, especially in an ever-evolving yet perpetually competitive world where, particularly in

educated first-world countries, people tend to boast very similar qualifications. As such, the most effective way to stand out lies in how much mind they give to carrying themselves right, ultimately signalling a most fundamental ability to take care of and take pride in oneself. This in turn translates into a willingness and capacity to strive for self-improvement, which all prospective employers and interviewers, be it for jobs, scholarships or university admissions, generally agree that they seek. Besides looking good on paper, executives and officials that hire prospective talent would undoubtedly prefer someone who looks just as good in real life, for the premise has in fact already been established and accepted that image matters, whether now or centuries before. Why not have a fresh approachable face representing one's company's brand instead of an unshaven, unkempt, uncouth, sluggish individual dressed in pyjamas and reeking of cheap whiskey and body odour comparable to that of a sewer? Ultimately, the bottom line remains that image is indeed important, in terms of exhibiting one's personality and consequently enabling a general audience to derive positive thoughts and opinions on them, affecting how one is to be treated from then on. Appearance affects perception which affects treatment that eventually determines opportunities granted, and with such an immensely significant role it plays on people's lives and future, the attention given to it is not "far too much" at all but rather, quite warranted and imperative instead. Thus, when a derogatory accusation is made regarding the unhealthy prioritization of image today, these critics could possibly be neglecting the genuinely sound rationale behind it, only concerning themselves with how they feel it renders people mindless in their obsession over physical looks. They lament the flourishing make-up industry and extensive rows of "unnecessary" beauty products, disregarding how the tagline and motto behind such commodities revolve around promoting and developing a greater sense of self-confidence. For instance, L'Oreal's slogan for their beauty products is "Because you're worth it", which better reflects the need for proper and appealing external appearances today—not solely for a superficial sense of attractiveness, but to hone deeper feelings of worth and appreciation for the self when one looks and feels good.

Furthermore, in asserting that "far too much" attention is placed on image, it suggests that every other aspect of a person's identity is comparatively undermined, rendered completely inconsequential. This is not the case. While appearances are of utmost importance in shaping one's most initial impressions, what sustains this favourable outlook in the long-run is the qualities that come from within, inclusive of one's preferences, personality traits, beliefs, skills and morals. These are what shapes a character more so than their surface-level attributes, and the extent of how much they also matter can be observed by how people always place premium on what lies on the inside when searching for a potential partner. It applies for all areas of career and social endeavours as well, since a person can only go so far lacking a likeable and desirable personality behind a pretty face. Hence, because of the general consensus amongst most people today that despite naturally paying great attention to image, high regard is still given to those who either match up to or make up for their outward appearances accordingly, the claim in question is proven to be quite a sweeping statement.

Comments:

A relevant and well-argued response with a strong personal voice and nuanced analysis. You could consider how image is important for corporate branding purposes too, especially for certain jobs or companies.

How far should people be blamed for their own ill health?

Ong Ern Sze Maegan (17S63)

With the rapid development of science and medicine, diseases that once plagued society have been eradicated with the discovery of new cures and treatments. In today's modern world, vitamins and supplements are easily accessible at pharmacies along with medication to treat the common flu, and it is no surprise that the mortality rate has plunged to half of that in the 1990s. People now have solutions to once untreatable illnesses, as well as the knowledge to keep themselves in the pink of health. With such information and services at the availability of the majority, it seems like those in ill health only have themselves to blame. However, this perspective is skewed and does not take into account the circumstances of those individuals. This statement is hence unfair to the exceptions in society: those who do not have the same privilege of this accessibility, and those who are often left without a choice.

People should not be blamed for their own ill health as it is sometimes inevitable. Illnesses like cancer and diabetes are known to be hereditary in some cases and will affect an individual during their lifetime despite them not bringing it upon themselves. Though there are many preventive measures that such an individual may undertake, such as through managing their diet and engaging in regular exercise, they are ultimately at a higher risk of contracting such diseases due to their inherent genetics. It is hence unfair to blame them for something out of their control, especially since many of them are aware of their unfortunate circumstances, and have actively sought out ways to avoid it. In addition, some illnesses that may not be hereditary, like cancer, can affect even the healthiest of individuals. These cases are largely unforeseen, and can only be prevented to a limited extent. Other illnesses can also affect one group more than another. For example, cervix and breast cancer primarily affect women as they possess organs that the other sex does not. Hence, these are all circumstances in which it is unfair to blame the victim of ill health, as they are largely unpredictable and inevitable.

However, in today's modernised world where healthcare is highly accessible in developed societies, lifestyle illnesses arise from one's own lack of care for personal wellness and individuals often bring such illnesses upon themselves. Engaging in unhealthy lifestyle habits like alcoholism and overeating can result in illnesses like liver disease and obesity, and the blame ultimately lies with the individual alone in consciously making those decisions. Especially in developed societies, individuals are provided with a range of healthcare services in addition to an even greater number of opportunities to maintain good health. For example in Singapore, the government has made a conscious effort to ensure that it maintains a clean and green city in a garden, by ensuring the regulation of air and ground water quality, minimising any possibilities of air- or water-borne diseases. This is a luxury that many developing societies still cannot afford. Organisations like ActiveSG have been set up to provide citizens with ample facilities and spaces to keep fit, through sports and games. The Health Promotion Board also has existing initiatives to encourage healthy lifestyles in Singapore, including that of the "healthier option" logos. These are plastered on food items in restaurants, food courts and supermarkets, promoting better eating habits. As such, societies like Singapore are provided with the resources needed to regulate their own health, and it is ultimately up to the individual to take charge of it through precautionary measures and through practising personal hygiene. In such a situation where healthcare is served on a silver platter, people only have their carelessness and irresponsibility to blame if they do end up in ill health.

On the other hand, there are still billions around the world in third-world countries who do not have this same access to healthcare, and cannot quite be blamed for ill health. In the rural areas of third-world countries like India and Cambodia, many animal-and water-borne diseases plague communities due to the poor sanitation, unsafe drinking water and ineffective waste management. This is prevalent in poverty-stricken societies where the government is not sufficiently endowed with the fiscal budget to intervene and enact changes in the communities. Even if they do provide the monetary subsidies, they are often not enough to sustain the following generations of people. Hence, because of the nature of their environment and conditions, people in these areas are invariably affected and more susceptible to contracting diseases, and are generally in worse health than most. The fault of ill health, in this case, cannot be said to lie solely on the individuals, but is a result of an ineffectual government and an unfortunate circumstance. People in such communities do not have the privilege of access to healthcare and have to rely on volunteer mission groups for aid, which are mostly unable to create benefits in the long run. They are also often unaware of the dangers of their poor hygiene habits as they do not have the basic knowledge of personal care, and hence are unable to improve upon their lifestyles and healthcare habits. In this scenario, it is unfair to blame these people in ill health as they are victims of their own circumstance, their poor health arising out of inequity and a lack of awareness, not negligence.

The extent to which people should be blamed for their own ill health is dependent on the circumstances of the individual, and the nature of the illness. One would expect that health would become less of an issue given the ever-developing nature of scientific research, and that ill health arises mostly out of one's own negligence. However, such a perspective is one-sided and does not account for the circumstances of different individuals, who may not be as fortunate as the majority. Whether people should be blamed for their own ill health remains debatable, but we should reach the consensus that more can be done, at the individual and societal level, to ensure a more effective and equitable distribution of healthcare worldwide.

Comments:

Great essay with thorough analysis of the issue and clear explanations. Arguments could be supported by a broader range of examples.

Do you agree that the truth should be told, whatever the cost?

By Wong Liang En Sarah (18S37)

The Boston Globe's reporting on the Catholic Church's sexual scandal rocked the world, as news about religious leaders sexually harassing young children surfaced. This caused the faith in the Vatican Church's moral authority to drop sharply, resulting in denunciation from multiple communities. However, despite the huge loss of faith in the church, this exposure of the truth brought closure to many victims and highlighted the deeply entrenched problems of the Church. This example showcases how, despite the costs incurred, the truth should still be told. While I concede that the truth should be withheld when it causes harm to and alienates innocent parties, I largely agree that exposing the truth is crucial as it can highlight the need for improvement, helps educate the people and raises awareness about pressing issues. Most of the time, the truth should be told despite the costs incurred by individuals for the greater good.

Admittedly, the truth should not be disseminated if it causes innocent parties to be subjected to excessive scrutiny and to be marginalised by others. When the truth contains sensitive information about a person and is proliferated online or in society, this could result in that person's privacy being violated and cause him or her to be alienated from society. One prominent example would be that of the leaked HIV patient data in Singapore in 2019. The pirated data was spread online, causing patients with HIV to be subjected to unnecessary public scrutiny and abhorrence in their workplaces and homes. The social stigma they faced caused great emotional trauma to the victims. In this case, the psychological and emotional pain inflicted on innocent victims proves to be too great a cost for the truth to be proliferated. This showcases how, when the costs incurred result in innocent parties being implicated and being subject to society's judgement, the truth should not be told so as to protect these individuals' interests and wellbeing.

However, while I concede that the truth should not be told in these instances, such cases are dependent on the intent of the person spreading the information. Therefore, the truth should be told despite the costs when the purpose of it is to educate and raise awareness amongst the public about issues that affect their personal security and violate their privacy. While such issues may result in costs incurred to others, ultimately, telling these truths is for the greater good and they should thus be told. For example, The Guardian's report on the National Security Agency (NSA)'s mass collection of United States citizens' personal handphone details raised awareness of the huge violation of privacy that was occurring. This resulted in widespread indignation from citizens and prompted multiple social media sites to introduce encryption to ensure the privacy of its users was maintained. While the NSA lost its ability to surveil its people, this ensured that individuals' privacy rights were protected. This example clearly presents how the truth should be told when it benefits the wider public and highlights issues that may be detrimental to people, despite the inconvenience it may bring to others. Therefore, the truth should be told when the purpose of it is to raise awareness of the injustice that the society endures.

Furthermore, the truth should also be told if it helps the public make more informed decisions about their political leaders. The truth can help to expose the moral values of politicians, helping the public determine if those values align with their own. This is despite the fluctuation in political support that may be inflicted on politicians. For example, the Malaysian 1 Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal implicated the ex-Prime Minister Najib Razak as it exposed his corruption and laundering of funds from the Malaysian state welfare fund. The uproar generated resulted in

his subsequent loss in the next Malaysian General Elections, despite his attempts to disadvantage the opposition parties. Currently, he is subject to investigation for his crimes. This shows that the exposure of the truth about political leaders to the public can allow them to make more informed decisions and choices in their roles as voters, to ensure that their country is managed by leaders they deem to uphold their beliefs and interests as a country. This is despite the costs that may be incurred, such as political unrest or the loss of voter support, which could occur should the public lose faith in their government.

Moreover, the truth should also be told when it highlights fundamental problems and pushes for the improvement of flawed systems. The push for improvement could be caused by the truth showing how such problems have proliferated in the system for a long time, with any change stagnating and conforming to the norm. However, exposure of the truth can subvert this and allow for improvements to be made to address such entrenched problems, resulting in an improved system. For example, the Cambridge Analytica scandal involving the collection of data from Facebook's millions of users highlighted the problems of data privacy and security within Facebook, prompting them to push for improvement and a more transparent privacy policy. This came at a great economic cost to the company, which lost much of its revenue after the scandal. This showcases how the exposure of truth can lead to the betterment of services as it can make prominent an insidious problem that might have previously been overlooked. This is despite the costs that might be incurred by the stakeholders involved.

In conclusion, I largely agree that the truth should be told, despite the costs that the different individuals and parties might incur. However, this depends on the intent of the person spreading the information and if telling the truth is for the greater good. Therefore, while the truth should be withheld when the purpose of telling it is malicious, it largely should be told as it can serve as a way to raise awareness amongst the public about matters concerning their safety and security, help voters make informed decisions about their political leaders and highlight the need for improvement.

Comments:

The essay answers the question clearly through a series of sensible points and strong rebuttal. Examples are well-explained, though more evidence could be provided to better substantiate the arguments raised.

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