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Issue ONE

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Foreword

Message from the Principal

"I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth."
– Sir Karl Raimund Popper

Philosopher John Stuart Mill noted,
"He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that".
In so succinct a manner, Mill summed up the case for understanding
different viewpoints and the free exchange of ideas.

It is with this view in mind that the KS Bull is produced – to compile a collection of well-reasoned General Paper (GP) and Knowledge & Inquiry (KI) essays by RJC students in the hope that these essays will inspire new arguments and divergent ideas among readers. We hope that the KS Bull will play a significant role in spawning many more good arguments and essays among students in Singapore.

In writing the essays, the students have engaged in research to understand an issue in depth and exercised critical thinking to consider an issue from different angles. In presenting their arguments clearly and coherently, their intent is to persuade readers to appreciate their point of view.

For the reader, the benefits of reading a well-crafted essay are evident. Through reading such an essay, the reader will have to analytically assess the validity of the argument presented, judiciously refine his insights, creatively think of counter-arguments, and finally, thoughtfully form his own conclusions. This rigorous mental process is perhaps akin to what Anglo-Austrian philosopher, Sir Karl Raimund Popper, had in mind when he said, *"I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth"*. Indeed, in being cognizant of the varying views, we can hope to understand an issue more completely and craft a better argument.

Read and Enjoy!

Auspicious Melioris Aevi



Winston Hodge
Principal
Raffles Junior College

Essay 01

Title: "A profit-driven mass media is more vibrant than a government regulated one." Discuss.

Name: Chow Wen Xin

Class: 07S03B

Both the profit-driven mass media and government-regulated mass media are manifestations of what extremely parochial motives can do to transform a medium that should serve multiple purposes. The profit-driven mass media is inextricably bound to the economic context and financial imperative of the media industry; the government-regulated mass media is devoted to perpetuating a specific set of beliefs and values. When money or politics serves as the sole impetus for the production of mass media, it eventuates in the ending of all variety, choice and vibrancy. In this essay, I will discuss how these two extremes impinge on the vibrancy of the mass media, and why the true solution for sustaining life in the media industry lies in the use of the media to disseminate a wide variety of information and knowledge.

Even in today's society, we can see the potential harm an economically-driven mass media might impose on broadcasting quality. This is because in most developed countries like the United States of America, the modus operandi of the mass media is governed by corporate sponsors. Television shows are produced so that a certain number of audiences will watch the advertisements during commercial breaks. Corporate sponsors pay the broadcasting firms based on the number of people they would expect to be watching the show. This has resulted in the trite banality and lack of innovation we see in today's media, what broadcasters term as "cookie-cutter" programmes.

We do not have to look far for evidence of the economy's role in the declining tastes and standards of broadcasting. The wildly successful birth of the "Survivor" series cemented the place of reality TV in today's culture. In the pursuit of profit maximisation, numerous broadcasting firms have churned out reality series, whose formulaic, insipid nature makes the discerning viewer queasy from the monochromatic excesses of cat-fighting, sex and cheap sentiment. For instance, The Bachelor has spawned Joe Millionaire, Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire, and Average Joe. The invariable formula has attracted millions of viewers, who desperately want the "stars" in the show to fall in love with each other, as if they could. Thus, reality TV is a potent example of how the blind pursuit of economic benefits can render the mass media completely bland and utterly unpalatable.

Broadcasting firms have also realised the need to target the largest group of people in society with abundant purchasing power, so as to (once again) maximise the revenue earned. The role of the mass media has thus evolved into one which is responsible for catering to the tastes of the majority. Social groups which are deemed unlikely to purchase the advertisers' products are, unfortunately, marginalised in the production of media. These include the disabled and the elderly, both of whom have generally lesser purchasing power and are less overwhelmed by consumerist desires. In contrast, teenagers and young adults are the motivation behind shows produced today; for instance, firms have been cognizant long ago of the baffling appeal of violence – this has resulted in the proliferation of violence in the mass media.

Violence is glorified everywhere – in song lyrics (Eminem talks about how he would brutally kill his mother in "Kill You"), video games (the most popular video game in the world, Grand Theft Auto, allows players to rape prostitutes before killing them), and movies (only one out of five violent movies is rated R – the rest are rated PG-13 to attract teenage viewers). Thus we see that when the mass media is only concerned with attracting the largest group of viewers to maximise revenue obtained from advertising, the media is reduced to nothing more than a few, painfully ubiquitous themes.

Not unlike the fanatically buck-chasing money-hungry mass media elucidated above, the government-regulated mass media is also dangerously focused on funding the growth of a particular motive. The only difference is that this time round, the impetus is political instead of economic. In this instance, the mass media morphs into a powerful tool to influence the people's beliefs and values.

Government regulation is also known, in a term that sends chills down a liberal's spine, as censorship. This is the magic behind many oligarchs', juntas', authoritarians' and emperors' abilities to rally the support of the people behind them. Censorship, in its most horrifying forms, can serve to suppress all other information that may jeopardise the

government's position in the state or country. As such, the mass media presented is devoid of all diversity. Only the government's stand is supported. For instance, Robert Mugabe, a corrupt president in Zimbabwe, forced all news broadcasting firms to close down, allowing only his government-funded news firm to disseminate information in the country. This has undoubtedly severely circumscribed the variety of information provided to the locals – they are made to believe the government is dedicated to serving the good of the people, and they continue to be unaware of Zimbabwe's atrocious human rights record. Thus, government regulation is culpable for expunging vibrancy from the mass media.

In both cases, we see that economic and political motivations, especially when given free rein, can severely endanger not only the vibrancy of the mass media involved, but also the society it serves. In my opinion, vibrancy can also be achieved – and maintained – if the mass media is used as a platform not only to entertain, but also to inform and educate the masses. In order to achieve this, the mass media must not be excessively fixated with the economic or political area – it must be willing to bear the responsibility of bringing good-quality broadcasting to all. An example of commendable broadcasting in the light of possible political adherence is the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Shows like "Hard Talk" present round-table debates and interviews with eminent leaders around the world, which expose the audience to a wide variety of opinions, ideas and information. Another example would be John Pilger's film about East Timor, which attracted 3 million viewers, out of whom an extraordinary half a million called the switchboard afterwards, to register their shock and anger at what had happened. This is media at its most effective – it educates, engages, and transforms the lives of many people. It is these types of broadcasting which would continue to inject vibrancy into a mass media inundated by duplicates of the same ilk.

Mass media can only survive if divorced from the ludicrously stilted motives of corporate sponsors and the government. Ultimately, the continuous vibrancy of the mass media will be left in the hands of the people whom it serves – only the people will have the power to demand a mass media that serves THEM best.

Comments:

Wen Xin, this was like a breath of fresh air! Arguments here were sophisticated, full of insight and maturity, and written with conviction. Superb work!

Essay 02

Title: "The pursuit of equality of the sexes is not only futile but foolish." Do you agree?

Name: Juang Wijaya

Class: 07A13A

The advent of the women's **suffrage** movement at the beginning of the last century and the subsequent **feminist** movement fifty years later has resulted in a world today that is no longer entirely bound to the traditional perceptions of the different functions of men and women, be it in the public sphere or in the family. The rise of **prominent** female figures in **contemporary** history in societies traditionally dominated by men – the present Chancellor of Germany, Angela Merkel, former President of Indonesia Megawati Sukarnoputri and Prime Minister Helen Clark of New Zealand are but a few examples that suggest that the pursuit of the equality of sexes is very much **tangible** and achievable – a stand that I believe in. However, certain facts of life have resulted in critics arguing about the ultimate impossibility of the dream of gender equality in the world – this I will discuss subsequently.

The **intrinsic** and biological sexual **dimorphism** between the male and the female genders of humanity is compelling **corroboration** for the **assertion** that any fight for gender equality will be "futile". It is a scientifically determined fact that women are indeed "the fairer sex". The high levels of **androgens**, among them the widely known **testosterone**, injected into the bodies of male fetuses with the stimulation of the sex determining gene at the tip of the Y-chromosome has been proven to result in the many characteristics of males we are familiar with – greater aggressive tendencies, better spatial skills and quick arousal in response to sexual images. It is interesting to note that an overwhelming majority of serial killers, psychopaths and criminals in maximum security prisons are male, and it has been found that these people do have higher than normal levels of testosterone. Similarly, the different chemical makeup of hormones present in females results in women having weaker skills of visualisation as compared to men, but with better skills of communication, verbalisation and emotional empathy, and it is no wonder that over 50% of the teaching workforce is composed of women. Inevitable differences between men and women do make the dream of gender equality seem **elusive**.

Intrinsic natural dimorphisms between men and women in turn lead to seemingly logical differences in the social functions of each gender. Women, who sacrifice a lot more of the nutrients in their bodies to bear a baby than men might naturally be inclined to play a greater role in the nurturing of the child in the family and in being homemakers while men, whose levels of male hormones bless them with better spatial skills, greater muscle mass and strength, naturally take on the function of hunting for the meals of the family. This structure of the human family which has existed since time **immemorial** – men as hunters and women as gatherers – has resulted in men taking on far more dominant positions in the societies of the world than women do. The very fact that out of possibly tens of thousands of known human societies in the world, at most ten are even remotely **matriarchal**, reflects the reality that there must be something central in the human male, absent in the female, that makes them the dominant people of their societies. **Sceptics** of the gender equality movement would be glad at the knowledge that even the "matriarchal" societies that exist – the Minangkabau of West Sumatra for instance, are not really matriarchal but rather, matrilineal – wealth and property gets passed down from mother to daughter but men are still expected to bring in the livelihood. The functions of the different genders do not seem elastic at all.

Ultimate in the argument against the possibility of gender equality is the fact that women have a biological clock while men do not. While the human male can father a child no matter how late into his life he is, the female has no such luxury, reaching **menopause** a little after 40. This obviously acts as the single greatest deterrent against any woman who aspires to climb the corporate ladder and have children at the same time, for half a year of maternity leave can be enough to disqualify a woman from a promotion. The realities that surround the lives that a man and a woman inevitably lead almost make the prospect of gender equality **bleak**, rendering any pursuit of it "foolish".

With all the above arguments to support the **assertion** that gender equality is an impossible dream, it would be hard for us to imagine any country which enjoys full equality of the sexes in the workplace and not suffer the consequences of falling birth rates, a phenomenon that we would otherwise think inevitable. Yet such countries do exist – Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, not only have among the largest labour participation of women, they also have among the highest fertility rates in the developed world. Such a scenario would definitely be impossible if we were to accept the argument that men and women must fundamentally remain in the workplace and the home

respectively due to intrinsic differences in the biological makeup of the different sexes, or else catastrophes such as falling birth rates will occur. Is the pursuit of gender equality **feasible** after all?

The saying "no job in the world now specifically requires a penis or a vagina" applies very much to a large extent in today's society. While the development of agriculture in the Fertile Crescent thousands of years ago did not prevent naturally hungry men from being the dominant members of societies, the advent of technology in the recent past has removed a great deal of the jobs that would traditionally require a man's intrinsic powers of raw strength. Manufacturing may now be done completely automatically by robots, while cranes may now take over men's duty to transport heavy things. Men's intrinsic abilities do not seem to prove very much to be a strong reason for the male's dominance in society now.

Increasingly, the modern workplace is in need of the intrinsic abilities of women – the skills of communication, **verbalisation**, and empathy. As economies of the world's developed countries evolve staggeringly from manufacturing based secondary economies to more knowledge and service based economies such as banking, finance, Research and Development, the skills needed in the workplace are also gradually moving in the direction of abilities not exclusive to men or women. The modern female, equipped with an equal amount of education as the modern male, is no longer the disadvantaged sex in the workplace – the possibility of a level-playing field between men and women in the workplace and the public sphere is no longer elusive, and thus, no longer futile.

With a level-playing field in the workplace there must come a level playing field at home – while this may presently still be a slow progression, it is by no means an impossible one. Recent years have seen the gradual but sure increase in the numbers of househusbands in countries such as the United States, an indication of the growing number of egalitarian relationships where the possibility of a wife, the "fairer sex" bringing in the bacon for the family is no longer dismissed.

Sweden has shown us that it is possible for men and women to be equal in the workplace and in the public sphere without disastrous consequences in the family demographics. Key to this success lies in open state support for Swedish women to both climb the corporate ladder and have children, which come in the form of government-funded childcare centres, economic **incentives** and more. We thus see here that the pursuit of gender equality, despite the intrinsic differences between men and women, is not only possible, but also feasible and far from foolish or futile.

With men and women increasingly taking on equal opportunities and functions in many nations of the world, I am confident that a future is possible.

Comments:

Excellent work! A comprehensive, balanced, fluent and well-substantiated piece. Do try to make reference to the terms of the question more often to make it clearer how your paragraphs answer the question.

Essay 03

Title: "The pursuit of equality of the sexes is not only futile but foolish." Do you agree?

Name: Asiyah A. Arif

Class: 07S03O

Throughout history, there have been individual battles fought to establish gender equality in different fields. The battle to establish long term equality of the sexes, however, still rages on. In a world where men traditionally are the **breadwinners** and women care for the household, drastic changes to the structure of society and our lifestyles are beginning to shift the original balance of gender roles; so much so that women are beginning to take up the cry for equal opportunities, respect, recognition and rights as men across the board. It is essential that at this point we consider whether gender equality can indeed be achieved at all, and whether such equality is the only way for society to progress. The sooner people accept that equality is definitely a possibility, the faster we can come together to build the new framework for the society of tomorrow, in which men and women will be given the chance to prove themselves in any manner they deem fit and be respected equally for their choices.

The implication that the quest for equality of the sexes is hopeless is not one that can be simply accepted as the truth. Although not many **breakthroughs** have been made by feminist movements **lobbying** for equality, there are many small indicators that show that society is already setting the foundations for bigger change ahead. More importantly, these signs show that the search for equality is not one that is futile as many recognise the need for it and are responding. An important example would be the positive **discrimination** in the workplace today. In some instances, when men and women are equally qualified for jobs, the opportunity is given to the woman to make up for the male domination in the field and to allow the woman to break out of the stereotype society dictates by proving her capabilities. This is an encouraging example of how male-dominated industries are willing to make small compromises to accommodate the growing number of women who want to liberate themselves from traditional roles by providing them equal opportunities to gain respect and recognition.

When measuring the possible success of a venture, it is necessary to take into account the psychological conditioning behind it. For this reason, education is key. Education is the tool with which men and women across the globe can be empowered with to work towards gender equality. By educating women, they will be able to acquire the knowledge and skills they require to survive. More importantly, education can be used to influence young minds and help them understand the need for gender equality and the benefits it will bring. In a country such as Singapore, education is a deep and **pervasive** tool used to spread the message of equality amongst people of different races and religions. A similar approach can be taken on the subject of gender equality, to eliminate some sexual **stereotypes**. As long as young minds are trained to think of either gender as equal, and society reinforces this view, the pursuit of equality is one that has hope for success.

Some may think of the pursuit as futile as the mass media and tradition seem intent on **shackling** society to its current state. The mass media, a powerful influencing tool, repeatedly portrays women as the weaker gender, needing **perpetual** support and attention. The marketing adage "sex sells" also becomes a hurdle, as women are portrayed simply as bodies used to service men only to be discarded afterward. A series of advertisements by beer company Guinness featuring **scantily-clad** women only serves to prove this point. Tradition also holds some societies back from enforcing gender equality. For instance, in China, newborns are sometimes killed when they are not the preferred male gender. In Arab societies traditionally, women's education comes only after men's. The message sent by such actions is clear; gender equality doesn't exist. Unless this myth is shattered completely and beyond doubt, it will be difficult to establish gender equality permanently and **holistically**. Fortunately, there is hope in this area as these stereotypes can be eliminated by giving women more respect and value.

The statement also implies that it would be foolish to allow gender equality to come into play. This view is very one-sided. It can be agreed that allowing men and women to work at the same time would cause great **upheaval** in the balance of society. Without definite roles to play, there is a chance that there will be no one tending to the household and the raising of children, ultimately leading to larger problems in society. In this light, the definition of gender equality must be firmly set. In this case, it is not merely about women being given equal opportunities to enter the workforce, but also about men sharing equal responsibility for the household. As author Betty Friedan puts it, a thousand-fold increase in divorce rates cannot be accounted for simply by **marital** problems but the "**obsolete** sex

roles" society holds. Now more than ever, it is imperative that we understand and take heed of her words. Problems in society such as increasing divorce and crime rates and such cannot be addressed properly until the issues of the changing gender roles are realised. As such, the pursuit of equality can be seen as far from foolish. Indeed, one may even say that gender equality in all senses is the only way for society to progress from its current state.

Gender equality also provides countries with a wider talent pool by recognising that women can be as capable as men, and by giving them equal opportunities to learn and develop, a country can rely on twice the amount of human resources. Such a resource is extremely important in a small country such as Singapore.

To conclude, we can see from all the evidence that gender equality is neither a futile nor a foolish pursuit. Society cannot be expected to change entirely over a short span of time. There are however indications that the battle for gender equality is slowly progressing on many different fronts. The evidence also confirms that equality between the sexes is something that can be achieved in the future if appropriate measures are taken now. The need for gender equality has also been proven, erasing the possibility that such a search was meaningless and uncalculated. There are risks involved, but risks must be taken for progress to occur; not only within societies but for humanity as a whole.

Comments:

This is the stuff that excellent GP essays are made of! Fluid, lucidly clear and highly skilled writing, coupled with mature sensibilities and strong argumentation prowess. An invigorating and astute take on the question at hand. Keep it up!

Essay 04

Title: "An educated society is a civilised one." Is this always true?

Name: Lee Suat Ying

Class: 07S03Q

Throughout history, education has consistently been heralded as a civilizing influence, and many people have imbibed and assimilated this notion blindly. However, though education has precipitated many changes for the betterment of society, and led to a society that is advanced, affluent, and sustainable, that does not constitute civilization in its entirety. Being civilised holds many meanings and layers of definitions, from mere refinement and sophistication to a community with moral fibre and empathy. I feel that a society cannot be deemed as civilised till it has fulfilled the aforementioned criteria. In recent years though, it has become increasingly more symptomatic that an educated society is not necessarily a civilised one, what with the exponentially increasing global crime rates and the sometimes childish discord between even the established political leaders of each nation. Education in this case refers to both formal and informal modes of learning, through an institution with qualified mentors or through one's life experience respectively. It is an imperative to bear in mind the modern context of education as well as the context of education through the years in order to expound on why a civilised society and an educated one are not one and the same.

Over the years, the multifaceted nature of education has been subsumed by the increasing paper chase and the emphasis placed on amassing accolades and paper qualifications. As a result, many have neglected the affective aspect of education, and are intent only on placing importance on academic results. In order to catch up with the rat race and not fall behind, many countries have neglected moral education and channelled both their energy and resources into formal academic education. This has resulted in students quantifying their own self-worth not by their heart or their behaviour, but by their academic diplomas. It is precisely this short-sightedness that results in the very fundamental aim of education being undermined. In the moulding of the world's future generation, education has only succeeded in creating a culture of self-preservation and instant gratification. The focus on the end product as a result of the inevitable competition has resulted in students forsaking their value systems in the process because of their perversely obsessive desire to experience the flurry on the pinnacle of success. Over the years, there has been an increase in violence, and education and the cold, calculative nature it cultivates definitely have a part to play. If people are so conditioned by the system to just focus on the end result without considering the repercussions of their actions during the actual process, this will be manifested in their adult lives when in order to achieve their goals, they betray their comrades, they kill, and they use underhanded tactics. The knowledge gained from education allows them to rationalise their decisions to a greater extent and make sense of or justify their wrongdoings, which might in fact be of detriment to others. For instance, the recent NKF (National Kidney Foundation) scandal exposed T.T. Durai for using donations to supplement his lavish lifestyle, and forsaking patient welfare for "gold taps". T.T. Durai was a brilliant individual who was able to organise fundraising drives of a large scale and who was a highly educated and qualified man. However, he used his education to manipulate those under him, to justify his actions, and dodge the long arm of the law from ripping his lack of transparency to shreds for an extended period of time, all the while sustaining his high standard of living at the expense of the donors. Is this what one would term as civilised? I emphatically disagree, for this is truly a barbaric form of behaviour from a highly-educated man.

Furthermore, education, though a definite means of empowering people, often fails to drum into us the boundaries and consequences of the use or applications of our knowledge, hence resulting in a society that is far from civilised. In early Japan, tandem during the Meiji Restoration, Japan implemented a reformatory education law that stated that each family must at least have one member who could read or write and was literate. However, such education only empowered the Japanese government, to coin what was then known as militarism in a bid to achieve their ideal of industrialisation. They conquered many nations and tortured the people, often irrationally, into submission. More often than not, they were barbaric, raping the women, bayoneting innocent infants, starving the people, and instilling nothing but fear. The Rape of Nanking is still spoken of today with much trepidation, and the Japanese who exacted such atrocious treatment on the people of Nanking were all educated enough to yearn for greater progress, to devise and harness their resources and scheme in order to garner more resources to fast-forward their progress. This just highlights how an educated society might not be aware of the limits beyond which they cannot and should not harness their knowledge, and could very well be a society that is able to justify the means it employs and employ their superiority in certain fields to achieve their avaricious desires. Another example would be the United States of America, which is easily thought of as an advanced civilisation and one of great prowess, having a high rate of

literacy and many avenues of higher education. However, the United States of America has exerted this higher status they enjoy and subjugated other nations, like in the war against Iraq. Hence, it can be seen that education often breeds moral **relativism**, which is dangerous for any society that wishes to remain civilised. The invention of weapons of mass destruction, for instance, right from the dropping of the atomic bomb, showed very clearly how cruel and brutal an educated society can be by using the knowledge **amassed** through the springboard known as education to achieve their own ends.

Education also results in the marginalisation of certain people in the community. Education and the **meritocratic**, qualitative system that it endorses and advocates, merely serve to result in an exclusive elite, and a non-inclusive culture, where those who are unable to survive and live up to the standards and expectations of the education system are **castigated** and relegated into a homogeneous lot of social outcasts. The streaming and the unforgiving nature of education have resulted in arrogance and complacency for those who are successful, and for those who are not, they are looked down upon. It is a dangerous cycle that education has **perpetuated**, one that gives opportunities to those who are able to thrive in the system, and refusing or depriving those who flounder of help or chances for self improvement, thus widening the already present gulf between these two groups. Those who are capable and rewarded or affirmed by the system, will then be placed in the higher echelons, where they will be able to make decisions that impact society and thus propel the sentiments of repulsion or the **flippant** attitude towards those that society deems useless. Even parents may treat their children as **commodities**, often comparing them with others and leading to child abuse in certain instances when children often cannot live up to such sky high expectations. This just reveals the ugly and barbaric side that education creates. For instance, the show "I Not Stupid" directed by Jack Neo, highlights how society **condemns** those who do not thrive in the system, and even those who are educated, like principals and teachers, still harbour prejudices and blind spots towards these children. This is most definitely not what characterises a civilised society, which is one that should be inclusive and cohesive, a caring and sharing community. A society that is **apathetic** towards those of lesser aptitude is hardly one that is sophisticated and civilised, for snubbing those who are weaker just shows how shallow, circumscribed and uncivilised their paradigms are. As can be seen, being educated is not equivalent with being civilised; in fact, it is this education that might lead to further social **fragmentation**. If we cannot even treat our fellow human beings equally with respect and care regardless of their status and level of **affluence**, who are we to claim we are civilised, for we are no more than animals.

However, it is undeniable that education is **indubitably** necessary to provide a sense of **conformity**. The reward and punishment schemes that are prevalent in most institutions today help cement a sense of right and wrong in the young, and promote an adherence towards rules and a fear of authority. Being more well-informed also allows one to communicate better, and therefore understand others better as well, thus creating some semblance of civilisation.

In conclusion, though education has its redeeming points, it still has a long way to go before it can be said to create a society that deserves the label "civilised". Furthermore, education, like all systems, requires the people to have a shift in world view before definitions can be revised and the direction an educated society moves is fine-tuned. Indeed, it is **hubris** to claim that such a statement is always true, because it is a mark of **stagnation** to believe that one **manifesto**, one **ideology**, and one system is enough to preserve nationhood and the qualities of a civilised society. Education is a double-edged sword that must be wielded correctly in order to mould a future generation that is not only educated but civilised, with not only **erudition** but empathy, and a keen sense of moral absolutes. I think it still requires a long while before one can emphatically claim "an educated society is a civilised one."

Comments:

You raise some good arguments and relevant premises. Take care to always qualify each of your claims so that readers will more readily accept them.

Essay **05**

Title: "Governments should pay attention to what art and artists have to say." Discuss.

Name: Chung Ming See

Class: 07A13A

In a world like today's, many nations are driven by pragmatic goals – the emphasis has been very much on economic competitiveness, boosting national productivity, generating economic welfare and high standards of living – and the list goes on. And in the face of such materialistic pursuits, art is often very much looked upon as something quite useless, without any measurable value. Yet I believe, it is a mistake for governments to turn a deaf ear to what art and artists have to tell them – that will be severely underestimating the power of art.

Firstly, what is art? Art is pretty much elusive and hard to pin down exactly; it takes on numerous forms – literature, music, film, plays; basically the list is quite inexhaustible. Oscar Wilde, in his book "The Picture of Dorian Gray", once said "all art is quite useless"; he was a firm believer that art exists to offer beauty and aesthetic value only and nothing else beyond that. I personally would have to disagree – even as Oscar Wilde wrote that book, he was, ironically enough, conveying messages, provoking thought and questions about the nature of art and beauty. Art is often viewed by many to be a medium of expression – and not without reason. Yes, sometimes art is just created for the sake of entertainment or just to convey some flitting personal sentiment; yet often, artists have something to say that may well be of tremendous significance. Look at books like George Orwell's "1984", and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale", both a stark portrayal of societies taken to their logical conclusions based on social and political phenomena that were taking place in their time. And then, look at our own local works of art – Royston Tan's "Cut", a stage production mocking Singapore's censorship board, even Jack Neo's movies (a more mainstream and popular form of art), which at times touch subtly on political issues. Art often carries with it a political dimension, and artists often use their art to challenge the government, force them to reflect on their current policies and way of doing things. And if governments would pause and listen to all these voices questioning them, bringing forth warning and advice, and if they would take these sorts of feedback positively, they may improve on current policies and take more things into consideration during decision-making.

Yet sometimes, governments do pay attention to what artists have to say to them – often for the wrong reasons. It seems that governments are aware of the power of art; not of its power to create positive change though, but rather its power to sow discord and destabilise the government. When Arthur Miller wrote "The Crucible", for example, the government arrested him not long after for his play paralleled the McCarthy trials ongoing at that time and they suspected he was trying to undermine the authority of the government. Similarly, in China, the government watches the local art scene with an unblinking eye and would be quick to sniff out any vague whiff of political dissent. In Singapore, Royston Tan's "Cut" was immediately overwhelmed by an onslaught of criticisms from the Censorship Board. Here are instances where governments do pay attention to what artists have to say to them; only they selectively do so, looking past any constructive value the works of art have to them, looking past the obvious warning signs that the artist tries to convey at times, reading only messages of hatred and danger between the lines such as "I want to topple you, suckers" or "Look, everyone. This is the ugly face of your government, here are their dirty stories". Hence, not only should governments pay attention to what art and artists have to say to them, they also have to do so with an open mind, and decide if the works of art do hold critical value instead of viewing art as merely a voice of political dissent.

Of course, this also does not hold true all the time; governments should not be entirely complacent and assume all art is of positive value and purpose. While they should pay attention to the constructive feedback artists convey in their works of art, and make use of art as a 'tool' which can help them refine their policies and better their rule, they should also remain wary of people who abuse art to achieve distorted, dangerous aims. For example, should someone release a book insulting Islam, the government has to be quick to evaluate the possible consequences of such a publication and adopt the route of censorship if necessary. The Prophet Mohammed cartoons published in a Danish newspaper stirred up much anger and hatred among the Muslims, and in this case, the government could possibly have paid more attention and evaluate more sensitively the consequences of such bold art.

Even if art does not carry with it an obvious political dimension, it may also reflect social phenomena and thus still be useful with regard to aiding the government in deciding its policies. Take Dickens' work, for example; "Great

Expectations" was more than just a fun read; it reflects a lot of social phenomena, for example, the materialistic nature of society then, and the cold, impersonal, cruel nature of the law. The poem "The Man in a Bowler Hat", also conjured a very thought-provoking portrayal of the common working man in a fast-paced, capitalism-driven 19th Century English society. Thus art can serve as a voice on behalf of common populace, and give governments an idea of where society is heading.

And if there are still not enough reasons for governments to hear what art and artists have to say, one can find a pragmatic incentive for doing so. Being more concerned about the local art scene does contribute to economic progress, however indirectly; studies have shown that governments which attract bohemians into their society give an image of being open and inclusive and thus attract and encourage more entrepreneurs. Paying attention to what artists have to say also sends a strong signal that their opinions matter, thereby encouraging the emergence of more such creative energy, and the development of a spontaneous and vibrant local art scene and culture. In line with pragmatic goals, this pushes a nation's development to a truly global and world-class city. The Singapore government, for one, has realised this to a certain extent.

All in all, art can serve as a crucial, genuine and spontaneous voice of feedback for the government, and governments should never underestimate the power – both constructive and destructive – of art.

Comments:

Excellent work, Ming See. A fluent, balanced piece with a number of mature insights. Do watch your paragraphing, however, and go beyond examples of literary works and film, to include painting or music perhaps.

Essay **06**

Title: "Social change has diminished the importance of the family today." Discuss.

Name: Cheryn-ann Chew

Class: 07S03K

Since time immemorial, society has arranged itself into subunits, better known as the family. It can be concluded that over the centuries, man has come to believe that the family arrangement is one that is effective in furthering personal and societal goals, serving as a suitable environment for the socialisation and upbringing of children as well as a unit of bound relations that supports each individual in society and meets one of man's most innate needs for companionship.

For centuries, the social institution of the family has been a symbol of constancy and stability. Yet, in our rapidly changing world of the 21st century, the constancy and previously unshifting stability of the family unit has been brought into question. As society progresses at breakneck speed, it can be said that even the family has succumbed to the forces of social change. Indeed, the family and the definition of the family unit have changed. However, these changes do not undermine the importance of the family in society, and this writer believes that the importance of the family today has not diminished.

This brings us to the question of why some would believe and be alarmed at the diminishing importance of the family. What social changes are believed to have led to this diminishing importance?

Those who fret over this alleged "breakdown" of the family unit claim that the family is no longer the vibrant social institution it once was due to a precipitous fall in the number of couples deciding to tie the knot. In our fast paced society, where most individuals are constantly bombarded with an overwhelming workload and constantly looming deadlines to meet, it is no wonder that more and more people are remaining single. With little time to socialise and search for a prospective soul mate or life partner, the number of singles is on the rise, and this trend is not likely to change anytime soon. In addition, in most developed countries, with a highly educated population, career often takes precedence over starting a family. Many individuals choose to give up starting a family in pursuit of excellence in the workplace. With the alleged selfishness of our generation, it is unlikely that individuals would be willing to compromise on the pursuit to start a family. This, coupled with the relatively recent female emancipation, has led to increasing numbers of both men and women striving to climb the corporate ladder rather than stay at home to maintain a family and raise the children. With fewer marriages and in turn fewer traditionally defined family units, it seems like a logical conclusion that the importance of family in modern society has diminished.

Apart from the fall in the number of traditionally defined family units, the growing proportion of families severed by divorce has brought into question the stability of this social institution. With three out of five marriages in the United States and two out of five marriages here in Singapore ending in divorce, the trend seems apparent that the family as a stable unit of relations is slowly losing its importance.

On the other hand, despite these trends of a decreasing number of nuclear family units and increasing divorce rates, the family is not diminishing in importance, but merely changing and shifting in its definition to suit the values of the new generation and the modern lifestyle. Changing social values has led not to the demise of the family unit, but to its evolution. The family, as a social institution is adapting, and we should not mistake these changing definitions for the undermining of its importance in society. The recent decades has seen the emergence and proliferation of a whole plethora of familial arrangements ranging from dual income homes to homosexually coupled families. It is very apparent that the modern family no longer necessarily connotes a nuclear family, complete with the male head of household, the stay-at-home mom and 2.4 children. However, despite a shift in the definition of the family, the new familial arrangements serve the same purpose with great efficacy and continue to uphold the importance of family in modern society.

The 21st century has seen great economic growth and in most developed countries, growing affluence has led to a rise in the cost of living. This increase in the cost of living now demands that both husband and wife work to support the family. Dual income households have become the norm in modern societies the world over and is accepted as a necessary arrangement in the light of the circumstances. However, despite the fact that both the husband

and wife are actively pursuing careers in the workplace, the importance of the family has not diminished in their lives. Circumstances simply require both parties to work and even if they both wish to pursue excellence in their respective careers, the family still remains an important source of support and serves as a suitable environment for child-rearing. In this respect, despite shifting family structures and definitions, the family still remains of paramount importance to both the individual and to society as a whole.

With the recent political activism aimed at the legalisation of same-sex marriages, it can be seen that society has grown to be more accepting of homosexual partnerships. While some countries, such as the Netherlands in 2000, have legalised same-sex marriages, most nations support according equal rights to homosexual partnerships and use the term "civil unions" in recognition that homosexual partnerships can also form the basis of loving, lasting relationships. While many may not yet be comfortable with recognising homosexually coupled homes as "families", this writer believes these new familial arrangements still can and do serve the purposes of the traditional family. While bringing individuals personal satisfaction and support, same-sex couples are also capable of loving and bringing up a child. Therefore it can be said that homosexually coupled families continue to uphold the family, the values it embodies and its importance in society.

With increasing divorce rates, one may begin to question the importance of the stable family unit in society today. However, single-parent homes, despite deviating from traditional definitions of the nuclear family, can still form the basis of an effective family. Besides, the number of remarriages is also on the rise, further proving that the family unit is one that is still valued and important in modern society.

In conclusion, it may appear that shifting social values and beliefs have eroded and threatened the family unit and caused it to be decreasingly important. However, the family as a social institution has not diminished in importance but has adapted and evolved to suit modern living. While modern familial arrangements may differ from the traditional nuclear family, these new forms of the 'family' still serve the purposes of the family with great efficacy and continue to embody all the values that the family constitutes. Despite brave proclamations of independence, man will always need the family for both practical and personal reasons and thus, the importance of family has not diminished despite the constant social change that surrounds it.

Comments:

Very good content that has been brilliantly and eloquently presented. Thanks for such a good read!

Essay **07**

Title: Is freedom always good?

Name: Wang Hanchen Class: 07S06N

"Any society that would give up a little liberty for a little security, would gain neither and lose both." Freedom is touted as one of the most basic and fundamental of human rights, and is intrinsic to our very nature. It is said that in many religious texts, such as the Bible, that Mankind was the only creature given the gift of free will. Yet, just as Adam and Eve were banished from the garden because they chose to eat the forbidden fruit, freedom is a value that is not always positive. There are two primary types of freedom, and those are, freedom from malevolence, and freedom of choice. In the latter especially, freedom is not always good, simply because the "right" choice, or the "best" choice, can be quite hard to make. This is all the more so because all our choices can affect other people.

First, we begin by understanding freedom. This precious commodity comes in two forms. The first is the lack of external forces oppressing the individual, and the second is the ability to make independent decisions and act upon those. From this dichotomy, we see that the concept of freedom entails three things or three prerequisites. The first, and most important, is empowerment. Whether it be physical or otherwise, the first step towards freedom is to break free from bondage. Once you have overcome the oppression, in order to act upon your freedom, to utilize it, you will then need knowledge and maturity. Maturity, as discussed by Immanuel Kant, is the exercising of one's mental abilities to arrive at rational and responsible conclusions based on an individual's knowledge and experience. Clearly, the last two requirements for freedom are interlinked.

In today's society, there are few who disagree with the idea that the most basic freedom – freedom from oppression – is a good thing, and above that, is a fundamental and indubitable human right. The right not to be a bondsman, not to be a slave, not to be a commodity, is one of the most sacred values of modern liberal societies.

Having cleared that hurdle, let us look at the second form of freedom, the freedom of choice and action. As previously mentioned, this requires knowledge and maturity, and it is because of these requirements, the inability of man to fulfil them and the inherent selfishness of Man, that we say freedom is not always good.

Most choices stem from a simple cost-benefit analysis. The cost of taking a certain action is considered, and the benefits are then considered. These two are then compared and a decision is made. For example, if John had to choose between a hamburger and a beef steak for lunch, he would compare the two, decide if the additional cost of the steak is worth the pleasure he derives from the taste, and then make the choice.

However, the problem is that not all choices are as simple. Many choices have hidden costs, or have undeterminable or indefinite benefits. In this case, the cost-benefit equation will be skewed, impeding a rational choice. For example, if John were to be in a different scenario, this time choosing whether or not to take out a loan on a brand new Ferrari, he has imperfect knowledge of the future, and therefore, is not able to factor in unexpected scenarios such as losing his job or other misfortunes. This may lead him to make the wrong choice. In this particular instance, freedom of choice is not necessarily bad, because there is no reason why John should be deprived of his BMW simply because he is not clairvoyant. However, if we take for instance the choice of pesticide used in agriculture, things may look slightly different. A farmer may choose a pesticide based on its financial cost rather than other factors, such as the presence of toxins or pollutants. In this case, an imperfect knowledge of the harm done to the environment or to oneself may lead to a choice with potentially far-reaching consequences.

Maturity, or the tendency to make rational decisions based on knowledge and experience is another factor in making choices. Just like a primary-school child would rather play than study, immature choices are often short-sighted, and may be harmful. The age of consent of 18 or above in many countries recognizes this fact and therefore, takes away a person's freedom while he is still a child. However, maturity is not something that is assured with age, and therefore, reason and rationality are not either.

With the point on maturity comes one of the strongest arguments against freedom, and that is the selfishness of man. This inherent trait means that all but the most enlightened individuals would make choices based primarily on

what is beneficial to them. It is argued that this selfishness is essentially the ultimate immaturity because the individual fails to account for factors in the bigger picture.

This is something that J S Mill recognised in his thesis on democracy, which led to the evolution of the harm principle. It works on the premise that all individual actions have repercussions on other people, and society, freedom and rights should be taken away when these repercussions are negative. Therefore, John has the right to buy his car and potentially fall into debt, because the effects are purely individual, whereas a burglar does not have the right to walk into someone's house and walk out with their belongings, because another party is harmed. The whole idea of rights is the segmenting of freedom into those you can exercise, and those you cannot. Clearly, freedom is not always good.

This brings me to my final point on freedom. When John decides if he wants to buy his Ferrari, he also has to live with the consequences of either choice. When Mary, who is on a diet, walks past a cake shop, she has to decide if she wants to eat that tempting cheesecake on display, and if she decides to go ahead and buy it, she will also have to bear the consequences. Freedom brings about a choice, and choice leads to responsibilities. This causes stress and may even become a burden, especially if the freedom were exercised immaturely, or without complete knowledge. That is why freedom even over an individual's choices may not always be good.

Yet, why is freedom such a precious value, so much so that people fight and die for it? It is because it is in the human spirit to desire freedom.

Freedom liberates the soul, by giving individuals the space to explore and be creative. It creates passion through one's choices. It creates diversification and promotes individualism. Nature's snowflakes are not hammered out by great big forces in the sky. They are given room to form freely, each becoming a unique and exquisite work of art.

In the same way, regardless of whether freedom is good or bad, its benefits can be seen and felt everywhere. It is no mere coincidence that first-world countries are mostly liberal democracies. Freedom encourages enterprise and development. It is especially potent in the arts scene, where the more liberal the regulations, the more colourful and vibrant the culture and the arts. So how do we handle freedom? We segment freedom up into rights to separate rights and choices that are harmful from those that are beneficial. We recognize that freedom is not always good, and we exercise our freedom responsibly and maturely. At the end of the day what we finally achieve should be a system where Hannibal Lecter is behind bars, and Picasso and Bill Gates are free to fly.

Comments:

Fantastic essay with absolutely brilliant analysis. Great dissection of the question and your points are eloquently and clearly substantiated by good thought experiments. Well done! Do be a little careful of the language though. Try to vary your choice of words as well. H.L.A. Hart's "The Concept of Law" is a good example of great philosophical writing that is easy to understand.

Essay **08**

Title: In your opinion, how important is an opposition in government to a country's progress?

Name: Eliza Sin

Class: 07S03G

In this era of the new millennium, with the widespread propagation of democratic ideals by the country many call the cradle of democracy, the United States, many a government has evolved into a more inclusive and pluralistic authority that is voted in 'by the people' and institutes policies 'for the people'. Even communist countries, like Russia and China, have seen the inherent benefits of such a political system that gives every member of the electorate a voice, though amid many other competing voices, in the running of a nation. In a true democracy, the presence of an opposition in the government is *a sine qua non* that is vital to enable effective governance, for it serves the irreplaceable role of acting as a voice for the people in the vetoing and checking of policies legalised by the ruling body. Such is vital for the progress of a society in this ever-changing world where change in governments is needed for survival.

Firstly, the opposition acts as an essential check and balance on the government. Lee Kuan Yew himself once mentioned: "There is no guarantee future governments will be as strong and uncorrupt as the current parliament". While a group of leaders may well have been voted in on the mandate of the people, there is no guarantee they will always serve the people well out of true concern for the welfare of a community. A reflection of this may be seen in Fidel Castro's Cuba, where clampdowns and state-sanctioned assassinations of his political dissidents have reduced his government to an ineffectual governing body, often accused of nepotism, cronyism and the like. This has led to international boycotts and stalled the economy of Cuba for extended periods of time. More so can be seen in the Philippines where previous governments had virtually no opposition to act as a counter to the blustering movie-stars-turned-politicians, leading it to the entrenchment of inflation and budget deficits over the last 60 years. Hence, ensuring that the strength of a government will augment, rather than attenuate, a strong opposition is a must. To quote a well-known phrase – 'Who guards the guardians?'. Well, it is the opposition.

Also, besides exposing inept governance and serving as an avenue to correct faulty policies, the opposition also serves as a form of competition. For example, in the US, the opposition of the Democrats against the incumbent Republicans in Congressional sittings has served as a reminder to the Republicans to clean up their act after various mess-ups concerning the Iraq War. Not to do so would be to risk losing their upper-hand in Congress during the next election where the electorate may very well vote against them for poor performance. As such, with political opponents hot on their heels, always ready to pounce on every mistake and fault, it is no wonder that governments have to be competent in governance, which is vital for society's progress.

While many say stability is essential for the success of a people, we have to bear in mind that political change is more often than not, a slow and gradual process. Society often needs radicalism and agitation for changes to be put into effect. An example of this would be the Women's Suffrage Movement, or more recently the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Martin Luther King once said 'Wait means never.' If not for him and his band of activists for the suffrage of blacks, the dream of blacks and whites sitting together at the table of brotherhood would, in effect, still remain a dream. Society needs a voice to speak up in government for its sake. Let us not take the tranquilising drug of gradualism any more, but rather instil a strong, vociferous opposition that is capable of agitating a government into change – a vital ingredient for progress.

Also, not to forget, an opposition may serve as a way to mandate the moral code of a people. The notion that the majority is always right is not only fallacious, but also immeasurably detrimental to the progress of a civil society. Such a motion, though congruous with the notion of democracy, is utterly, in every sense of the word, wrong. One man thought he could use the mandate of the majority against the minority. One man thought he could carry out atrocities, given the support of the majority. That man was Adolf Hitler. With the support of a parliament (essentially weaklings who dared not speak out) and the support of the Germans, he carried out massacres and other indescribable atrocities that will forever tarnish the image of Germany in the annals of history. The lack of an opposition, clear-headed and brave enough to speak up against the majority led to such degeneration of morals that it is indeed regrettable. To draw lessons from this episode, all governments need an opposition, strong and daring enough to speak up against authority and ensure that the basic foundations of democracy incorporate a fundamental moral code by which a government adheres to.

However, it is essential to note that an opposition must be wholly and truly dedicated to its role of serving an ideal that aims for the betterment of society. In some instances, it is unfortunate that having an opposition in the government may very well impede the effectiveness of the governing body. Take for instance, the presence of opposition politicians in Singapore such as Chee Soon Juan, whose political filibustering and ideological posturing and strongly-worded accusations serve only as an avenue for him to undermine the integrity of the government and cause an international uproar in the media. Such would only serve to devalue the People's Action Party, an institution that has indeed done much for Singapore for the good of the people. It is indeed an impediment to the effectiveness of the government and directly affects the progress of Singapore. In such a case, Singapore would do well to be rid of such opposition members. While Singapore's clean and effective government is the exception rather than the norm, we can see that it is possible, in unique cases, for a country to be almost devoid of strong opposition to succeed. Perhaps Singapore could serve as a success story to show the possibility of the existence of a government that is able to stay uncorrupt and virtuous through good leadership (under the mandate of Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's patriarch) and a strong moral code that serves as a framework for the government to move within. It is possible for a country to progress without a strong opposition, but only in exceptional cases.

To conclude, Ronald Reagan once said "Democracy will ultimately be the only thing that will last through generations". More so, it is the opposition, among other factors, that serves as one of the foundation stones of a strong government and true democracy that is able to lead a nation well into the 21st century. It is the opposition that truly speaks out for the people, the underrepresented, maintains the moral code and brings into effect changes. Hence, it is the opposition that enables the building of a strong and successful country. Indubitably, a strong opposition is a must. History serves as an avenue for us to learn from past mistakes. May all countries seeking to release themselves from the confining systems of dictatorships and one-sided governments learn the importance of dissent. May the failure of governments such as Hitler's Germany, Castro's Cuba, Ramos' Philippines, among many others, never occur again.

Comments:

Very well-answered with strong support and thematic thrusts.

Essay **09**

Title: In your opinion, how important is an opposition in government to a country's progress?

Name: David Chan Tar Wei

Class: 07A13A

According to Rousseau's Social Contract, the duty of a government is to ensure that the needs of its people are constantly met; and in return, the people subjugate themselves to the political authority of the state, confident that their government will continually seek the progress of their nation. Yet one wonders whether this role of the government can be fulfilled effectively without having a strong and credible voice of dissent from within. Such a debate inadvertently challenges the fundamental tenets of statecraft and democracy, which this essay attempts to achieve with regards to the issue at hand.

Perhaps, one ought to comprehend the nature of democracy first before ascertaining the relative importance of having a strong opposition in the government. Democracy originated from the Greek word 'demos' meaning 'people' and such a political system hands the people the prerogative to have a say and decide who should govern them. The government that is elected by 'Vox Populi', has the mandate to govern its citizens; and this mandate is often derived via a fair electoral process of voting. Political parties contest for a majority in Parliament to form the ruling party which constitutes the executive branch of the government, formulating policies and charting the overall direction for the nation. Unequivocally, each government hopes to implement policies and directives that would benefit the country in general, so as to ensure its continual progress and its own success in the next election.

Yet, in a democracy the role of the opposition cannot and must not be overlooked. For without an opposition present, such a government would be intrinsically dictatorial and totalitarian, akin to the Machiavellian government, enjoying a *carte blanche* within the country due to the absence of a check-and-balance mechanism in the form of an alternative voice. The opposition fulfils this obligation by presenting a different perspective and opinion, given its duty to "oppose" the ruling party when deemed fit, especially during parliamentary sittings. Such discourse and dialectics often improve the nature and quality of debate and hence benefits the overall decision-making process.

But how much of this opposition voice would truly be beneficial to the overall progress of the nation? Where is a demarcation going to be drawn between having a strong and responsible opposition, seeking the progress of the nation, *vis-à-vis* a myopic and bigoted group of people intending to oppose the government at all cost in an effort to discredit the ruling party? Such represents the inherent conundrum existing today.

First and foremost, it has to be acknowledged that having a 'strong' opposition in government is not commensurate to the number of seats won by the opposition. Rather, it is the quality of the opposition within the government that is paramount. The provision of the electoral process allows capable opposition into the decision-making of their country, giving them a say in the running of the nation and acting as a check-and-balance mechanism for the government; hence, upholding the tenets of democracy. The presence of a credible opposition forces ruling parties to remain accountable and responsible to its electorate at all times. This was seen in the recent Tom DeLay saga in the US where the Democrats forced the ruling Republicans to pressure DeLay to resign as Leader of the House of Representative due to his suspected involvement in a corruption deal. It thus can be seen that the effectiveness of the opposition within the government hinges on its purpose and duty to uphold their role as a responsible opposition with the high intentions of seeking the eventual progress of the nation. As mentioned by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew, there needs to be a "First Class opposition" that is clear of the demands it is obliged to fulfil. Only in such a circumstance would a strong opposition arise and in so doing aid the decision-making process and hence, the country's progress.

Unfortunately, what often emanates is the fact that opposition parties do not accept their role as 'the opposition' and would constantly seek to gain a vantage point whenever possible, so as to ensure better success in the elections. For instance, the opposition parties in the UK constantly berate the failure of Tony Blair's Labour Party in addressing the economic disparity of the nation and even though Blair had pushed for reforms via the Education Bill, much of what was proposed was shot down by the Tories. This excessive discourse within parliament exacerbated the problems associated with bureaucratic red tape, which led to a wastage of time, energies and resources which could have been channelled elsewhere. Likewise, the American culture of log-rolling serves the same purpose of complicating the

process of policy construction. Before a bill is read in Congress, it has to go through the hands of every Congressman on Capitol Hill, and each senator adds a new clause to the bill to suit his aims, thus reducing the chances of it being passed later on. Such inadequacy and inefficiency resulted in a plethora of problems, especially during the period after Hurricane Katrina. And even before the Bill is passed, it still is subjected to the party politics of the Democrats and the Republicans who often debate in accordance to their party line. In such a scenario, it certainly is the case where too many cooks spoil the broth.

At the end of the day, one needs to ask the question: what really constitutes a country's progress? Is it based on political, economic or social terms? In Singapore's case, the People's Action Party deliberately adopted an emphasis on economic progress. As such, having too strong an opposition would only seem to hinder the effectiveness of policies and initiatives. On hindsight, Singapore's system did in fact benefit the nation in general – and not having too strong an opposition is clearly a trade-off. While one may argue that a marginalised opposition intrinsically discredits the democratic and electoral process, one can likewise assert that in a pragmatic and practical sense, what is mandated in such a fast-paced society is efficiency and efficacy, which would only remain a chimera if a government were to have a strong opposition which constantly contends with the ruling party. Bread and butter issues far outweigh the philosophical imperatives of democracy and in such a context, having a strong opposition would seem more of a hindrance to a country's overall progress.

Comments:

Excellent work, David. Cogent, lucid, well-substantiated arguments here. An engaging read, from start to finish!

Essay 10

Title: "Censorship is an insult to man's intelligence." Discuss.

Name: Samuel Wong

Class: 07S03H

There is much truth in the term "global village" coined by Marshall McLuhan, and we can see that the world has indeed been expanding at an accelerating pace in the new millennium. Along with the massive leaps in technology, the increased accessibility of information has resulted in greater exposure of undesirable material to people, thereby causing increasing debate over the issue of censorship in recent years.

First of all, it can be deduced that "censorship" here refers to the censorship of undesirable forms of the media. In my opinion, to say that censorship is an insult to man's intelligence may be a rather one-sided and "self-centred" statement. The word "insult" strongly suggests a negative connotation and that there are no benefits of censorship whatsoever. I feel that it is perhaps too much of a generalisation to undermine the importance of censorship by deeming it to be an insult to man's intelligence, and we must consider both the advantages and disadvantages of censorship before stating such unjustified claims.

A common argument against the case of censorship is that it challenges the basic premise of a person's individual judgement. This argument claims that people should be allowed to decide for themselves what they want to watch, instead of letting the state decide for them what they are allowed to watch. In my opinion, I feel that it is an unjustified argument, as we must examine what really is man's intelligence before stating such a claim. If we take the example of Ted Bundy, a man who was obsessed with pornography and went on to sexually assault and murder innocent young women, we can see that the term "man's intelligence" leaves much to be questioned. In our newspapers, we often come upon cases of rape arising from the rapist having watched pornographic films before committing the crime. As such, we can see that the claiming of "man's intelligence" is not necessarily true for all people.

Hence, if we look at the above mentioned examples, we can see that they refer to adults who had been directly or indirectly incited by uncensored undesirable material to commit atrocities. The effect of violence and sex in the media is unsurprisingly even more pronounced in teenagers and children. According to Bandura's Bobo Doll experiment, children who were exposed to violent scenes were more likely to hit the Bobo Doll, suggesting a certain correlation between violence in the media and in the lives of children. There are numerous examples of how a lack of censorship has led to tragedies, some of the more prominent ones being the Columbine shootings inspired by the video game "Doom" and the case of Nathan Martinez, who shot dead his step-mother and step-sister after watching the film "Natural Born Killers" ten times.

As we can see, a lack of censorship can have dire consequences with regard to the impressionable minds of children and teenagers, and it is perhaps vital for the censorship board to impose certain age restrictions on movies, for example, to ensure that movies with excessive sex and violence do not reach the young and "pollute" their minds with undesirable content. I feel that it is probably foolhardy to state that censorship is an insult to man's intelligence as a whole because it is evident from empirical evidence that children and teenagers are not fully mature in their thoughts yet, and even though many teenagers may claim that they do not follow what they see in movies, the subtle influences that these movies exert on young minds may not be revealed until later in life.

Moreover, continual exposure to acts of violence in the media desensitise the young to violence in real life and may lead them to trivialise criminal offences such as assault and rape.

Having examined the importance of censorship to the young, as well as adults, we can see that almost all people are influenced by the media to varying degrees, and as such, the importance of censorship is evident in reducing the negative impact of the mass media in terms of sex and violence.

If we move on to political censorship, we can see that many governments censor opposing views to their system of rule. For example, Chairman Mao of China censored any dissenting views criticising his reign, while Adolf Hitler of Germany took his form of "censorship" one step further by silencing any form of opposition. In the political scene, I feel that there is a certain level of truth that the censorship here is "insulting" man's intelligence of distinguishing

the committed political party. However, these cases are perhaps extremist issues which may only be partially relevant to today's society, as after all, we all know that Hitler practised censorship solely for his own selfish motives to gain power.

In today's society, censorship of political dissent may not be something totally bad. In relatively unstable countries such as Indonesia and perhaps Taiwan, a complete lack of political censorship allows people to get wind of certain radical measures proposed and this has often resulted in demonstrations, riots, and needless bloodshed. As such, censorship is being compared with freedom of speech, and it is possible that some form of censorship is required to maintain social stability in such countries. In my view, the apparent "intelligence of man" here is questionable, and we should look at who the audience is before deciding whether to impose censorship or not, and not say that censorship blatantly insults the ability of people to think for themselves.

Thus, I would perhaps suggest that for a stable country such as Singapore, there is no real need to impose excessive political censorship because the people in Singapore are generally well-educated and informed members of society. Therefore, it is essential to realise that censorship is not a cudgel with which to impose a government's view on people, but instead a yardstick with which to measure the amount of leeway that can be given to people, depending on their education level and other environmental factors.

Nevertheless, it must be recognised that censorship alone does not shape the behaviour of people. In the case of censorship of sex and violence in the media, the family, moral values, as well as the surrounding environment all play a part in moulding the character of the individual and what he does. In terms of political censorship, it is also essential to recognise that the stability of the country is not only dependent on the level of censorship the government imposes but also many other social factors. This may suggest that excessive censorship may actually be questioning or an "insult" to man's intelligence. An example of excessive censorship may be that of China banning the import of certain Hollywood movies for fear of negative Western influences. This shows that there are two sides of the argument, and excessive censorship may actually indirectly cause a certain level of oppression.

As such, I would think that censorship may be referred to as a double-edged sword, and it is imprudent and perhaps even dangerous to classify it as something that is solely an "insult to men's intelligence", and consequently, indirectly suggesting that all forms of censorship should be abolished. Therefore, I conclude that it is important for censorship to exist, as the deceptive term "man's intelligence" may not hold true, even for mature adults. Thus it is probably all the more important to impose some form of censorship to protect the minds of young people (even though certain movies depicting violence strongly condemn violence) as I feel that the state has a responsibility to reduce the possible negative influences that may be caused by sex and violence in the media, and in addition, those that may arise from its decision of whether to censor certain opposing political ideals. As such, the statement "censorship is an insult to man's intelligence" does not really hold true for all situations, and I strongly think there should be some form of censorship.

Comments:

A view that is really controversial but you have put together a very strong essay that considers most angles and sufficient perspectives.

Essay

Title: "Censorship is an insult to man's intelligence." Discuss.

Name: Amelia Chang

Class: 07S03Q

In a society where the concepts of liberalisation and freedom of speech are being increasingly prized, we are often faced with the catch twenty two situation of how much freedom is good for us. While it offers us the opportunity to make personal views heard, the question always remains if the negative implications of such actions outweigh the benefits they embrace. Herein lies the rationale for censorship, which involves the intentional removal of certain content deemed contradictory to public welfare. However, one should note, is this action justified? By having a small panel of individuals judge what is suitable for the majority, it would ostensibly appear as if censorship makes a mockery of man's intelligence, since it belittles the right of choice of the individual. Nevertheless, this perspective is fallacious to some extent, given the fact that human impressionability renders us vulnerable to influence, as well as the sensitivity of certain issues.

Upon closer inspection of the statement, one notes a grave assumption; that man is – on average – intelligent, implying that he has the ability to discern right from wrong with respect to a generally acceptable standard. However, it is precisely this absence of judging ability which justifies the concept of censorship. There exists among a large majority of the population a lack of the skill of objective differentiation, an effect especially marked in the youth generation. Steeped in a media culture which promulgates violence, sexual revelry and a general defamation of the family as an institute, these impressionable adolescents are constantly being bombarded by negative visual footage and verbal commentary, leading to the establishment of fixed mindsets that are potentially lethal. Take for instance the Columbine High School shooting incident, where two youths went on a shooting spree before committing suicide, killing many innocent students, injuring even more and traumatising others for life. When the videotapes they recorded before the murders were viewed by authorities, there emerged a revelation which chilled many to the core – these two adolescents had taken inspiration from the film "The Matrix", whose two-hour-plus runtime includes more than an hour of violence and fighting. It is therefore evident that a certain degree of censorship is necessary, in order to control the influences our youths are exposed to. As delineated by the Darwinian theory of evolution, we have all descended from apes. Now it appears that we have retained at least some behavioural semblance to our primate cousins – the "monkey see, monkey do" complex – which manifests itself most heavily during adolescent years. It is therefore not justified to say that censorship is an insult to intelligence, as man's ability to discern may sometimes be clouded by other concepts, for example, immaturity of thought.

Additionally, censorship exists for a purpose, especially where sensitive issues pertaining to race, religion and the like are concerned. As people have varying opinions on the same issue, it is pertinent that an authority runs through any form of content produced in order to minimise clashes when it has been released. On the same note, certain articles in our local newspaper are held back from publication just because they are deemed to be offensive and derogatory to a certain race, hence pre-empting possible anger from certain communities. Should the editors of the print run have anticipated the uproar in the Islamic world over the cartoons satirising Prophet Mohammed, it is likely that they would never have published them in the first place to steer clear of stormy waters. While the intelligence of viewers remains questionable, the crux of the issues here lies within the fact that intelligent people have their own views, which can be expected to differ based on background, religion, et cetera. What is acceptable to one person might be insulting or derogatory to another. Thus, censorship is necessary to introduce some modicum of regulation, in the hope of diverting potential conflicts, arising precisely because man thinks for himself and holds an intelligent – however debatable – opinion.

Nevertheless, censorship kills off certain aspects of artistic creativity through selective choice of content, and hence might be said to be an insult to the professional judgement of the producer of that piece, be it a movie or article. Those with experience in dealing with the media are acutely aware of the "shock effect" on the public, created through grisly images and shocking, eclectic perspectives on established issues. To stir up emotions over a humanitarian crisis, one inevitably uses footage of cadavers, mutilated and burnt, or scenes of violent inhumane torture. To lambaste an entity or concept, one can choose to adopt an acridly acerbic tone which might be offensive to some. While these are often subjected to censorship, it is arguable that the intentional cover up of such issues reduces their impact and the intensity of response generated, hence affronting the professional integrity of the producer – as well as the

consumer, as it would seem as if they lacked the mental capacity to handle the knowledge of such atrocities carried out by their fellow homo sapiens. It is also an institution readily open to abuse, as those in power can control what is shown to the general populace.

Regardless of that, one should note that the negative effects arising from the showcasing of such issues might very well outweigh the positive effects generated. While footage of Jews being tortured by Nazis in the Holocaust moved many to silent tears of outrage and sorrow, it is saddening to note that on the anniversary of Adolf Hitler's birthday every year, groups of faceless mobsters still carry out acts of anti-Semitic violence mirroring scenes broadcasted to all, for example the torching of synagogues, the torture of children and mutilation of babies. With inspiration from such media footage, these "Nazi disciples" participate in such acts while holding the vivid imagery portrayed by the media in mind, which serves to some extent as a visual aid, however repulsive. The existence of censorship cannot then be said to be an insult to intelligence and therefore be abolished, as society still retains an imperative need for it.

To this end, censorship appears to be a double-edged sword. While it is crucial to prevent the promulgation of undesirable ideals and preserve the sanctity of certain sensitive issues, it arguably limits the freedom of the producer/consumer, albeit with logical reasons and an end in mind. As such, censorship aids societal well-being through passing information via a more objective filter to determine if content is suitable for viewing or reading. It is not quite justified to make a sweeping statement declaring censorship's insulting nature to humans in general, seeing that there must always be order within a system to avoid the slide into anarchy. Nonetheless, one nagging question remains. As the Romans eloquently put it: quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Who will guard the guardians? If censorship has been established as a crucial concept which does not threaten the mental capacity of mankind, then who is to ensure that it does not degrade into a tool for abuse?

Comments:

Generally well-considered and argued. Will benefit from a discussion of political censorship and whether that is always an insult to one's intelligence.

Essay 12

Title: "Technology has made our lives busier, not better." How far do you agree with this statement?

Name: Cherie Chua Xue Li

Class: 07S03F

The past few decades have seen the improvement in technology by leaps and bounds and while many would agree that technology has made our lives better – taking better to mean benefiting mankind physically, mentally or emotionally – many would be taken aback if told that technology has made our lives busier. There is, after all, an irony in the statement. Technology, synonymous with simplicity and efficiency, cannot possibly have made us busier, can it?

We must not deny that improvements in technology have led to increases in efficiency and productivity, in fact, increasingly so. Taking a look at how far technology has brought us in the areas of communication and transportation, we now have email instead of letters, mobile phones instead of pagers and aeroplanes instead of trains. In the past, it took ages to communicate a piece of information from one end of the country to the other, especially if you were in huge countries such as China, not to mention, relaying news across continents. However, technology has made it possible, at the click of the mouse, to send messages to an overseas spouse instantly, and today, teleconferencing is all the rage. Firms have become more efficient because it no longer takes months to settle a deal with their counterparts from abroad, where most of the time is spent on travelling rather than discussing the deal. It is now the norm for businessmen to fly from Singapore to Thailand, then to China and finally to the United States of America, if that is what it takes to strike a deal. Globalisation would not have been possible without the technology we have today. In this regard, technology has indeed made our lives better.

However, it is necessary to point out that it is precisely because technology has allowed for greater efficiency that we have become busier, no matter how paradoxical that may sound. An increase in efficiency has paved the way for Man to do the same amount of work in a shorter period of time. Inevitably, we find ourselves taking on more work so that we may now accomplish more within the same time frame, say 24 hours. Although some may argue that the purpose of technology is to make life simpler, and thus less busy, for Man, this does not seem to be the case. As Leonardo Da Vinci once noted, "Iron rusts with disuse, stagnant water loses its purity ... even so does inaction sap the vigour of the mind." Indeed, the nature of Man is such: if technology is going to enable me to finish my original set of tasks in ten hours, leaving me with six hours of free time, then I should fill up these hours meaningfully with what else but work? Therefore, technology, though unintended, has made our lives busier too.

There are examples we can draw to justify this, such as how improvements in the technology of household appliances have resulted in more people taking to multi-tasking. We see this in our own homes all the time: Mother dumps the dirty laundry into the washing machine while the dishes are left in the dishwasher and then proceeds to mow the lawn. All at once, the clothes are washed, the dishes are cleaned and the grass is cut. We may marvel at the wonders of technology, but we are not aware of the fact that all this multi-tasking has made our lives busier.

Such busyness can also be seen in hospitals as medical technology continues to advance. There is no longer any excuse for not being able to save a person's life; the only excuse is that of not having enough time because doctors were out saving someone else's life. Medical technology today has advanced to such a level where it is almost always possible to offer some kind of treatment for all kinds of illnesses. The fact that doctors are more able now than ever before to treat patients has led to greater busyness on their part. The responsibility they now bear is larger because the lack of technology to save someone's life is no longer a valid reason. They must do all they can – because with technology, they can – to help their patients, and this increased responsibility has indeed made the lives of medical staff busier than ever.

Finally, we would know by now that technology is not without its flaws. While technological advances have made our lives better and more hassle-free, they have also sent us into a frenzy when glitches occur. It is not surprising that we find ourselves busy repairing these technological devices half the time and breaking down together with the machine when we cannot get it to work. Therefore, over-reliance on technology might not necessarily make our lives better but instead busier.

To conclude, I would say that technology has enriched our lives and benefited Man to a large extent, what with greater efficiency in communications and transportation as well as advances in the medical world. However, all these improvements in technology would have failed in their purpose if we were to end up busier than before. Technology in itself should serve to aid us in our work and in doing so, free up our time for leisure or other purposes. It would be a sad irony if, at the end of the day, we find ourselves moaning, "Technology has made our lives busier, not better."

Comments:

Good, Cherie. This is an excellent piece of work. Keep it up!

Essay 13

Title: "Technology has made our lives busier, not better." How far do you agree with this statement?

Name: Chia Yan Min

Class: 07S03F

The unstoppable charge of new technological developments has been gaining momentum in recent years. These days it would be accurate to say that change is the only constant in the technological arena, and these developments and fancy gadgets have permeated our lives to such an extent that increasingly, technology is referred to as a double-edged sword – undeniably, no modern person would ever be able to do without the convenience it brings, yet it has without doubt made our lives much busier and more stressful. Thus it is indeed true to a great extent that technology perhaps has "bettered" our lives less than most might imagine – in fact, our lives have become less meaningful and fulfilling as a result of its tireless invasion.

One area of technology in which new innovations seem to pop up almost daily is the communications sector. Ever since the invention of the mobile phone in the 1980s, companies such as Nokia and Sony Ericsson have been constantly churning out new gadgets that are smaller, sleeker and most importantly, enable one to stay contactable 24/7, no matter where one might be. Indeed, the mobile communications device, owned by a large majority in developed nations, enables all of us to stay connected constantly, a function which would ostensibly be a boon especially to businessmen and others whose jobs require them to constantly be in touch with those they work with. Yet, this has undeniably resulted in even more work, as well as job-related stress, for owners of mobile phones. No longer does the work end when one steps out of the office – instead, one's working hours have extended to an almost infinite extent, and one has no excuse to be uncontactable due to the presence of that handy mobile device. Truly, this indicates beyond doubt that technology has made our lives busier and not better – no matter how much of a workaholic one is, staying on the job practically 24/7 and being forced to constantly be on the alert for phone calls from the boss cannot be considered "better" than being able to leave work when one leaves the office.

Technology has also given mankind the ability to accomplish tasks at a much faster rate than if our non-computerised, non-robotic brains and limbs were put to use. Superficially, this might appear to be a positive development; however, it has also resulted in a much faster pace of life as technology – especially in the areas of robotics and computer programming – enables us to work that much faster, resulting in the common perception that faster automatically equates to better, as more can be accomplished, and leading to the endless pursuit of faster, more efficient gadgets – familiar to everyone who lives in the modern world. Yet it is often said, "Even if you win the rat-race, you're still a rat." Technology has forced us to do more, yet leaves us with less – more things are expected to be accomplished (seeing as we have the aid of technology), but we lose ourselves in the pursuit of squeezing more and more tasks into our schedules.

This is again evident in the manner in which technology has sped up every aspect of modern life. Not only does it make us busier by speeding up our tasks and indirectly giving us more to do by enabling more to be accomplished, as previously mentioned, it has also enabled us to get from place to place more rapidly, it has made time zones irrelevant as people are able to make use of technologies such as the Internet and video conferencing to keep in touch despite being separated by continents. Essentially, technology has us all sold on its speed and efficiency and resulted in a culture where few see the real need to "stop and smell the roses" – after all, technology, being the limitless creature it is, will probably be able to make every action instantaneous sometime in the near future. In a fast-paced world of instant gratification and lightning-speed communication, we will all be too busy, cocooned in our little technological comfort zones, to wonder if this is really all there is – does the endless pursuit of faster, smaller and sleeker truly make our lives more fulfilling and meaningful, in other words, "better"?

Some might claim that technology has in fact made us less busy and bettered our lives in the sense that it has resulted in greater convenience and greater efficiency – that is, the automobiles of today are an improvement over the horse-carts of yesteryear. Granted, technology is not entirely evil and has brought a number of important benefits – for example, vast improvements in hygiene standards with better cleaning and purification technologies – essentially, a better quality of life. Who can deny the convenience of water flowing into one's home at the turning of a tap, or the convenience of a transport network that extends to all parts of the country and runs like clockwork?

Truly then, technology is a double-edged sword. Without doubt, it brings tangible benefits, and perhaps I would go as far as to say modern societies would crumble without it, yet the endless rat race it has created with its speed and efficiency has made all of us busier people and robbed us of more intangible ideals such as time to slow down and smell the roses, or even breathing space between the countless tasks technology has enabled us to squeeze into the course of a day. It has bettered our lives in all possible material aspects but the fact that it has put our psychological health on the road to ruin more than outweighs this. Thus, it is true to a great extent that technology has made our lives busier, not better. Though of course, since it is obviously here to stay, perhaps we can only resign ourselves to this.

Comments:

Very well-written, Yan Min! Mature, sensitive and organised. Well done!

Essay **14**

Title: How far should the media be held responsible for the problems faced by young people today?

Name: Janice Heng

Class: 2S03L

The media is one of the most convenient scapegoats today. It may be blamed for anything from underage alcoholism to promiscuous lifestyles among teenagers, or accused of acts ranging from perpetuating the myth of the ideal body to promoting moral perversion. While there may be some basis to these allegations, it would be naïve to hold the media fully responsible for the problems faced by young people today. Firstly, the media's role is more influential than directly causal; secondly, responsibility falls on many other parties; and thirdly, the absence of media-influence would not necessarily imply the end of all problems faced by youth today.

It is hard to deny that the media has a role to play in contributing to the problems of youth today. Moral norms are often threatened by salacious television programmes such as the infamous *Desperate Housewives*, or by sensationalist news reports about the sexual exploits of students. This may mislead some youths into morally questionable behaviour, with consequences such as teenage pregnancy, or at the very least, parental disapproval. The glamorisation of smoking and alcohol consumption may similarly exert an undesirable influence on impressionable teenagers, drawing them into what may become lifetime addictions. Advertisements for slimming advertisements, or the proliferation of television programmes in which perfectly-proportioned actors are the protagonists, may even contribute to teenage insecurity and self-esteem issues – one of the most common problems faced by those in their formative years. Clearly, one cannot absolve the media from all responsibility, as it is indeed capable of having a profound influence on its consumers, particularly the impressionable youth of today, most of whom are on a steady media diet of radio, television and glossy magazines.

Yet one must distinguish between correlation and causality. While the media's contribution to problems faced by young people is evident, a direct causal link is harder to find. Even the staunchest advocate of media censorship would find it hard to argue that, for example, teenagers engage in sexual activity only because the television programmes that they watch encourage them to do so. Hormones, not television dramas, are responsible for teenage sexual misdemeanours; peer pressure, not *Seventeen*, is directly responsible for creating the perception that one must conform. Although the defence is harder to make when considering the media's role in glamorising vices, it is even less plausible to assert that all youths who smoke derive no pleasure whatsoever from the act, and only do so because of the media's influence.

Since the media is unlikely to be the direct cause for the problems faced by young people today (and hence can be held responsible only to a limited extent), there must necessarily be other factors that play a more important role. Peer pressure, a subtler and more insidious force than media influence, is one of them. If one's social circle finds smoking 'uncool', for example, then it is unlikely that one will take up smoking just because the lead singer of a famous rock band does so. Conversely, if one is brought up on a strict diet of only the most wholesome television programming and educational publications, yet associates with peers who consider copious alcohol consumption the ultimate rite of passage, then one may well end up heading down the road of teenage alcoholism despite not having been exposed to corrupting media influence. It can be argued that the media itself plays a role in shaping teenage attitudes, and hence contributing to peer pressure – but the role of the latter is ultimately more directly causal, and certainly more influential, than that of the media.

Furthermore, it would be giving young people too little credit to suggest that they are the helpless victims of a media onslaught, able only to succumb to media influence without any resistance. The consumers of media bear at least as much responsibility as the suppliers for any ill effects that consumption may entail. Today's youth do not have to accept the stereotypes reinforced by pop songs or movies; instead they are free to challenge the value systems and morally-suspect messages presented to them by the media. Like all other industries, the media industry is ruled by the forces of supply and demand. If youths choose to buy magazines that promote materialistic superficiality or decide to watch reality shows that glorify backstabbing and manipulation, then they are at least as responsible for the ensuing problems that may be created as the suppliers of these media are.

All that aside, it would also be too much of a generalisation to say that the media should be held fully responsible for the problems faced by young people today. "The media" encompasses everything from *The Asian Wall Street Journal* to *Teenage Magazine*, and includes both documentaries and mindless sitcoms alike. Only a section of the media holds any responsibility for the problems of today's youth, and it is hardly fair to tar the whole media industry with the same brush. More importantly, young people today face far more problems than the ones commonly cited by critics of the media. Not every teenager faces moral decisions about sex or drugs and although self-esteem issues are indeed widespread, they may not always have to do with physical appearance. Many youths face problems that are entirely unrelated to the media: academic stress, social politics, a dysfunctional family situation, or even financial difficulties that might require them to quit school and take up a job. Young people who are already working also face a slew of work-related problems – but one can hardly blame depraved television programmes for poor working conditions or unsympathetic employers. The range of problems faced by young people today is vast, and the media is only implicated in a small portion of those problems. One should not, therefore, hold the media responsible for problems of the youth to anymore than a small extent.

From the above, it is clear that removing media's influence from the equation will not eliminate all the problems faced by today's youth, simply because the media only contributes to a few of those many problems. In addition, the removal of undesirable media influence does not necessarily mean that the problems in which it was involved will cease to exist. Banning *Cosmopolitan* or *FHM* will not lead to a drastic drop in teenage pregnancies; impressionable girls will not be cured of anorexia just because they are no longer exposed to beauty pageants. Since even the problems in which the media holds some responsibility will persist without the media, the media cannot and should not be held greatly responsible for the existence of said problems.

In conclusion, while the media cannot be absolved of all responsibility for problems faced by today's youth, neither should it be made to hold all responsibility. Rather, because its role is one of influence rather than causation, because responsibility is also held by peer pressure and the consumers of the media themselves, and because there are many problems faced by the young in which media is truly free from guilt, the media deserves to be held responsible only to a small extent. Besides, putting aside the question of the media's culpability, do we really want to hold it responsible? If we hold it fully responsible, against all logic, then we will inevitably attempt to tackle the problems faced by today's youth by merely censoring and diluting the media. The root causes of the problems, however, will remain unacknowledged. The media remains a convenient scapegoat; but to persecute a scapegoat is to remain unaware of the truth.

Comments:

Good understanding of the issue. Question is well analysed, logically argued and fluently written. Balanced view. Maturity of thought here is impressive.

Essay 15

Title: "Democracy is essentially about 'people power'". Discuss.

Name: Tan Zhi Feng

Class: 2A01A

Democracy as a system of governance was developed in the late 18th century. The cry of "No taxation without representation" in the 13 American colonies led to the liberal democratic system, where every citizen who paid taxes was entitled to have a say in the running of the nation. Since then, universal suffrage has been established, and through democracy, people worldwide, with the exception of some regimes like Cuba and Iran, have the power to choose their governments. However, democracy might not necessarily be about "people power", which is the ability of the public to influence public opinion, as politicians who are elected to represent the people may merely protect their own interests. On the whole, democracy is essentially about 'people power', however, the democratic system can often be abused to serve the interests of some.

'People power' in democracy is enshrined in the power of the vote. In representative democracies, adults have the power to exercise their vote to elect a government that will protect their interests by bringing about law and order, economic prosperity and social stability. Governments that are corrupted, inefficient and inept will be removed from power, as the people have the power not to vote for them in the next election. In Italy and Germany, the incumbent political leaders, Silvio Berlusconi and Gerhard Schroeder respectively, were ousted as Prime Minister and Chancellor because of their inability to deliver on their promise of lifting their nations out of the economic doldrums. Therefore, we can see that democracy is essentially about 'people power', as the public can use their votes to choose who they want to be in government.

Direct democracies, like in Switzerland, allow people to influence government policies even more directly, as referendums have to be held to pass laws and make amendments to the constitution. Everyone will have a say on government policies, as the people have to vote before laws can be passed. Even in representative democracies, the people have a say on important issues through referendums. In 2005, a decision had to be made on the new European Constitution that gave expanded power to the central European government. Even though French politicians supported the move, the French people were able to exercise "people power" through a referendum and reject the constitution because they desired to do so. More recently in France, the Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin attempted to pass the CPE law, to allow companies to hire young workers on short-term contracts with reduced employee benefits, without consulting the French parliament. However, the French people were against the CPE and were able to express their opinion through demonstrations and strikes concentrated in Paris. In a democracy, this action is legitimate as there is freedom of speech. Politicians cannot use force to crush these protests, as authoritarian regimes like North Korea would undoubtedly do. Therefore, we can see that in a democracy, the people can use various means to express their views on government policies and change decisions that are not in the public's interest.

However, it is questionable if "people power" is an inherent feature of the democratic system or simply a quirk of some people, notably the French and Swiss, as seen earlier. Many economists subscribe to Public Choice theory, which states the politicians often protect their own interests once elected into power, rather than representing the interests of the people. Politicians adopt policies and measures which benefit them greatly, but harm each individual only to a small extent, even though the detriment to society as a whole is often far greater. Since gains are concentrated and costs are diffused, the politicians have a far greater incentive to continue doing so, while the people are often unwilling to protect their interests, as the costs of doing so does not justify the small gains they might achieve. For example, many developed nations give agricultural subsidies to their farmers so as to gain their support, for example, in the Common Agricultural Policy in Europe, even though this increases the tax burden on its people and increases the prices of agricultural produce for consumers. However, the people are unwilling to use their power to overturn these harmful policies, as it is not worth their while to do so. An individual would have no reason to hire lawyers and expend resources to investigate the economic viability of these agricultural subsidies, so as to save a few cents when he purchases his carrots from the local supermarket. On the other hand, the politicians and large conglomerates would have vested interests in hiring economists and lawyers to "prove" that these subsidies are beneficial to the public. Therefore "people power" often does not exist in democracies, as the people often do not exercise their power to object to harmful policies, allowing politicians and the wealthy to continue benefiting from these.

As renowned academic Noam Chomsky once said, "Propaganda is to democracy what the bludgeon is to the totalitarian state." This suggests that just like how totalitarian regimes use force, violence and oppression to prevent the people from revolting against harsh and unfair treatment, democracies often use propaganda to convince the people that the government is doing a good job, hoodwinking the public into believing what the government wants them to believe. Thus, 'people power' does not exist in democracies, as the people are unable to express their genuine views. In the United States, many Americans supported George W. Bush in the 2004 Presidential Elections, as they still believed that he was right in deciding to invade Iraq in 2003. However, it has emerged that President Bush, ignorant of the truth or otherwise, had painted a false picture of the threat posed by Saddam Hussein and Iraq, using rhetoric to convince the American public that Iraq had to be invaded as a pre-emptive measure. The American public would not have voted for Bush in the 2004 Presidential Elections if they had known the truth then, as they object to the invasion of Iraq. Therefore, we can see that governments often use propaganda to make the people believe what they want the people to believe, depriving the people of the chance to exercise genuine 'people power'.

In many democracies, a small vocal group is often able to express its opinions best, thus undermining 'people power', as the will of the majority is not respected. In Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra was forced to step down as the Prime Minister even though he had been re-elected, as the urban population in Bangkok launched huge demonstrations that threatened to cause immense disruption. Even though the majority of Thailand's rural population, comprising the majority of the Thai people, supported Thaksin, they were unable to express their support, as geographical limitations prevented them from doing so. Therefore, we can see that democracy is not about 'people power', but instead it is about the power of the most vocal and outspoken of the people.

Conversely, democracy has often been termed as the tyranny of the majority and the interests of the minority groups are often neglected. This is because the voting system results in the will of the majority being imposed on the unwilling and often oppressed minority. For example, in France and many other European nations, African immigrants who are a minority are often discriminated against and are forced to work long hours with low wages and to live in appalling conditions. Therefore, democracy is only about power of the majority of the people, with many small groups within the democracy being ostracised.

In conclusion, there are many problems with democracy being about 'people power'. Democracy often serves the interests of the politicians in power and only allows the largest and loudest to be heard. However, in theory, democracy is supposed to be about people power. It is only in reality that the negative aspects of human nature results in the abuse of the democratic system. Even then, on balance, democracy allows the people to express their opinions. As Lee Kuan Yew said, "Politics is about your life, your future, and your children's lives". Therefore, when the motivation is strong enough, the people will always seek to protect their interests and more often than not, democracy allows them to do so.

Comments:

Knowledgeable discussion with balanced arguments.

Essay 16

Title: Democracy is essentially about 'people power'. Discuss.

Name: Chua Wei Yuan Class: 2S03M

There exist several political doctrines in the world: communism, democracy, totalitarianism, fascism, monarchy, just to name a few. Democracy is perhaps the most prevalent form today, and non-democratic governments are all experiencing a pressure to move in that direction. The word 'democracy' has its origins in the Greek language, from the root words '*demos*' and '*cratos*', which mean power and people. Indeed, democracy is about power to the people. It seems extremely tempting to suggest that democracy is essentially a form of government that is "of the people, for the people, and by the people", truly living up to its reputation of 'people power', as some notable leaders have said. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that while the institution of democracy is founded on the principle of according some power to the people, it is fallacious and simplistic to say that democracy is simply about people power. The several examples that I shall examine will show that perhaps a better way of putting things is that democracy is essentially about exercising good governance and bringing development, progress and prosperity for the country via means of according power to the people.

Indeed, a democracy must incorporate the element of people power in it or else it would not qualify as a democracy. In this essay, the idea 'people power' shall refer to the power accorded to ordinary citizens of a state. The notion of people power is immediately seen in the fact that these governments are elected. In democracy, common people do have power, and in this case they are given the power to vote, and have a say in whom they want to lead the country. This does go to show that democracy is about 'power to the people', and is in stark contrast to other political doctrines like communism and monarchy, in which rulers are pre-decided by heredity or otherwise. Also, the idea of people power suggests that people are a driving force in the decisions and progress of a nation, and they have a power to influence decisions, or even make decisions themselves. A good example of this would be Switzerland, whose citizens can initiate a change or a referendum in the way their country is run, as long as they can gather fifty thousand signatures in favour of that particular notion. All this goes to show that democracy is essentially about people power. But is it?

The idea of people power entails that people do have a power to speak up or express themselves. People become more at liberty to voice their opinions, especially those regarding how their country is run. This has led to positive effects, like the development of a kaleidoscopic pop culture in America, whose freedom of expression has led to a diverse multitude of art forms which America is now so clearly distinguished by. Yet, if one were to recall, such freedom of expression has led to negative consequences as well. That racist comments started appearing in weblogs (affectionately known by the younger generation as 'blogs') of two Singaporean men and anti-Muslim cartoons appeared in a Danish newspaper was a result of abusing the freedom of expression. As expected, the cartoons in the Danish newspaper were greeted by a furore across the global Muslim community and the two young executives behind the racist comments on their blogs were duly punished by the law for sedition.

True enough, the basic idea of people power exists in democracy, but a couple of questions we must all ask ourselves are: How far is people power relevant in our society? Do people really have the kind of power that democracy envisions them to have?

Lord Acton once said that "power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." While democracy does give power to the people, it must nevertheless maintain a healthy balance of power between the people and the State, so as to achieve the most optimistic and progressive equilibrium.

Perhaps few have noticed the fact that democracy only functions well as 'people power' if the people are well-equipped with the knowledge and ability to make rational, informed and wise decisions, and such a situation is rare. If selfishness or ignorance on the part of the people were to cause a judgmental error and an erroneous decision, it becomes difficult to determine who is at fault, and how we can distribute the blame equitably between the ignorance of the people and the indifference of a State for a wrong choice; This is a fundamental reason why democracy is not entirely about 'people power'. To some extent it is about government power. The government of a democracy has a role to educate and inform the public about the quality of their choices, and to provide advice or rectify problems

that the country faces.

Consider the cases of India and Indonesia as compared to China. Both Indonesia and India have weaker economies and a poorer government. India practises too much democracy and hence it hinders the decision-making process whereas Indonesia faces problems of corrupt officials and in the end, both countries' economy and status have experienced a severe blow. On the contrary, China has a more Communist government. Indeed, little power is given to the people in terms of decision making but because of that, the country experiences less dissent and hence better and faster progress economically. Also, to further prove this point that 'government power' is essential, and to bring this essay closer to home, one can review the cases of the Singapore economic crises. The government opted for a pay cut in the working sector to allow the economy to recover. This was met with much objection from the people. Immediately, one would imagine that if the government were to allow a vote on this issue, most people would reject the idea of a pay cut and consequently the economy would suffer and not recover. The government took no heed of the people's objections but carried the pay cut, and in a few years, the economy recovered. This incident clearly shows that government power is a necessity when people are overly selfish or unwilling to sacrifice for a long-term cause, and the government must exercise its power responsibly so as to ensure that only the best decisions are made.

Moreover, democracy, as is the case with any form of governance, is also about promoting the principles of good governance, namely pragmatism, being forward-looking, meritocracy, fairness and transparency. Democracy, with its concept of 'people power', is well-equipped and even at an advantage to exercise these values. When the people are accorded power, it follows that the policies of fairness, transparency and meritocracy are upheld. People are closer and more in touch with national issues and as democracy entails the idea of fairness and meritocracy in the fact that it need not ensure equal conditions, but rather ensure equal opportunities for people. This can be seen in America where President Bush launched the "No Child Left Behind" campaign to ensure that all children get equal access to education and opportunities to attempt for whatever they may choose to become. This is also a distinguishing mark of democracy as other political models are more poorly equipped for such principles. Communism and totalitarianism, for example, denote a rift between leaders and their people, and it is harder to practise pragmatism, fairness and transparency under such systems.

Lastly, I must reiterate that democracy is not, in its entirety, about people power. Though it gives some the idea of 'people power', such power is highly subject to conditions, and in some cases, even subject to the whims of the leaders. Examples of this would be the failure of China's "Hundred Flowers Campaign", which meant to encourage voicing of opinions and increased freedom of speech, but was terminated after one year due to the massive amounts of dissent the people showed. Also, the failure of the USSR's Glasnost and Perestroika, a twin policy that was spawned in the 1980s, to encourage freedom of speech regarding the way a nation was run, showed that people power was not necessarily effective or democratic. Such people power must be tempered with regulations or restrictions, lest it gets abused.

I staunchly believe that whatever political model a country might adopt, as long as it runs its country well, it is a good model. One must examine the purpose of a political model in the first place. A political model is a method by which a country is governed, and the aims of political models are generally to give a country good, responsible, effective governance, and to bring about the developmental aims of the nation, and different political models exist to suit the needs of various countries, whatever works best. For example, the communist model exists to govern people who may otherwise show dissent to the extent it disrupts the flow of events in the country, or that the people are simply ignorant and incapable of making informed, rational decisions, while the democratic model functions as a means of respect to the people by giving them the option of choice, when the time calls for it.

Admittedly, a democratic government is distinguished from other political systems by the fact that it constitutes 'people power'. However, as shown in this essay, democracy is a balance between people and the government to make the best out of a country's situation, hence in conclusion, I think it is fitting to say that democracy, like any political model, has its essence in providing good governance to the people, solving problems and promoting progress and development, and that 'people power' is a means to carry this out.

Comments:

A fine piece.

Essay 17

Title: 'The moral man is invariably put at a disadvantage; it is always better to be amoral.' Discuss.

Name: Wee Shu-min

Class: 2A01A

Everyone has experienced it – the tug of irritation and disgust towards the prissy teacher's pet, the stoic prefect who records your name for whispering during a school talk, or the straight-laced discipline master droning on about what should and should not be done. The truth is, the heyday of Malvolio-esque Puritanism is long over, and the strict adherence to that austere brand of morality is frowned upon in society today. People, increasingly, are making heroes out of villains, while the real "heroes" languish beneath the dismissive labels of "boring" and "uncool". Yet, it would appear hasty to embrace amorality and cast aside morality as disadvantageous.

Certainly, as the world becomes more centred around the hedonistic pleasures of material wealth, unbending moral codes are unpopular. While it may be righteous to report a friend's misdemeanours to the authorities, it is likely that the tattle-tale may be lambasted for snitching. While it may also be prudent to be frugal and task-oriented, often this behaviour invites sniggers of "killjoy" and "loser". A survey of Literature undergraduates in the United States showed that 72% preferred the character Iago, the embodiment of motiveless evil, over Othello, the noble general. Protagonists in books and films are increasingly shaped not just by the forces of all that is good and kind but shades of immorality as well, with the philandering ways of James Bond and the willingness to sacrifice human life of V from "V for Vendetta". There seems to be a popular shift from stiff upper lip morality to a more flexible, laissez-faire attitude bordering on amorality, which would make it seem disadvantageous for the moral man.

History, too, shows us that the moral man does not always have the last laugh, and often it is the wicked that triumph. Joan of Arc, canonised posthumously for her goodness and bravery, failed to escape her fate at the stake. Sir Francis Drake, on the other hand, cavalier, thieving, violent and amoral in the extreme, yet knighted and revered as a hero in English history. The other conventional image of the moral man as the quiet, humble worker, pale but unwavering in the face of oppression, versus that of the opulent, bejewelled, amoral fat cat seems to have been reinforced time and time again. No surprise though – one would expect most moral men to lack the cunning and ruthlessness to toss aside competition, to worm through layers of corrupt bureaucracy to reach affluence, or to deal with oppressors in the same way they are treated. For Christ himself said, did he not, "They know not what they do." In a dog-eat-dog world, where not everyone is as moral as yourself, perhaps the moral man is put at a disadvantage, and perhaps it is better, more pragmatic to follow a kind of Machiavellian amorality.

However, all generalisations are false – it could not possibly be fair or incontrovertible to claim that morality is "invariably" disadvantageous or that amorality is "always" better. First of all we cannot discount the spiritual satisfaction that many people derive from the knowledge that they have done the right thing; not everyone has the stomach for hard-hearted amorality, so it cannot be, by default, always the better option. What is "better", and by which yardsticks is it measured? Better financially, possibly. Better socially, perhaps. But few would purport that amorality trumps morality from a spiritual perspective. Spirituality aside, there are pragmatic benefits of morality. An honest and eager man is more likely to be hired by a firm than a man who gives the impression of duplicity and arrogance, though he may technically be more qualified. An entirely amoral man will probably find it difficult to keep his connections and friends for long, if he has backstabbed half of them and is regarded with wariness by the other half. A moral man may have a better time of eventually winning the respect and loyalty of friends and clients.

The other side of the same coin is that there are clear cases where it is extremely disadvantageous to be absolutely amoral. The entire judiciary system is testimony to this. Being an unscrupulous drug-pusher may give you a slim shot of rising through the ranks to become a drug lord, where the profits lie, but there is a much higher probability of being gunned down in a gang fight, disowned by your family, or left for the police to capture while the bigger fish make their escape, whereupon you may be executed or incarcerated for life, depending on where you are caught. It would take a rather twisted mind to perceive this series of unfortunate events as good. Ultimately, societies have entrenched values and a general morality, which may be more flexible than before, but there are limits to how acceptably amoral one can be without being rejected by the herd.

Yet morality is not an absolute; the very definition of morality is a code of values or ethics embraced by a particular

society or group of individuals. From utilitarianism to virtue-ethicism, morality is fluid. One form of morality may be unacceptable or disadvantageous in a certain culture, but it may be a strict code by which another people lead their lives. The concepts of "disadvantage" and "better" are also in themselves subjective, dependent on the context in which the judgment is made. While it is inappropriate to make an overt generalisation, it is largely safe to say that in the society in which you function or among the group to which you belong, it is better to abide by morality rather than to indulge in flagrant amorality, lest we displease our neighbours and face social isolation.

Comments:

As David Lodge would have said, "Nice work!" An entertaining and engaging read!

- 1) austere
- 2) languish
- 3) hedonistic
- 4) laissez-faire
- 5) canonised
- 6) posthumously
- 7) opulent
- 8) bejewelled
- 9) Machiavellian
- 10) incontrovertible
- 11) incarcerated
- 12) utilitarianism
- 13) flagrant

Essay 18

Title: 'The moral man is invariably put at a disadvantage; it is always better to be amoral.' Discuss.

Name: Victor Siek

Class: 2A13A

Oscar Wilde was of the opinion that "Morality, like art, means drawing a line some place". Men who live by a moral code necessarily face these 'lines' in the everyday business of living: these lines represent boundaries and the restraining force that morals inevitably entail. Principles such as fairness, honesty, integrity, an aversion to cheating and an obsession with the 'fair and square', all definitive traits of the moral man, represent the limits of his modus vivendi. The amoral man, literally meaning 'without morals', does not face the same constraints: one must easily see that for the amoral man, only the goal exists, and all paths toward it are open – he faces no limitation by guilt as conscience, and has no moral obligations to play by the rules.

The disadvantage to the moral man, then, seems obvious and extremely considerable. The moral man is restrained not only by his own ability, but also his moral credo whereas the amoral man is limited by the stretch of his imagination. For example, while the amoral man might advance his career by being the cooperative party to some dishonest practice by a superior or by pretence of admiration, or by taking credit for other people's work, the moral man must rely on the sweat of his brow and the hope that he will be utilised. Morality then must seem to be a weight that prevents advancements, a definite disadvantage if it encumbers some but not others.

Additionally, the amoral man never has to think about right and wrong; the situations where the course of action is morally ambiguous and moral man must agonise and exercise great care in order not to compromise his ideals, the amoral man sees his quarry and swoops down on it. This is demonstrably a disadvantage where time is of the essence.

Furthermore, morality might deal a double blow as it not only dictates what cannot be done but what must be done as well. Morals are not merely passive, but also active restraints. The moral man has obligations to his society and must fill the needs of others when he sees it as necessary. This means that while the amoral man can concentrate his energies entirely on the goal or the money and the task at hand, the moral man donates to the poor and cannot ignore the needy and lonely elderly. Moral obligation then becomes an encumbrance to the single-minded drive that the amoral can enjoy.

At the most basic level, it seems that moral man is inherently disadvantaged because he plays according to rules that the amoral man feels no need to subscribe to. However, to suggest that it is 'always' better to be amoral is a fallacy that has been proven to be false, and this is so for both personal and social reasons.

On the personal level, man might take comfort in having a credo and knowing what he can and cannot do. Further than the "Dr Spock", feel-good theology this suggests, it represents a deeper, far more significant meaning. Morals exist as a definitive trait for mankind. For example, if integrity is part of the credo we subscribe to then we are (at least partially) defined by the thought 'I am a person who values integrity.' Moreover, in this way, can count too a rooting and stabilising force in the identity of a person. Though it may seem insignificant in the short term as compared to a substantial bank balance, in the long-term a man might find his morals an anchor rather than a punishing weight, and a considerable advantage to his personal well-being.

Morals can also be seen as a basis for strength on the personal level. A man who wrestles with 'moral force' has that irreplaceable impetus to power through the way an amoral man does not. The amoral man has no driving force beyond his own gains; he is not motivated by the desire to do evil as the immoral are, or by good, like his moral counterpart. Moral man therefore has an additional and quite formidable motivation and impetus for action, an advantage that amoral man cannot share.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, to have morals is a definite advantage at the social level. It is often said that man is a social animal, and this is an incontestable truth; practically no man in the twenty-first century can claim independence from society in our shrinking world. The fact remains that in order to exist in harmony with society, one must do 'as the Romans do', when in Rome, and this lies at the heart of the practical need to live by a moral

code, for society itself exists by a moral code. Most societies today attempt to enforce some sort of morality though laws. Examples of laws that were motivated by moral order, whether correct or incorrect, include the anti-divorce laws that still exist in some Muslim states today and laws against homosexual acts. Furthermore, society frequently punishes the amoral, and amorality is seen as a disgrace in the eyes of propriety. On the positive side of things, society attempts to reward those who live by doing what is right. Mother Teresa not only received the Nobel Peace Prize for her considerable contribution but has been awarded immortality in the collective memory of society for being a moral person who gave her all to other people

Therein lies the advantage moral men have in society. Amorality is a selfish code where the will of the self must dominate in a decidedly Machiavellian manner. It is clear that the benefits of morality must outweigh those of amorality in a society, and that society rewards the moral and shuns the amoral. Morality, though defining the self, acting as a source of strength and the basis for social behaviour, must bring more advantages than the ill-earned, short-term gains of amorality's deceptive attractiveness and its elegant simplicity.

Comments:

Victor, overall, you have done a good job with this essay. The discussion on society's shunning of the amoral requires more explanation, I think. The point is, if society does reward the moral, as you say, then is it not in the interest of the amoral man to appear moral? Wherefore will he be shunned then? The immoral one certainly is shunned, but you will need to account for the amoral better. Still, a nice read overall with sensible points.

- 1) aversion
- 2) encumbers
- 3) At the most basic level,
- 4) is a fallacy that has been proven to be false,
- 5) credo
- 6) Examples of
- 7) On the positive side of things
- 8) Awarded immortality in the collective memory of society
- 9) Therein lies the advantage
- 10) Deceptive attractiveness and its elegant simplicity
- 11) It is often said that man is a social animal,
And this is an incontestable truth,
practically no man in the 21st century can claim
independence from society in our shrinking world

Essay 19

Title: 'Life is harder, not easier.' How far is this true?

Name: Han Huiqing

Class: 2S06K

In the Age of Technology we live in today, the juggernaut of globalisation has generated a plenitude of wealth and raised standards of living phenomenally. Life, for many, especially in the developed nations, is now minus the toil and the aches one used to experience. There are three meals on the table, and many even have sufficient excesses to put into their savings, or spend it on the latest flashiest car to reward themselves. Life can only be better; life can only be easier, without chores and manual labour. Yet mankind has found itself having to struggle with increasingly complex problems – social, political and economic disruptions that come as inseparable spectral comparisons of progression. Can we then still safely say that life for the common man is easier today than it was yesterday?

It is easy to understand why people may conclude that life is easier today. First, the advancement of technology has revolutionised communication. The shift of the era of the printed book to the television and Internet was prophesied by Marshall McLuhan in his book, "Understanding Media", published in 1964, which spoke with great visionary force. Clearly, the usual "paper, envelope, stamp" routine is no longer viable today. The computer, amongst its many progeny, launched the email, which is now the most efficient and common mode of transmitting documents across countries. Telecommunications too, have improved phenomenally. Today, it is possible for a business man to clinch important deals over the handphone; or check his email account using his Blackberry PDA. This has without doubt simplified the jobs of many, as information can now be transmitted with merely a click of the mouse or the dial of a keypad.

Secondly, there is the mechanisation of labour. In factories, machines are now used to carry out menial, repetitive work. They are able to do so with great accuracy and productivity. No longer is there a need for Man to tire himself out with doing such tasks himself – all he has to do is to switch on the button of the machine. In homes, machines have also made life easier. With equipment like the electronic cake mixer, microwave ovens, food can be prepared in much less time and effort than previously imagined. At the forefront of such a technological revolution is the development of robots, which holds the potential of taking over all the household chores. Osim's iScoop robot for instance, is able to clean surfaces to a sparkle, all with the click of a button being programmed even to navigate difficult corners on its own. Such is the wonder of technology. It has made human life less tedious and has removed the need for humans to tire themselves out.

Surely then, you may say, life is definitely easier today. However, William Bertrand once said, "We love Machines because they are beautiful, we treasure Machines because they are of great value; yet we hate Machines because they are hideous, we loathe Machines because they reduce us to no more than slavery." Machines, in replacing manual labour have led to escalating unemployment, especially in developing countries where the workers lack specialised skills and can only engage in manual labour to earn their keep. To such individuals, life is hardly better – it is worse. Furthermore, our overdependence on such devices has made us even more vulnerable – we are reduced to mere slaves of technology. One virus can destroy all the files in a database and vital information can be lost to a hacker. All these threaten to take away all that one has painfully built from scratch. Globalisation, on one hand, has led to greater inter-connectedness and hence efficiency, but has inevitably led to a widening divide between the rich and the poor and even the most capable now face immense pressure at work to perform – knowing that if they are proved unworthy, someone out there is waiting to take their place. No one is indispensable. Gone are the days where the longer one has stayed in the company, the greater the job security.

Perhaps the one key question we should ask ourselves today is: are we happy? When one is happy, life becomes easier. Research findings have shown that as the world gets richer, the number of people seeking solace in religion rises. Indeed, the anxiety that many experience today comes from innumerable sources. This has invariably made life less pleasurable, and more difficult to navigate.

War and conflict are the looming black clouds at the back of people's minds. While technology has helped us, it has also greatly increased the destructive potential of warfare. The world is poised on the blade of a knife today. With the terrorist bombings of September 11 still fresh in our minds, we are forced to keep a state of heightened vigilance and fear for the safety of our loved ones. North Korea's unwillingness to conclude six-party talks and stop its nuclear

research has contributed to rising fears that a nuclear showdown is imminent. Furthermore, the United Nations as a peacekeeping organisation is losing its credibility due to its inability to stop the United States of America from invading Iraq. How can the UN be trusted, or handed the mandate of ensuring world peace, if it cannot even stand up to the might of one superpower? What will we do if conflict arises and the UN is unable to intervene? Such worries permeate the minds of millions across the globe; it is little surprise then that so many are seeking protection and solace from a higher power, over things they feel they can no longer control.

As technology advances, there also arises the issue of our ethics being unable to keep up with the pace of development. Cloning, for example, has begun a furious debate over whether it is morally right to clone a human being. The greatest worry is whether we are able to utilise technology morally, and in a way that our institutions can cope with. In the past, developments like the air-conditioning system and vacuum cleaners were all met with majority approval. As science progresses, we find ourselves facing increasingly complex issues concerning ethics. We have to make decisions that may fill us with guilt for the rest of our lives. Life is definitely not simpler and easier to navigate.

Moreover, even our youths are faced with immense stress nowadays. In schools, the academic competition has never been greater. In Hong Kong, 3 out of 5 teens surveyed have had suicidal thoughts, according to a survey conducted by TIME in January 2005. In Japan, the trendiest neighbourhoods are filled with disoriented and disaffected teens, their ennui relieved by designer drugs. One can only wonder how we have placed our future in such dire circumstances. Students have parental pressure and peer pressure as main sources of stress. Parents have impossibly high expectations of their children; a case in point would be the escalating number of primary school students forced to go for tuition class, dancing and piano lessons – all this in the hope of turning their children into “super kids”. Perhaps more pertinent to teenagers would be the pressure to conform and appear hip to his peers. Aggressive marketing and the media have contributed to the pressure teenagers face to look good and have increased their desire for material goods. As a result, youth today face a large amount of pressure from all areas. Those who cannot tolerate it any longer simply give up and attempt to take their own lives. It hence deserves no argument that life is indeed more difficult today than it was for the generation before us.

Detractors may argue that this mainly affects people in developed nations and not those in developing nations. To some extent, this is true because advancements in technology and the flow of investments to poorer nations have benefited the people and saved many from the brink of starvation. To them, life is perhaps easier in that they can now have enough to fill their stomachs. However, this is hardly the case today. A UN development report in 2002 showed that the global income accruing to the poorest of the world has decreased from 2.3% to 1.4%. This suggests, contrary to what many believe, that there is a widening gap between the rich and the poor. Hence, they have not really benefited from the advancements we see today. Furthermore, the majority in the world today is able to maintain a decent standard of living. Threats of disruption to world peace and health threats like the Avian Flu and SARs affect everyone. Africans too, have to battle with escalating rates of those contracting AIDS. In the light of this, life is, without doubt, harder today.

Ultimately, Edwin Brock's satirical poem “Five ways to kill a Man” provides some valuable insight. In it, he describes fair clinical, warlike and historical methods which have been used to dispatch millions through the course of history. Yet all are cumbersome compared to this:

Simpler, direct and much neater to see
That he is placed in the middle of the twentieth century
And leave him there.

Indeed, it is true that life is more difficult, with the mounting tension, anxiety and worries, than it has ever been.

Comments:

Excellent piece. Appears that some points prepared for certain topics have come in handy, I'm guessing; cleverly interwoven. Ideas with suitable language, although appearing bombastic initially.

Essay **20** Title: Is it true that the more we have, the less happy we are?
Name: Janaki d/o Shanmugam Class: 2S03H

"The more we have, the less happy we are." This is often said by many, but one must realise the specific contexts it is used in. More often than not, it pertains to material wealth and possessions and seems to link one's happiness to the amount of property one owns. It is built upon a basic, albeit not necessarily true, assumption that man is not easily satisfied. As he attains more wealth, he is consumed by greed and yearns for even more, resulting in a state of misery rather than happiness. Although this applies to such cases, there are exceptions whereby the more we have, the happier we are.

If one were to argue in favour of the statement, one realises the limitations and boundaries within which it remains true. As mentioned earlier, the accumulation of material wealth is the most obvious factor. One can venture to say that it all stems from the unhealthy competition among people for status and recognition in society. This has led to the rise of exclusive clubs for the upper classes in society, offering them various privileges. Securing a membership at such clubs is even considered of utmost importance to some, more so than the troubling issues of terrorism and global pandemics in the international arena. Comparable to the arms race between nations in times of war, such people race to accumulate as much wealth as they can. However, this 'wealth-race' drains them of their happiness.

Recalling old wives' tales and children's stories, characters often hoard their wealth, becoming miserly as well as miserable. With increasing wealth comes increasing responsibility to safeguard it. As such, many resort to high-tech security gadgets and surveillance technology, making them prisoners of their own wealth and greed.

Furthermore, their actions are spurred on by the constant cold calculation of critics and analysts, pitting the wealthy classes against one another. Examples include the publication of the World's Richest People or Top 100 Billionaires by Forbes magazine and the like. In an attempt to gain recognition and fame, even those content with what they have are lured to try and enter the upper class.

In extreme cases, people whose names have already entered such lists, try to outdo their "competitors" by business feuds which may even affect the economies of nations. There have been many cases and reports in the news of people who brutally murder either their partners or associates in order to take control of their shares and assets in a company for example. All these despicable actions only serve to heighten one's misery. Hence, such real-life examples seem to support the argument that the more we have, the less happy we are.

However, one must not be led into thinking that material wealth is the only wealth that is being mentioned here. Offering a twist to the argument, the common saying "The more we give, the more we have" is worth thinking about. Emotional wealth is one of the factors that may be proposed to counter the argument.

Emotional wealth can be defined as the rich social interaction one has with others, the many relationships one has and more importantly the love and concern gained from this interaction. Man is a social animal after all. With the exception of a few who prefer to be alone by choice, society thrives on the basis of relationships; society being an interlinked network of numerous groups of individuals. One can only gain, and as a result, increase one's happiness.

Considering a family, the care and concern each member shows for the others is incomparable in terms of any other wealth. Relationships between a parent and a child; siblings; lovers; husband and wife; even colleagues; subordinates – they all bond the parties involved with love or care. It is this love which characterises emotional wealth.

Of course, some may argue that not all relationships are harmonious at all times. Some may yet offer that there can be no hatred without love. Quarrels are frequent in households and workplaces. Marriages may fall apart and end in divorce. Employees unhappy with work relations may resign their positions in search of a better alternative. Such cases do occur and their existence is much documented. Yet, in the perspective of humanity and the need for a companion, one still yearns to believe that many of these problems can be resolved. If not, why the need for counselling sessions involving marital problems? Why do workers' unions exist?

It becomes quite clear that the underlying concern for one another enriches the interaction one has with others. Reconciliation and the desire to lead peaceful lives in the face of problems and strains in relationships prove this. Receiving more love does seem to contribute to leading a happier life.

Many studies have been conducted on sample groups of diverse populations on the extent to which one is happy and satisfied with one's life. In the majority of these case studies, it has been shown that loving, peaceful relationships seem to rank in the top three factors consistently. Although more proof will be needed before a conclusion can be reached decisively, the unquantifiable amount of love and care received does seem to matter. Analyses of troubled teenagers from broken homes who end up with charges of assault, drug abuse and the like often cite the lack of love and attention from their parents or other members of the family as the reason for their undesirable behaviour and actions. These invariably result in misery and hardship for both the 'victims' and others concerned.

At yet another level, children who are more exposed to their surroundings at a young age seem to become more world-wise when they grow up and interact with their peers and superiors alike more freely. This allows them vast opportunities to upgrade themselves and shine in areas where they do best, and also in widening their social circles. The increased exposure to the outside world prevents the development of the undesirable proverbial frog in the well and sets the path to a brighter future. With time, success is assured and happiness too indeed.

As with all cases, there are exceptions. With respect to material wealth, there may exist some who are easily content with what they already possess and shun the "wealth-race". There may be people who have a phobia of interacting with others, have problems showing their affection or feel uncomfortable receiving it in turn. In this respect, it may perhaps be possible to say that their level of happiness would not be affected either. They can also become happier or sink deeper into misery. However, in order to deal with an argument, the assumptions made at the beginning must stay and hence, the argument flows alongside these set boundaries.

"The more we have" depends on the object as well as the nature of the person in question. It may cause increased, decreased or even no change in one's perception of one's happiness pertaining to either one's life or mere superficial targets along the way. In any case, one is forced to accept that it cannot be determined by a fixed template or guideline and is dependent very much on the circumstances involved. Hedonists and pessimists may both have their own way eventually.

Comments:

Fluid, lucid and mature articulation.

Essay 21

Title: Do you agree that as technology advances, the arts get more enriched and more interesting?

Name: Shirin Nadira

Class: 2A01A

The impact of technological advancement has spared very few aspects of modern life, and the arts are no exception. Taking the arts broadly to be the three symbiotic areas of literature, visual art, and music, it is evident that technological wonders like the printing press, the computer and its attendant digital graphic software, and musical equipment such as synthesisers, have evolved new forms in these arts which may arguably be deemed as enriching as a whole, by allowing the arts to expand and stay relevant.

Particularly, increasingly sophisticated multimedia technology has democratised the arts by reducing the need for formal education in visual art, for example. The popularity of programmes such as Adobe Photoshop lies in the user-friendliness of such software, which allows any bored student with some free time to create graphics of decent quality to be turned into website layouts, or personal user pictures, 'avatars', for use on online forums. Whilst such programmes, and their more advanced counterparts are also used by professional graphic artists or art students in their own work, the availability of digital imaging software to the masses has given rise to an incredibly varied range of artistic output, which may be admired on such websites such as DeviantArt.com, where users may display their frequently amateurish, but at times nevertheless interesting, pieces of digital art. In this sense, technology has enriched the arts by making it populist where it used to be a prerogative of an elite. In fact, there are now multiple communities within any particular art – for example, Singapore's National Arts Council gives out grants every year to promising young artists to further their education in their chosen art form or to assist them in organising a display of their works. These painters, actors, writers and musicians often achieve some laudable successes, but there exists too a subculture in most arts, consisting of guerrilla artists who prefer a level of anonymity and do not study their art formally, choosing instead to hone it or develop it through their own experiences, and their perceptions of street zeitgeist.

The majority of these substrata of artists is divorced from the technicalities of classical art form. Digital artists generating multimedia blueprints of their intended work, experimental musicians using software which transcribes their playing into musical notations, reflect technology's ability to enable artists, especially restless ones, to skip the slog of technical acquisition and go straight to creative expression. This has produced a wider range of art which is interesting in content but lacking in finesse, or on the other hand, it encourages crass self-indulgence, devoid of any artistic merit. The debate then might boil down to one's personal preferences regarding the arts. Should an artist always be schooled in the basic techniques and movements of the art of painting? Is this knowledge a fundamental requirement or merely the tools to realise a work, tools which have been replaced with technological advances by helpful digital imaging software?

Another perspective from which to study the influence of technological advancement on the arts is to look at it not in terms of form, but content. We already know that computer technology has enabled the diversification of art forms, but in terms of actually permeating the concerns of artists, technology has also played a key role. This is exemplified in the proliferation of art dealing with the issue of scientific/technological progress and whether this bodes well or ill for the future of mankind. Thus we have 'Star Wars', 'Star Trek', 'Blade Runner', and 'I, Robot', films which were hugely profitable at the box office and demonstrate that the theme of technology and its impact is an engaging one for the bulk of today's audiences.

A final nod to the benefits of technological advancement on the arts is perhaps the way technology has helped paralysed or otherwise physically disenfranchised artists who regain the ability to express themselves creatively. There have been artists who have survived road accidents, for example, who lose certain motor functions in their arms or hands and are unable to produce art in traditional forms of sculpture or painting. The existence of sensitive computer mice or graphic pens which work in tandem with digital imaging programmes recover these artists' abilities (to some extent) or give them the opportunity to evolve unique techniques to compensate the skills they lost.

However, the general impression of technology's impact, examined from some distance for objectivity, is not a particularly heartening one. Certainly, technology has undeniably democratised the arts, as many youngsters do

produce graphics on the Internet which are aesthetically decent, but to dub this an 'enrichment' of art would be spurious, considering that most of these are of homogenous levels of skill and are not conceived of with any higher purpose than the immediate adornment of a personal website or weblog.

Also, as multimedia is so easily available for anyone to pick up and employ at will, it becomes difficult to define the boundary between an innate artistic ability making use of modern tools, and dogged resourcefulness in working software posing as art. Originality tends to be compromised as everyone using similar software will have similar tools, and without education in the arts, they hardly ever use the various tools in innovative ways. That would be a stretch, as most users simply learn the tool's function from the help manual and use it as such. The paintbrush or oil pastel is then superior to the technological wonder of a graphic software as the former does not come with prescribed tools of as specific a nature as the latter, thus allowing for – nay, demanding – both talent and thought.

I am furthermore of the opinion that technology has not made art more interesting, because it cannot. The ability of a piece of music, or a novel, or an art installation to strike our fancy lies more squarely in its composition and the message(s) relayed, than simply its form. Although technology may produce new forms of art or music, the novelty of which may temporarily garner great interest, this type would be unsustainable without substance. When synthesisers were first produced, the 'electronica' genre of music emerged, but it is often derided for its synthetic, unemotional quality. Likewise, few, if any, digital pieces of artwork have earned their artists accolades of the sort that continue to be heaped upon such long-deceased greats as Michelangelo, Monet or Picasso.

Technology furthermore submits the arts to crude commercialism at the hands of advertisers, who are able to make mass reproductions of acknowledged masterpieces, which arguably reduces the value of a piece to the lowest common denominator as people purchase such reproductions to hang in their rooms purely for aesthetic pleasure, and disregard the value of the arts as a means for expressing a mood or idea.

In conclusion, technology has been less enriching for the arts than it has been detrimental. It mainly serves to reduce the need for the so-called dry basics and accumulation of technique through formal art education. However, the artists who do benefit from such technology would in all likelihood have succeeded even without it, provided they had the innate gift of artistic, musical, or literary ability anyway. Those who do not merely resort gratefully to technology as a way out of skill, and contribute to the great fountain of art a deluge of mediocrity that can hardly be said to be either enriching or interesting. In order for technology to play a more positive role in broadening and elevating the arts, it is artists themselves who must subdue technology and mould it to the form they desire their ideas to take, and not revel purely in technology as the answer to the question of artistic innovation.

Comments:

Brilliant response! Cogent arguments with a conscious effort to distinguish between the "enriching" and "interesting" aspects of the question.

Essay 22

Title: Do you agree that as technology advances, the arts get more enriched and more interesting?

Name: Liew Shang Zhao

Class: 2A13A

As early as 1932, art critic Walter Benjamin voiced concerns that technological advancement encroached upon the artistic endeavour. Ever the prophet of doom, Walter Benjamin argued that what gave art its "mystical aura", its most sacred and revered quality, was its singularity. Art moved people so because it was unique, "unreproducible". It was feared that with the Industrial Revolution came the technology of mass reproduction, and with mass reproduction of artworks came the desecration of art. And yet the 20th century bourgeoned with artistic inspiration and achievement; modernist and futurist experimentation even incorporated technological advancement in the quest to test the boundaries of art. Clearly, worries that technology obviates the arts are unfounded, and technological advancements often strengthen and enrich the arts.

Let me first clarify our conception of art and technology: technological advancements relevant to the arts include the development of the printing press, the processes of mass reproduction inherited from the Industrial Revolution, and the 'communications revolution' which gave us the Internet. Art, by contrast, is a far more slippery concept, and any definition of art immediately encounters exceptions to the rule. Perhaps, as Cubist and conceptual artist Marcel Duchamp remarked, "anything the artist spits is art." For the purpose of this essay, 'the arts' refer to the whole of the creative endeavour, ranging from the visual arts, literature to music.

Let us begin by conceding that technology and art are not always complementary, and that the two are antagonistic to a degree. To be sure, the mass reproduction of Edvard Munch's "The Scream" has desensitised modern audiences to much of the raw, unbridled power of the original. To see the angry reds and oranges glaring at you every day as you take the train to work may consign Munch's masterpiece to the blur of the mundane and the routine. Furthermore, this desensitisation is harmful insofar as it encourages careless and cursory treatment of artworks in general – few of us today can claim to have looked upon a work of art and immersed ourselves completely in a wholly beautiful and transcendental experience. With the rise of the Internet, and the proliferation of file-sharing services such as Kazaa, Limewire, and Torrentsearcher, another threat to the artistic endeavour has arisen: more avenues are open for copyright breach, and this removes the incentive for artists to continue the creative effort. If sales revenue from the sale of CDs plummet because the public opts for the cheaper alternative of free downloads, then the artist is deprived of both the will and the resources to make a new album. Malaysian artists, for example, frequently allege file-sharing and rampant piracy as reasons why the domestic music industry cannot take off. In these cases, technology and art are opposing forces.

But these concerns can be moderated: postmodernist Richard Appiguanesi has refuted Walter Benjamin's thesis that mass reproduction threatens the arts. According to the writer, the appearance of Vincent Van Gogh's 'Sunflowers' on bank notes, and in murals in subway stations and art galleries, has in fact heightened the public's appetite for art. Perhaps this is why the original is worth tens of thousands of dollars. In response to growing concerns of copyright breach, a matrix of intellectual property law has arisen to preserve artists' incentive to create, in tandem with the recording industry of America's crackdown of illegal file-sharing services. Technology can be reconciled with art.

Moreover, it is precisely technological advancement that has allowed for preservation of the classics – the works of the great masters. Take, for instance, the restoration and reconstruction of damaged prints from the Italian Renaissance, currently exhibited in America's National Gallery of Art. This would have been impossible without the precise tools and substances that technological advances have given us. In another example, the development and sale of colour fixatives have been a godsend for colour-pencil artists. In the absence of such fixatives, pencil pigment flakes off easily, diminishing the vibrancy of even the most meticulously coloured masterpieces within months. In these two instances, technology is crucial to the continued survival of many artworks.

In addition, technology is sometimes instrumental in the birth of new forms of art. Digital art would not have

been possible without the widespread availability of technological tools such as Adobe Photoshop. Technological advances also provide fertile ground for artistic inspiration: for example, the Bauhaus movement and the doctrine of new internationalism in twentieth-century architecture argued for a consideration of houses as functional “living machines”, and drew inspiration from the construction of multi-storey flats, carparks, and state buildings. In another example, Marcel Duchamp’s masterpiece – the urinal, which embodied a rejection of the aesthetic process – would have been impossible if technological advances had not produced that urinal in the first place. In these instances, technological advancement is the precondition for the emergence of these artistic movements. From a Marxist perspective, developments in the technological “base” led to the artistic “superstructure” growing ever richer and more interesting.

Finally, the communications revolution and the accessibility of ‘e-texts’ have benefited the literary tradition. It has allowed writers access to other writers’ works and ideas with a click of the mouse. It allows the meeting of millions of minds, and the literary movement is surely richer for such dense interaction. After all, if post-structuralist Julie Kristeva maintains that all literary texts are “tissues of past citation”, allowing authors access to other works is absolutely essential. To this end, technology fires up the artistic imagination.

In conclusion, technology has the potential to enhance and enrich art beyond measure, but care must yet be taken to insulate art from the ravages of unbridled technological advancement.

Comments:

Knowledgeable discussion, delivered at a good pace. Well done.

Essay **23**

Title: 'Science, unlike religion, promises more than it delivers.' To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Name: M Aditya

Class: 2S03C

The history of mankind and its progress have been marked by both spiritual and material progress. Two radically different philosophical worldviews have emerged as catalysts and products of such progress: the empirical method of science and the more spiritual one of religion. Many feel that the two are diametrically opposite at their deepest levels: science is an objective, empirical interpretation of the universe while religion seeks a moral, spiritual understanding of the world we live in. In the light of recent and not-so-recent developments, to say that science 'promises more than it delivers' – that essentially, faith in it has been disproportionate to its results – to a greater (or lesser) extent than religion, is inaccurate; it is a viewpoint with which I therefore disagree.

What is science? Simply put, it is a natural explanation of our world based on empirical, observable data from our environment. It assumes that the world is based on unchanging natural laws that are not affected by human concerns. The world as explained by science is one built on random events. A fundamental goal of science is to reach as deep an understanding as possible about what makes our universe tick.

Many followers of religion would see science as having failed because it is unable to explain some phenomena. Their scepticism is evident in their arguments against, for example, the Big Bang theory of the creation of the universe, and the theory of evolution. Many ask what happened before the Big Bang, and proceed to attack science for not knowing the answer. Such a viewpoint is inappropriate. Science does not claim to offer a full or complete understanding of the universe, but merely hopes to move closer to the truth. This it has certainly achieved. The annals of man are scattered with examples of quantifiable progress: Galileo and Copernicus' discovery that the Earth revolves around the sun, rather than the other way round as was previously thought; Alfred Wagner's theory of continental drift, for which we now have much evidence; Alexander Fleming's theory of germs, which was mercilessly ridiculed but was proven right and which spawned the growth of microbiology. Indeed, we have moved closer to the truth.

A second promise of science – the one that interests more people – is that of material progress, and better control of our surroundings. This is a natural sequel to the first promise: where the first is to help man better understand his environment, the second is to help him exploit it to solve his problems and increase the quality of his life. In this too, science has very obviously succeeded. It has been remarked that one of the best indications of the validity of any scientific theory is the amount of money it potentially allows one to make. Indeed, many modern developments today resulting from science have revolutionised not just the world economy but the very nature of the life of the average person. There is ample evidence to show how even small scientific developments and the resulting innovations have led to a better quality of life. The fairly recent birth of the Internet, for instance, significantly transformed the concept of mass communications, increasing the reach and speed of information – information that, in turn, solves more problems. Given such remarkable evidence, any passionate declaration that science cannot solve our problems should be taken with a pinch of salt. Of course, science cannot make everything right; there are problems and issues that science alone would struggle to handle. For example, the question of population pressure cannot be answered purely by better birth control or farming techniques but must also be addressed from ethical and social premises. However, the fact that some measurable progress has been made cannot be denied.

In such a situation, it is bad enough to accuse science of failing to live up to its 'promises', it is worse still to simultaneously applaud religion for its honesty and integrity. The truth is, religion offers or has offered many of the same benefits as science, but seems not to have fared half as well.

Religion, like science, offers an explanation for creation and existence. Theories of creation range from that of a primordial cosmic egg to the belief that everything about us is the manifestation of a consciousness. I do not claim to believe in any of these, or indeed not to believe in them. It is generally recognised that many such explanations are symbolic more than scientific (the 'cosmic egg', for instance, symbolises vitality and abundance). What I do assert is that there is no way to confirm any of these claims. Religion, unlike science, often offers explanations of the universe in which any unusual phenomenon can be labelled as a 'miracle' or 'paranormal occurrence'. Though it is possible that some of these may be explained in more mainstream ways in the future, others will linger as evidence that even

religion has its failings: surely not every eerie cloud or unnatural sound is the work of spirits or devils, so what are these things? Religion still struggles to find an answer.

One promise of most major religions is that of salvation. As no one has yet managed to return from the dead to tell us about the 'afterlife' (at least in recent times), this is fine – there may be an afterlife, and I cannot disprove it. However, the existence of so many different religions throws up exasperating questions. Which 'God' is real? Which afterlife is real? If two or more religions claim to be the only path to salvation from sin, would that not mean that the followers of each are doomed to hell, according to the claims of the others?

Religion also promises to develop society morally according to universal principles. It continues to fulfil this to some extent: many people worldwide cite a religious upbringing as the reason for their morality and sense of right and wrong; many acts of benevolence are performed in the name of religion. However, even this is overshadowed at times by the many moral dilemmas that religion itself creates. Religion has been used as a political tool to subjugate and discriminate, to kill and to maim. For example, the caste system in India, so influential and dominant for centuries, caused much unhappiness especially among those of the lower castes. Though the caste system can be argued to have produced socio-economic stability, it was nevertheless used as an excuse for the more privileged upper castes to practise inexcusable and unjust behaviour in their respective societies. Religion has also led to war and destruction, especially when two faiths are unable to coexist peacefully. Many examples of this have been chronicled – the Crusades in Europe; the invasion of the Persians in North India; the ongoing friction between India and Pakistan (which is regularly fuelled by politics). Moral development. Indeed.

Thus, both science and religion have made promises that they have either kept or failed to deliver. It is not fair to say that one has failed significantly more than the other, because both have their limitations. It is perhaps better to recognise both as systems that strive to reach their goals, overcoming setbacks along the way. There is a beauty in the nature of both in that while both will always promise a bit more than they can fulfil at present, they are able to promise more and more as time passes, with ever-greater confidence of living up to them.

Comments:

A well-considered piece.

The following essay won the second prize in an Essay Writing Competition organised by the Vegetarian Society (Singapore). It is re-printed here with the permission of VSS.

Essay **24**

Title: Out with the Meat, Turn over to the Leaf

Name: Hong Yanci

Class: 07S06M

Love us, not eat us: All lives are precious – A case for vegetarianism. This is my passionate plea for meat-lovers to stop eating meat. Instead of appealing to emotions, I intend to use sound logic to persuade even the most persistent meat-lovers.

First, I need to make a guilty confession. I used to indulge in all sorts of poultry, beef and even the occasional foie gras. Every time I go for a buffet, I would descend on the roast meat section with a vengeance. Like Saul, the Pharisee and persistent persecutor of Early Christians who was on his road to Damascus, a revelation dawned upon me. Unlike his celestial revelation, my revelation came in the form of a ghastly anti-meat consumption video – “Meet your Meat”¹. The final straw came when my doctor informed me that consuming too much red meat was a major cause of my asthma attacks. Subsequently, I embarked on an all-vegetarian diet, shunning all meat and animal products. My personal experiences have shown that even the most recalcitrant meat lover can realise the benefits of an all-vegetable diet.

My passionate but logical appeal will first debunk myths associated with vegetarianism. Next, I will present arguments as to why we should love animals not eat them, and the benefits of a vegetarian diet. Lastly, I will address arguments put up by die-hard meat lovers.

Many people have dismissed vegetarianism as a fad. I too was guilty of such ignorance. When the doctor suggested a transition to a vegetarian diet, I dismissed the notion completely. However, appropriately planned vegetarian diets are now recognised as being nutritionally adequate and providing health benefits in the prevention and treatment of chronic diseases. Vegetarianism is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras was vegetarian².

We all love our pets, be they cute Persian Cats or Cottontails. Hence, there would be howls of protest if I made dog meat soup out of them – itself a delicacy in the Guangxi province of China. Nonetheless, would we think twice about tucking into a rib eye steak? Consider this shocking fact – the average meat eater is responsible for the deaths of some 2,400 animals during his or her lifetime³. Furthermore, animals reared for food endure great suffering in their housing, transport, feeding and slaughter, something which is not evident in the neatly wrapped packages of meat at grocery counters. I used to console myself that my plate of kebabs died a happy chicken. Now, after being exposed to these cruel practices, I doubt so.

Brutality to animals has become routine in today's factory farm. Pigsties are a model of such cruelty. The pathetic animals see no sun in their limited lives, with no hay to lie on or mud to roll in. The sows live in tiny cages so narrow they cannot even turn around.

By adopting a vegetarian diet, we are saying “no” to these horrible and harsh farm practices. By encouraging others to follow suit, we are taking the fight to the perpetrators of such practices. Adopting a vegetarian diet is the first step in saving these farm animals.

Besides employing cruel practices, animal farming has devastating environmental consequences. Meat production has also been linked to the severe erosion of billions of acres of once-productive farmland and to the destruction of rainforests.

Furthermore, grain fed to cattle represents a huge waste of resources in a world still plagued by hunger and malnutrition. Studies have shown that reducing American meat production by just 10 percent would free enough grain to feed 60 million people⁴.

Growing evidence suggests that the human digestive system was not designed for meat consumption. This explains why there is such a high incidence of heart disease, hypertension, and colon and other cancers among meat lovers⁵. This constitutes a compelling health-based case for vegetarianism.

Vegetarianism is indeed the way to go. An all-vegetable diet gives us added cancer protection and reduces the risk of heart attack, along with a host of other health benefits. One study found that lifelong vegetarians had a 24 percent lower incidence of coronary heart disease compared to meat eaters.

With such overwhelming support for the "case for vegetarianism", it is surprising that some still contend that a diet of meat is much more satisfying. Many friends tell me what I am missing out when we sit down for a meal and they tuck into their favourite chicken rice. Some "unrepentant" meat lovers use the argument that since homo sapiens have arrived at the pecking order of Nature, it is natural that we consume the preceding members of the food chain. Hence, we can deservedly indulge our insatiable hunger for meat. I would like to put it to them that if our food supply happens to run out, will we resort to cannibalism? There is a wonderful analogy offered by H.G. Wells' Time Machine. He paints an ominous future of A.D. 802,701. Homo sapiens have branched out into two species, the Morlocks and the Eloi. The cannibalistic Morlocks live underground, tending machinery, supplying the soft and empty-headed Eloi with food and clothes. In fact, these Morlocks are raising the Eloi as cattle and using them for their food supply. Far-fetched as it may sound, how can we be sure that we would not resort to cannibalism, eating another living being just because it is another species?

It is not my intention to demonise anyone here. The purpose of this plea is to lay out the bare facts for all to see. Take the first step and make that transition to vegetarianism! No one said it would be easy, but with the multitude of vegetarian cuisine, life as a vegetarian would be much easier. You would not want the thought of squealing pigs being led to an abattoir to be seared onto your conscience, would you?

(Footnotes)

¹ "Meet your Meat" is a video produced by PETA—People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals

Note: (For the purpose of my essay I would use the definition -- Vegetarianism is the practice of not eating meat, including beef, poultry, fish, and their by-products, with or without the use of dairy products or eggs. The exclusion may also extend to products derived from animal carcasses.)

² The Case Against Meat by Jim Motavalli <http://www.emagazine.com>

³ Being Vegetarian for Dummies (2001) by: Susan Havala

⁴ Barnard ND, Nicholson A, and Howard JL. The medical costs attributable to meat consumption. *Prev Med* 1995; 24:646-55.

⁵ Dwyer JT. Health aspects of vegetarian diets. *Am J Clin Nutr* 1988;48: 712-38.

Essay 25

Title: Do you think society is better off with the liberation of women from their traditional roles?

Name: Bensen Koh

Class: 07A01A

No longer content with being, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, the 'Other' or the 'Second Sex', many women in today's society have committed themselves to the abolition of the gender stereotypes that shackle them to the traditional roles of the 'nurturer', 'homemaker' or 'sexual object'. Theirs is perceived to be both the sorry plight of victims of a prejudiced patriarchy, and a courageous battle for freedom. A battle in which the women are often perceived to be the underdogs, yet also a battle that womankind has clearly been winning. Indeed, over the last century, women have risen from their traditional roles and done things that were once thought impossible for them; things such as having a successful career. But has all this success, all this liberation and 'progressive-ness' really benefited society? Has society really become better off now that women have shorn off their traditional roles? The unfortunate but honest answer is, no. Or at least, definitely not the way in which our society has gone about doing it.

The famous American novelist Aaron Allston once said, 'Feminism is sort of like God. Many people profess to believe in it, but no one seems to be able to define it to everyone's satisfaction.' And he is absolutely right. Ask any random person on the street if he believes in equal gender rights, and chances are that he will agree. But the problem lies in the fact that most people never think beyond the high and noble ideals of freedom from social prejudice. Society isn't just the place where people co-exist; it is a creature in itself; albeit a very clumsy and often confused creature, but society has to be able to function, lest it collapses thus allowing chaos to ensure. It is all very well to want everyone to be completely free, but let us not forget that complete freedom cannot co-exist with order. To create a society of equal gender rights, women have to know exactly what it is that they want, and realise the consequences of such desires. It is extremely unfortunate that this is not the case.

Let us take a look at the roots of feminism. While the first published work of a woman appeared in the 1300s, feminism cannot be said to have really taken form until the Enlightenment period, where thinkers such as Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and the Marquis de Condorcet began championing women's education. Feminism then developed into something more scientific, with scientific journals for women being published in 1785, as well as the release of Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman'. However, it was not until the 19th century, with the debut of Utopianism, that feminism finally became an organised movement. This was when feminism became really popular, even producing male activists such as the utopian socialist Charles Fourier. However, this was also when women themselves began to recognise the many hidden problems that plague feminism.

In Wendy Kammer's book 'A Fearful Freedom: Women's Flight from Equality', she redefines feminism, splitting it into two very general forms which she calls 'egalitarian' feminism and 'protectionist' feminism. Egalitarian feminism merely refers to a form of feminism in which the focus is to promote equal rights between men and women. Protectionist feminism, on the other hand, focuses on legal protections for women, such as employment laws and divorce laws that specifically benefit women, as well as the placement of restrictions on men, such as on free speech and more specifically, on the right to produce and consume pornography. This dichotomy shows the beginning of the fracturing that feminism is about to suffer. Already, their demands seem to contradict one another. They wish to be treated as equals to men, yet specifically demand special legal protection that only applies to and benefits females. How much of this is a genuine desire for freedom from prejudice, and how much of this is just the desire for an easier life?

Yet, the reason why feminism has led to such confusing demands is not because feminists are crazy and unreasonable people. It is because of the fundamental truth that society is beginning to realise: that as shocking and outrageous as it may sound, men and women are NOT equal. This is not to say that men are better than women, or vice versa. That would be an equally fallacious statement. But one simply cannot ignore the fact that men and women are not equal. Physically, the difference is obvious. The make-up of their psyche is also different. This is not to say that all girls should wear pink and that boys should play with trucks, but it is undeniable that the 'homemaker' role that women were traditionally given has a direct and relevant link to their ability to give birth to children. It is just the same as how the 'hunter' or 'breadwinner' role that all men are faced with stems from their naturally more muscular physique and consequent ability when it comes to activities such as running, jumping or fighting.

It is sad to note, then, that the liberation of women in society has not just failed to shed understanding on the gender issue, but has instead merely confused it further. It would not be wrong (or chauvinistic) to say that at this point in time,

the collective identity of women have no idea what they want, except that it roughly encompasses equal rights. Several sociological studies have shown that although women deride men for not devoting enough time to childcare and domestic tasks, these same women also agree that they find men who do engage in these tasks to the detriment of their careers a lot less attractive as shown in 'The Perception of Sexual Attractiveness: Sex Differences in Variability' by J.M. Townsend. At the same time, women are determined to have similar careers to men, but feel threatened when some men take on the role of the 'nurturer', as can be seen from the widespread discrimination of men who have decided to take on such a role, as well as the single fathers who do not have a choice. Women want equal career opportunities as men, so that they too can take on the role of the breadwinner. Yet some also wish to keep their traditional role of the nurturer exclusive to their gender.

As feminism develops and continues to flourish, this discrepancy in goals and aims has also begun to become obvious. Faced with the question of what exactly it is that they want, most women would not be able to pinpoint the specifics of their desires. To be the breadwinner is to forego your role as the nurturer, or to dilute both of these roles and be a little of each. So just what do women want? We are still waiting for their answer.

Meanwhile, women, being the creative people that they are, have found many ways of dealing with the problem. Unfortunately, none of them are acceptable. Some women realise the problem they are faced with, and either remain confused or spend their time trying to and failing to convince their peers of the opinion that they have arrived at. Still others have looked the question in the eye and decided to pretend it isn't there, ignoring it and blaming all problems on male chauvinism. Finally, there are those who go to the other extreme, promoting misandry and even male inferiority. These are women who, faced with the relative success of feminism, have decided that the final goal should not actually be equality, but a society where females are superior to males. Why stop at equality when women can be the superior ones? These women do not just want equal rights, but wish to shove men into the role of the 'Second Sex'. It has been demonstrated that replacing the words 'male' and 'female' in some feminist writings with 'black' and 'white' respectively would make these text seem more racist to people than the corresponding feminist writings would seem sexist.

As feminists find themselves and boycott the traditional roles placed upon them, society suffers, with children being the main victims. Women, unhappy with their roles, divorce and bring up their children in single-parent families. Other children find themselves with two working parents, both of whom have little time to spare for them, and so the former end up being brought up by maids, nannies, elder siblings, or not at all. At the same time, to the extent that the role of the 'homemaker' and 'nurturer' is abandoned, so are there fewer homes and less nurturing. Young women nowadays are opting to stay single or to not have children in order to cope with their careers. This has resulted in falling birthrates and aging populations in developing countries all over the world.

Things have certainly changed since the advent of feminism. There is no room for doubt there. But has society really become better off? In terms of lessons, we have definitely learnt several important ones. That to believe that males and females can ever be completely equal is naïve; that freedom is one word for many desires and that these desires have to be defined, and then evaluated; that one cannot completely assume both the male and female roles. But has the situation in society become better off? The answer, sadly, is no. We have only become more confused. When one of the two gender roles is successfully cast off, the basic unit of all societies – the family – ceases to function. Two breadwinners or a childless family may be much more conducive in building careers and making money, but it does little for the upbringing of children and the continuity of society. No, with the liberation of women from their traditional roles, males and females are now faced with an identity crisis, and the creature that is society seems to be ceasing to function.

What is the solution to this problem? The answer is surprisingly simple. Women have to realise that their enemy is not male chauvinism anymore. Indeed, once upon a time, that was a problem in dire need of a solution. But now, an even more lethal one has become evident. Women have to realise that their biggest problem now is disunity amongst themselves. They have to decide what it is they want. Who it is that they, as the collective female identity, really want to be? It has come to a time where the answer 'I just want to be myself' is no longer acceptable and is just plain naïve. To truly progress into a society where both males and females can be satisfied with their roles, women have to combat the schizophrenia that now characterises that once-great movement that is feminism.

Comments:

The clarity of writing and thought here is highly commendable. Your claims are largely well-supported and your arguments engaging. You do wind up addressing the question, and in the process of doing so, you've displayed an excellent breadth of ideas. Well done.

Essay **26**

Title: Consider the view that the study of mathematics is intellectually satisfying, but of little practical use.

Name: Fong Jing Heng

Class: 2A03B

Mathematics is always a key component in the education syllabus of any system, be it simple arithmetic, or calculus and trigonometry at the more advanced stages. One of the key purposes of education in general, is for intellectual stimulation, satisfaction, and hence, growth. To a large extent, studying mathematics helps to achieve this.

Mathematics is considered to tap the left brain, which focuses on logical thinking, reasoning, and problem solving. Here, people think actively using numbers, symbols and formulae to express things, instead of being restricted to basic emotions as a less educated, more primitive version of man might be. The active harnessing of the human mind to solve mathematical problems can be a source of satisfaction. It takes on the form of a challenge, which one has to tackle using his intellect and thinking skills. When the solution is finally found, there is a sense of success and fulfillment, as most mathematics students would have felt at some point or other. This helps explain why some try solving problems like Sudoku, the rubic cube, or discuss well-known mathematical 'conundrums' like the Postman problem. Solving the challenge a mathematical problem holds can be intensely satisfying to people.

Other than the challenging aspect of the individual problems one encounters in studying mathematics, another form of satisfaction might be derived from intellectual growth. Since mathematics is usually studied through a long period of schooling years, it makes it more possible to compare a student's level of growth at a nascent stage with the more mature phase by the time graduation nears. Previously a student might have had difficulty grasping basic concepts like multiplication. Yet by a later stage, when these operations have become second nature, the problem at hand 'evolves' into applying it to the higher demands that algebraic, trigonometric, or calculus problems might pose. There is a sense of satisfaction acquired from observing this growth, not just as an increase in the total volume of mathematical knowledge, but a deepening in thinking skills like deduction and reasoning.

Beyond the temporal comparison of abilities or the satisfaction of solving a mathematical problem, being able to apply mathematics to the real world is something which can potentially be the source of much satisfaction. This is typically only achieved in the later stages of study, because the school curriculum usually focuses on the answers to constructed questions on paper rather than the real world. This transcendence from the paper world of Cartesian planes and random triangles to the actual application of concepts is all the more satisfying because of its elusiveness to many students. For example, the golden ratio, a mathematical concept considered the 'formula' for aesthetic beauty, has been used in many works of art, from the Egyptian pyramids to paintings like Da Vinci's Mona Lisa. How some even tried to link the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet, a popular poetic form, to the golden ratio, is testimony to the extent to which mathematics is used to explain beauty. Beyond the arts, mechanical applications of mathematics abound. Logic gates, the crux of the operations of many modern inventions like computers, were a product of mathematical study. Scientists like physicists use mathematics as the main tool in unlocking the secrets of the universe. Einstein's famous ' $E=mc^2$ ' formula which sums up the relationship between energy, mass and the speed of light into a single mathematical formula, is one such example. 'Softer' sciences have also increasingly started to tap mathematical methods to help further their development, when scholars find links between their own disciplines and mathematics. Econometrics, the study of economics using concrete mathematical figures in preference to baseless hypothesising, is such an attempt. Not only does linking mathematics with the world provide new possibilities and avenues for progress, there is also an inherent satisfaction in the personal discovery that intersection points between two apparently dissimilar fields do exist.

However, despite the many applications of mathematics in many widely different areas of human life, the thought that mathematics is of little practical use always lurks in the background. This is especially true among students who simply cannot understand how the many graphs, equations and various geometrical figures they encounter could possibly help them in their lives. Indeed, the most immediate part of life which even involves mathematics is in counting money and spending it, which is not only hardly satisfying, but also inappropriate to be classified as a 'study', seeing how it is possible to use money without ever having formal education at even the most rudimentary level, such as Singapore in the colonial era. Trade could bustle even though education of anything, including mathematics, was largely ignored by the profit-oriented British incumbents.

The mathematical applications for the solutions of daily problems are oftentimes not observed. This is true because the average person lives and behaves by instincts and approximations. If running late for an appointment, a person would not calculate the distance from his home to office, find the amount of time he has, and then decide the speed he needs to drive, contrary to what a problem sum might suggest. It is more likely that he would just drive. Mathematical observations, whilst interesting in their own right, are also sometimes limited in providing solutions, as is especially true in sports, where game sense accounts for sublime play much more than calculations. While it can be understood mathematically how David Beckham positions his foot to meet the ball, how Carly Patterson times her fall whilst somersaulting in mid-air or how Michael Jordan scores a three-pointer, athletes themselves approach these instinctively. A 'study' in mathematics implies having to spend a great deal of time calculating, which is impractical in the process of the actual physical motions, as clearly illustrated by countless athletes.

Although I acknowledge the study of mathematics might have little practical use except for scholars and people working in specific sectors, I feel it is unfair to conclude that mathematics is useless as far as life is concerned. Whilst mathematics as a study might appear immediately to have little apparent relevance, in truth, the accusation of 'little practical use' could be levelled at nearly every discipline of study ever undertaken. Advanced mathematics might not be necessary in daily life, but neither is an in-depth knowledge of science. One does not need to know about acid and bases to be qualified to use toothpaste, neither is intricate knowledge about procreation a prerequisite to doing the act itself. The arts disciplines are similarly useless. The average person has better things to do on a rainy day than attempting to understand the water cycle. People usually buy things on a whim, instead of leaving it to the 'rationality' economists assume they need in order to calculate the value of what to purchase. And nobody, if anybody ever did, converses in iambic pentameter in real life today. Not just the study of mathematics, but the study of just about anything, is immediately irrelevant in today's context. This might help explain what Mark Twain meant when he said 'I never let my schooling get in the way of my education'. One recalls how some of his characters, like Tom Sawyer, get on quite fine in life without having studied much mathematics, or anything else, before.

Therefore, to justify the study of mathematics or any other field, one has to realise that there is more to life than simply fulfilling the demands that mundane and 'practical' life gives us. Life is more than physical actions and monetary calculations, but more abstractly, a journey towards discussing and understanding, not just of the self, but of the world around us, natural or human. While it is true that one does not urgently need mathematics to do this, it should also be recognised that mathematics does aid in both these aspects. It helps to develop the self, via the process of stimulating and satisfying the human intellect, and hence helps it to grow and mature. It helps us understand the world around us, microscopic or non-microscopic, living or non-living, terrestrial or cosmic. Even if we graduate and our exposure to mathematics tends towards zero, scholars from diverse fields of specialisation would still be using mathematics, whether in a bid to further human progress, or to solve the mysteries of the natural world. They do this not only because of some noble motivation to advance the torch of human knowledge, but also for the personal satisfaction that is felt when the problem is finally solved.

In conclusion, I do acknowledge studying mathematics has little practical use and is fairly irrelevant in the affairs of everyday life. Yet there is much more to life than just the practical parts. Whilst it would be spurious to term mathematics as the path to understanding life and the universe, it could at least be agreed that it does help in the endeavour, and is also, if nothing else, intellectually satisfying.

Comments:

Superior discussion on an acknowledgedly 'dry' topic; lucid language and apt examples; comprehensive.

Essay **27**

Title: Is it misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge?

Name: Nicola John

Class: 07A01B

“Cogito, ergo sum.”

“Here is one hand.”

From the very origins of philosophy as a discipline, scholars have struggled with the concept of knowledge and, by extension, the different methods of acquiring knowledge. In pursuit of this aim are two notable groups of philosophers apparently at odds with each other: rationalists, who see logic and reason as the source of all knowledge, and empiricists, who believe that knowledge must be derived from one's experience of the world. Both schools of thought accept the idea of justified true beliefs as a working definition of knowledge. It is about the steps required to satisfactorily prove a belief both true and justified that rationalists like René Descartes disagree with empiricists like John Locke. Rationalism holds that all knowledge can and should be uncovered through the use of logic and reasoning, beginning with clear and distinct ideas that need not be proven further and building up through layers of more complex reasoning a view of the world that is both true and logically justified.

Reasoning is a very powerful tool in the acquisition of knowledge, offering philosophers a method of extending their knowledge of the world beyond their own experience. By comparison, empiricism's reliance on sensory perception and contact with the physical world appears somewhat limited. The subjectivity of the senses and our perceptions of the world we inhabit also cast doubt on the extent to which empirical knowledge can be conclusively proven true or justified. This is less of a challenge in rationalism, where one does not have to rely on sensations to derive knowledge; instead, one can derive knowledge through a series of logical arguments – that is, through the power of reasoning alone. In the case of Descartes, rationalism also transcends the challenges posed by scepticism to some degree by asserting that proof of a consciousness is a sufficient proof of existence. By adopting a structure that is apparently more objective than empiricism, reasoning offers us a chance to acquire theoretical knowledge even beyond our personal experience.

This does not mean however that rationalism is without its flaws, and that reasoning can be seen unquestionably as the only source of knowledge necessary. One of the strengths of reasoning as a method of acquiring knowledge – its capacity to provide theoretical knowledge – is also one of its weaknesses. The fact is that one cannot exist purely in the theoretical realm, so an application of knowledge acquired through reasoning requires at least some degree of experience as well. This is because rationalism without reference to the real world can face the problem of internal logic, a system of reasoning true only within itself. As Gödel's thought experiment with the Ultimate Truth Machine illustrates, such systems cannot be exhaustive because they fail to consider self-reflexive statements and cannot be extended beyond their own limits. Because of this, it is possible to argue that reasoning alone cannot be the source of all knowledge because of the limitations of reason applied in the detection of closed belief systems.

Another problem with reasoning is the concept of infinite regress, the idea that logic can devolve into an endless stream of questions waiting to be answered. The argument is that for every conclusion justified by various premises, each premise must also be justified by premises which must in turn be justified. As it is impossible to see the end of such questioning, some believe reasoning cannot be said to prove any knowledge conclusively true.

There are also other ways of acquiring knowledge that do not depend on reasoning. Gnosticism purports that humans are born with innate ideas, true justified beliefs they need not arrive at through either reasoning or experience. The existence of God is often regarded as a good example of an innate idea as neither reasoning nor sensory perception offer any conclusive evidence to prove or disprove it. There are, therefore, some undeniable limitations to reasoning that suggest it is insufficient as a sole source of knowledge.

It is very possible, however, to argue that reasoning can remain the primary source of knowledge even when combined with various other sources of true justified belief. In this case, reasoning is the main source of knowledge to the extent that it is crucial in the justification of a true belief acquired by other means. Empirically-gathered sensory data may

be acquired, for example, but it is the cognitive faculties that facilitate the formation of an image to be recognised, and therefore for the acquisition of the knowledge that the object being viewed is what it is.

A number of rationalists also believe that reasoning is used to uncover or reveal truths. This is consistent with the idea of innate ideas, but uses reasoning as a key process in proving that the idea is both true and justified.

The reliabilist position also relies heavily on both empiricism and reasoning. By arguing that a belief is considered knowledge as long as it has a relatively high success rate, reliabilists utilise both empiricism in their observation of the phenomena in question and rationalism in their formulation of the argument that if things have been a certain way for a long time (premise 1) and things will continue to be this way (premise 2) then things will be this way tomorrow (conclusion). In this example, inductive reasoning is used to overcome Hume's empirical position, which asserts that any belief about the future can only be seen as anticipation and never as knowledge in the form of a true justified belief.

Because reasoning cannot be used to explain every aspect of life and our conception of the world, I would suggest that it is misguided to hold that reasoning is the only source of knowledge one needs in the world. The large number of phenomena necessarily excluded from this position as well as its own limitations, make it a difficult one to defend. In view of reasoning's strengths, however, I am inclined to see it as a very powerful tool in the acquisition of knowledge. In overcoming scepticism, at least to some degree, and in offering a verifiable method of arriving at knowledge through a series of apparently objective steps, reasoning must not be seen as insignificant. In fact, particularly because of the large extent to which reasoning can be coupled with other sources of knowledge, I would agree that reasoning is a very crucial source of knowledge. To this extent I believe it is misguided to hold that reasoning is the only source of knowledge but not that it can be the primary source of such justified true beliefs.

Comments:

This paper digresses from the essay question in that it seems to discuss reasoning as "the only source" more than it does reasoning as the "primary source." However, it very fortunately remains relevant to the question insofar as you've been able to juxtapose your rejection of reasoning as the only source against your views on reasoning as the primary source. Nonetheless, please take care to address the question more explicitly and more directly. To do so, try to show why reasoning is the primary while experience is the secondary source of knowledge. This will strengthen your final conclusion.

Apart from this, your essay is well-expressed, and fluent in epistemological terms in the areas of Rationalism and Empiricism. The observations you make are by and large supported, though if you could illustrate them more often (as you have done with Gödel's Ultimate Truth Machine), they would become even more persuasive.

Essay 28

Title: Is it misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge?

Name: Chong Wanling

Class: 07S06O

I believe that it is misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge. I do acknowledge that reason is required to make sense of our sense experiences and that there are some fields of knowledge such as mathematics, which require non-empirical frameworks. However, having said this, I still believe that experience is the primary source of knowledge. Not discounting the role reason plays in the construction of knowledge, I believe that experience is the primary source of knowledge for it is the foundation and first means by which knowledge is constructed, and I will proceed to show here how experience comes before reason in the construction of knowledge.

As Aristotle once said, "there is nothing in the mind except what was first in the senses." I believe that we need to experience something first in order to have knowledge of it. One example that might illustrate this is colour. It is plausible to claim that we cannot imagine a colour we have never seen; it would probably not be inaccurate to say that blind men cannot imagine colours like seeing men can; blind men could arguably know about certain colours, but they may never know specific colours in the same way seeing men do. It would then be possible to claim that without first having the visual experience of colours, one cannot as successfully construct knowledge of colours.

Rationalists might counter my point by using the example of mathematical *a priori* knowledge. The rationalists' claim is that mathematical concepts, such as addition and subtraction, are gained *a priori* and can be arrived at through pure reasoning, that is to say, a person locked in a room and thus isolated from experience would be able to conceive of a concept of addition if he or she thought very hard and applied reasoning alone. Rationalists claim that they have found knowledge which requires only reason as its source and not experience. While the above situation may be possible, it is not a forgone conclusion that all our mathematical concepts were formed in such a fashion. It is possible to concede that observations, such as seeing two and two pebbles put together to make four pebbles, were used to form the mathematical concept of addition, or that counting physical objects allowed us to derive numbers. In this way, while mathematical concepts may be arrived at through reason alone, the mathematical knowledge that we know now can be seen to have its roots in experience as well, in which case, experience cannot be ruled out as a primary source of knowledge, even in the case of what are seemingly *a priori* fields.

Rationalists can and will counter this point. They might say that if it is the case that some mathematical concepts have their roots in experience, the case may also be that reasoning could play more important a role than experience in the construction of scientific concepts such as Quantum Mechanics, String Theory and the Theory of Relativity. Rationalists may claim that the scientists who came up with these theories had no experiments or experience to inform them of these theories, and that they conceived these theories through reason alone. I question this claim because the scientists who came up with these theories cannot be said to have had no experience – they were not locked in a room and isolated from experience since birth. While the scientists may not have had any direct experience of the theories, the scientists could have combined or abstracted this from what they already knew from experience. Just as the concept of a unicorn (a concept which seems to be formed without any experience) is formed from the combination of a horse and a horn (concepts which have their roots in experience), likewise, the scientists could have conceived of these scientific theories by combining these pieces of knowledge they already possessed. It cannot be said that just because direct experience was not responsible for the scientists' conception of these theories, that therefore reason must account for the formation of these theories. It is also possible that these theories were formed as a combination of or abstraction from previous knowledge gained from experience.

One argument rationalists use to show that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge is to assert that without reason, our sense experiences are nothing more than "white noise". Reason is required to make sense of our sense data, categorising them and inferring from them to form knowledge. However this argument alone is insufficient to show that reason is the primary source of knowledge. All it does is to show us the relationship between experience and reason, that one cannot function without the other to form knowledge. I fully acknowledge this point but still put forth the point that experience has to come first before reason in the construction of knowledge – for three reasons:

1. Experience of something is required for us to form knowledge about it (we cannot imagine a colour we have never before seen.)
2. Even *a priori* knowledge can be seen to have their roots in experience, for example the concept of addition.
3. Concepts of things we have not experienced are simply combinations or abstractions from things we have experienced, an example, being a unicorn or other such mythical beings.

Rationalists may question the credibility of experience as the primary source of knowledge as our senses are limited in what they can perceive and have been known to deceive or mislead us at times. This is where reason comes in. As in the first example, reason is used to generalise from all our experiences of colour to form concepts of different colours, helping us sieve through our sense experiences to organise and make sense of the "white noise". As in the second example, reason is used to generalise from daily experiences of addition to form the mathematical concept. Lastly, as in the third example, reason is used to combine knowledge we already know to form concepts we may be unable to experience and to extend beyond the limitations of our senses to explore the what-ifs in our world which we cannot experience. Reason is clearly needed to make sense of our sense experiences and to extend beyond these sense data to form concepts about our world. While reason and experience are both important, experience is what must act as a stimulus, upon which reason will act. Without experience, our reasoning ability will be wasted for it has no stimulus to engage it. Babies do not immediately use their reasoning ability to derive mathematical knowledge or other such *a priori* knowledge. Instead, the human mind and our reasoning ability is wired such that we first think about what we experience (what is stimulated) before even considering any such *a priori* knowledge. Babies seem more concerned with building knowledge around what they experience, and likewise grown adults too construct knowledge about what they experience, as what they experience stimulates their reasoning ability.

As I believe that without the initial input of sense experiences, there can be no processing of our sense data by reason, I believe that experience is the primary source of knowledge as it is the foundational and first means by which we construct knowledge. Thus it is misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge.

Comments:

Fluent, directed and balanced. You take a definite position and make a concerted attempt at defending it, refuting opposing claims as you go.

Here are some suggestions for improvement:

1) The argument you number as '1' needs to be qualified. By 'something', do you mean 'all' knowledge? If so, you'll need to account for the rationalists' claim of transcendental claims (eg. The Cogito), or of synthetic *a priori* knowledge. If not, you should explain clearly what kinds of knowledge require experience.

2) You may also want to address the rationalists' claims of innate ideas (e.g. language concepts) and Descartes' clear and distinct ideas.

3) You should attempt to define upfront what you mean by 'primary'. What other interpretations of 'primary' are possible, and might they lend diversity to your views?

Essay 29

Title: Is it misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge?

Name: Xing Zhenrong

Class: 07S03S

"There can be no *a priori* truths of reality. For...the truths of reason, the propositions that we deem to be valid independently of experience, are so only by virtue of their lack of factual content..." – *Language, Truth and Logic*

At first glance, we may find the above statement too extreme. How can there be no *a priori* truths of reality? Yet, as we scrutinize it closely and ponder over it, we may find that it actually makes sense. Reasoning here does not refer to the rationalists' point of view. It is merely a logical process, an ability all human beings allegedly possess. It does not contain within itself the presence of innate ideas, knowledge or concepts. Thus, I would say that any view which holds that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge is indeed misguided.

Firstly, by primary source of knowledge, I define it not as the first source. That is, the primary source of knowledge does need to be one that is foremost in sequential or chronological order. Rather, it is the main source, the source that gives the widest scope and is the most instrumental in our construction of knowledge. By knowledge, I also mean the knowledge of the phenomenal world, since Kant had claimed that our mental templates decide the way we think and structure our perceptions. Therefore, according to him, it would be unlikely that we have knowledge of the noumenal world, through reasoning or perception (though Kant had tried to find synthetic *a priori* truths to prove that knowledge of the noumenal world is possible).

Having defined these terms, I can now show why it is wrong to think that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge. First and foremost, I will look at it from the rationalists' point of view, since they are the advocates of the reasoning process. But even so, the rationalists adopt three theses, namely, the Intuition/Deduction Thesis, the Innate Knowledge Thesis, and the Innate Concept Thesis. Reasoning belongs to the first thesis, and Descartes seems to be the main advocate of it. His search for knowledge through intuition and reasoning, however, has not given him many 'clear and distinct' ideas that are self-justifying in nature, except for "*cogito ergo sum*". Yet that alone does not provide us with any knowledge of the phenomenal world. After all, what is the self in the first place? Furthermore, through pure reasoning, what knowledge can we gain of the phenomenal world? True, the knowledge that $1+1=2$ might come in handy when we are doing arithmetic. But what of the concept of complex/imaginary numbers? Do they help in understanding this world in any way? Thus it is obvious that the Cartesian approach to gaining knowledge is flawed and severely limited in scope, and therefore does not provide us with much knowledge.

Some rationalists other than Descartes also support the first Thesis. However, if we come to think of it, reasoning alone can only tell us analytical truths. One example is that "all bachelors are unmarried men". Surely by looking at the word 'bachelor' we already know that he is unmarried, and is a man. Therefore, the analytical statements are tautological in nature. They provide us with no new knowledge of the world, especially of the phenomenal world. We cannot know, through pure reasoning, that bachelors are happy, or that foxes like grapes. These are synthetic statements, known through empirical evidence, and are knowledge of the phenomenal world.

Furthermore, advocates of the other two theses seem to have a more solid claim. Plato said that we have innate knowledge of the world. Those ideas are present in another intelligible realm that we can access, perhaps through experience. According to Plato, the "timeless and eternal" concepts of colour, justice and beauty (and perhaps language, as proposed by Chomsky) are certainly more practical and give us more knowledge of the world than pure reasoning. Through those concepts we can then make propositions such as "that place is beautiful" or "that is a morally wrong action". These are propositions that surely give us knowledge. Though these arguments are flawed too, because the concepts can vary among different people, I shall not discuss them here since they are not very relevant. Instead, what I can conclude is that the whole rationalist school of foundationalism, reasoning included, cannot provide us with enough knowledge of the world, and certainly is not the primary source of knowledge.

Let us then look at the empiricists' point of view. They will of course claim that since those innate ideas proposed by Plato are subjective, they cannot act as a basis for the building up of our beliefs. Hume has suggested that since morality cannot be traced back to any sensation, it arises out of our emotions and is thus subjective as well. If so, then surely the Innate Knowledge and innate Concept Thesis do not hold. Furthermore, Locke himself has claimed the mind to be a *tabula rasa*.

As for reasoning, which gives us only analytical and perhaps mathematical truths, it cannot tell us of the real world. The justification for basing our superstructural beliefs upon the few basic beliefs formed from reasoning requires experience. Taking a highly abstract scientific hypothesis, $E=mc^2$, for example: many would claim that reasoning contributes greatly to its formation. However, reasoning can only provide Einstein with the means of using mathematical rules to determine the equation. The fundamental beliefs that all objects have certain masses and certain amounts of energy are known empirically. Therefore, without experience as a basis for the justification of the equation $E=mc^2$, it will not even exist in the first place. So empiricism, not reasoning, not even rationalism, is the primary source of knowledge.

Let us then look at a hypothetical situation, a thought experiment. Suppose that there exists a machine, with all logical processes input into it (much like Condillac's statue, but this time it is the reasoning processes). However, it has no innate knowledge or sense data. The machine is then like a highly sophisticated computer, able to process data, play chess, perform advanced calculus, or even generate inferences. Surely, as some will argue, they know how to do these things. But is that really knowledge as we know it? Reasoning only provides it with the means to deduce and to make calculations based on data fed to it. I cannot deny that it knows how to generate an answer, but does it really know what it is doing? Does it gain any new knowledge of the world? It simply makes use of the axioms and algorithms preinstalled in it to give us answers, without knowing so. Even if it can defeat chess masters, does it even know that it has won? Through reasoning alone, it cannot even know the concept of winning, unless we allow it to experience that concept for itself. Thus this machine cannot be said to know much, if at all.

Therefore, the hypothetical situation proves my point. Of course, I cannot deny that reasoning proves us with some knowledge. Some transcendental arguments, derived from pure reasoning, give us knowledge of how to defeat the skeptics, since we cannot say that we know nothing, anymore. However, other than that, we cannot know much more. Thus reasoning is severely limited in scope. It cannot even give us information about the noumenal world, as proposed by Kant, since it is restrained by our mental templates. No matter how hard we think, we are still confined by our mental templates. Reasoning is only complementary to experience in providing knowledge.

In conclusion, reasoning cannot be the primary source of knowledge. Firstly, it cannot provide us with any knowledge of the noumenal world (though experience cannot either). In terms of understanding the physical or phenomenal world around us, reasoning gives us nothing more than analytical truths, which are repetitive in nature and cannot provide us with knowledge of the phenomenal world. The limited amount of basic beliefs (that are self-justifying) are severely limited in scope, and do not help us much in understanding this world. Other pieces of knowledge based upon those provided by reasoning require justification through experience. Those that do not, such as higher levels of mathematics, still do not give us much knowledge of the phenomenal world. If experience is required for justification, such as in scientific experiments, then experience, though not necessarily the foundation, is certainly the primary source of our knowledge. Innate ideas, which may provide us with useful knowledge of the phenomenal world through reasoning, are however subjective in nature and as such, cannot be innate. Therefore, reasoning alone cannot be the primary source of knowledge, especially of the phenomenal world. It is misguided to hold a view that reason is the primary source. However, if reason is not, then is experience really our foundation of knowledge? Perhaps that is another question to think about.

Essay **30**

Title: Is it misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge?

Name: Ng Shi Qian Rachel

Class: 07S06O

Essay	Marker's comments
<p>We live in a world where our pool of knowledge originates from a plethora of sources. Out of all of them, reasoning is the primary source of knowledge. Being the primary source, it implies that reasoning precedes other sources of knowledge and contributes the most significant amount of useful knowledge to the collective knowledge already in existence. Hence, it is not misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge, due to the following reasons.</p>	
<p>First and foremost, reasoning can provide knowledge in two ways – a priori and a posteriori. A priori knowledge is derived purely through logic and reason, and does not require experience to result in knowledge being created. For example, there is “I think therefore I am”, a quotation from Descartes which attests to the fact that thoughts exist. Otherwise, he would not have been able to come to that conclusion as it is a thought in itself.</p>	
<p>This method of generating knowledge is essential and important, especially to society, as truths derived through reasoning are eternal and unchanging, and are things which we can anchor ourselves to when our phenomenal world is changing all the time. This makes it much more valuable than empirical knowledge, as it forms an unshakeable bedrock on which knowledge can be built, and even as time passes, it will still hold true. An illustration would be language – for if it does not exist, thoughts can't be formed and ideas can't be communicated. This is certain, unlike empirical knowledge which might change over time and prove not to be knowledge anymore. For example, “the world is flat” used to be common knowledge to everyone, until it was later discovered that the Earth was actually round. Hence, reasoning is a primary source of knowledge as it (a priori knowledge) is eternal and unchanging, which is essential to an ever changing world, as it still remains relevant and valid, all the time. One example would be basic mathematical axioms, such as $1 + 1 = 2$, whereby more complex mathematical truisms can be built upon it, such as indices, calculus and so on.</p>	<p>¹ Explain phenomenal world.</p> <p>² Explain how this piece of proposition may be derived in an a priori manner.</p>
<p>The second way logic provides knowledge is through processing empirical data. You might say that much more knowledge is obtained from everyday experiences, as compared to knowledge derived by pure reasoning, but ultimately without logical reasoning, the empirical data would be just white noise perceived by our senses, and nothing else. Therefore, since reasoning precedes empirical data, it is the primary source of knowledge. As an active originator of experience, reasoning provides the platform by which perceptual data can be synthesized to form useful and coherent data to make sense with the rest of the world.</p>	<p>³ Why? Explain.</p> <p>⁴ How is this the case? Please support your claims, illustrating them with examples.</p>

<p>According to Immanuel Kant, our minds come preloaded with mental templates, not unlike a computer loaded with software, to aid us in processing the empirical data which our senses perceive and construct knowledge. For example, when we see coffee and smell its aroma, we are able to make the link that coffee looks brown and has that unique smell. The next time we are exposed to coffee again, we are able to recognize the color and the specific smell, and identify it as coffee. Otherwise, we will just merely see the brown liquid and smell the aroma, not knowing anything else. Images might flash through our minds and we might sense things, but we will not be able to acknowledge nor identify them. Hence, as empirical data proves to be useless without the processing of reasoning, reasoning can be said to be the primary source of knowledge.</p>	
<p>However, this does not mean to say that the importance of empirical data should be undermined, as it is an integral aspect of the construction of knowledge, especially in that of the knowledge relevant to our daily lives. Undeniably, without the presence of empirical data, we would not be able to construct knowledge about our phenomenal world. For example, we are not unable to imagine a color which we have not seen before, nor are we able to imagine the taste of something which has not been ingested before. Nevertheless, though the importance of empirical data should not be undermined, the fact that reasoning precedes sensory data indicates that reasoning is the primary source. If empirical data were the primary source, wouldn't all animals in the world possess knowledge then, since they too experience the world as we do, but ₅ without the power of reasoning?</p>	<p>⁵ Safer to say their reasoning faculties are probably different from ours. We can't say that for certain at this time that all animals can't reason.</p>
<p>Reasoning also allows us to construct knowledge based on existing knowledge. Without having to experience it, we are able to come to a conclusion through logic. For example, it is not necessary for you to ingest large amounts of poison to know that you will die when you do so. ₆ <u>Conversely</u>, you are able to imagine a shade of red which is darker than the one which you are seeing.</p>	<p>⁶ Wrong word.</p>
<p>Knowledge derived by empirical data is also limited, as the information about the phenomenal world which we human beings can gather is limited by our senses. For example, we are not able to hear a sound higher than our frequency range. Also, our senses are not infallible, as we do make human errors when we use our judgment. Also, we might have varying perceptions of the same object, differing from person to person. For example, sometimes people might see the tennis ball as lime green, and some might view it as yellow. Hence, ₇ the data is only as useful as when applied to our daily lives.</p>	<p>⁷ How does this conclusion follow from the above claims?</p>
<p>Hence, in view of all the following points brought up above, it is not misguided to hold that reasoning is the primary source of knowledge, as it is indispensable in the process of construction of knowledge, both a posteriori and a priori.</p>	

Essay 31

Title: How might doubt be overcome?

Name: Aditi Shivaramakrishnan

Class: 07A13A

Doubt, often referred to as scepticism by philosophers, questions the manner in which human beings construct their knowledge and beliefs, by asking how they can be absolutely sure about a certain idea. While there are certain benefits to be derived from this, doubt can also pose challenges to the construction of a system of beliefs, and hence it is worth studying how it can be overcome. In this essay I shall explore different ways in which doubt might be overcome and evaluate their effectiveness.

Firstly, how did doubt even originate? One reason is the idea of infinite regression. Knowledge is justified true belief that can be acquired, among other means, through deduction or inference from other pieces of knowledge. Let us take the theoretical example of A being derived from B. In this case, it is necessary to ask what B is based upon. If it is based upon C, C in turn would have to be based upon some further piece of knowledge, and so on and so forth. The challenge faced in attempting to find one fundamental justified true belief upon which all other knowledge can be based leads us to question whether our own beliefs are sound, hence giving rise to scepticism – or doubt.

Another reason for doubt is the “brain-in-a-vat” theory put forward by Putnam, which is derived from Descartes’ “evil demon” theory. This theory suggests that our brains may have been removed from our bodies and submerged in a vat of life-sustaining liquid. Our brains are then fed with electrical impulses that bring about certain perceptions and sensations. In such a situation we might well not be in control of our faculties at all, but are simply living in a sort of simulated reality, giving rise to doubt about whether what we experience and know are really true. Though this scenario may sound somewhat far-fetched, the fact that we have no way of knowing for sure that it is not true suggests that it is a logical possibility.

The problem with doubt, then, is that when taken to the extreme it would lead us to conclude that we cannot know anything for certain. Such a situation can effectively render it virtually impossible for one to go about his daily life. For instance, if one starts doubting gravity, or that the sun will rise tomorrow, or that water is not poisonous, it is easy to imagine that one would not be able to lead a ‘normal’, or at least functional, life. This is why attempts to overcome doubt are worth making.

There is evidence to suggest that doubt can indeed be overcome, as transcendental arguments will reveal. By showing that some of the conditions for doubt cannot be present during the very process of doubting something, scepticism can to some extent be mitigated. There are several ways to go about this. First of all, the existence of language can be used to discredit doubt. One could doubt the existence of language, yet in so doing one would be making use of language itself to express this idea. Hence, theoretically, language must exist. Secondly, in expressing my belief that we cannot hold any beliefs to be entirely true because they are all susceptible to doubt, I am contradicting myself in that I am stating a belief I hold to be true myself. In other words – it is not logically possible to doubt doubt.

Now that it has been established that scepticism can indeed be overcome transcendently, we move on to explore other approaches that can be taken to achieve this. Firstly, we can utilise Moore’s appeal to common sense. Moore states that inasmuch as knowledge that a society holds to be true is based upon widely-accepted conventions and beliefs, there is no need to doubt this knowledge for there is not much to be gained from doing so, practically speaking. For instance, we can accept that it is morally wrong to steal from someone as this is the general consensus held by a society, which is able to give sufficient justification for such a belief – for example, because stealing involves intruding on someone’s privacy and taking what does not belong to you. Moore considers such beliefs so basic that we do not need to question how we know them. To question them would be to rely on philosophical claims, which, when compared against the common-sensical claim, are less obviously true. Hence the need for doubt is eradicated in this sense.

While this may be a fairly acceptable approach to take when deriving moral and aesthetic beliefs, when applied to factual knowledge it could impede scientific progress. For example, the belief once commonly held by people was that the Earth was flat. However this was later scientifically proven to be untrue and today one holding this belief

would be considered wrong. Another example of this is the fact that the different planets revolve around the sun, as opposed to the traditionally-held belief that the Earth was at the centre of the solar system. It is difficult to imagine what our lives would be like today if these new discoveries had not come to be accepted as true knowledge. Hence while Moore's appeal to common sense can indeed help in overcoming doubt, it could bring about negative repercussions if applied to all domains of knowledge without discretion.

An effective method of overcoming doubt is by curbing the infinite regress that emerges when we seek to find the source of knowledge. To do this, we must find certain beliefs that are self-justifying, hence forming a sound foundation for further beliefs. Such foundational beliefs can be obtained rationally – through reason, or empirically – through experience. Rationalists like Descartes argue that there exists innate ideas in all human beings, including some mathematical concepts such as that of geometrical shapes, and that the mind can derive 'clear and distinct' ideas without reliance on experience, and that need no further justification. Empiricists, too, put forth that notion that there are foundational beliefs that need no further justification; they explain this using the argument from the incorrigibility of the senses.

These foundational means of overcoming doubt are not entirely flawless. For example, it can be argued that our senses can deceive us, as they do in perceiving optical illusions. The rationalists' claim that there are innate ideas is also arguable – in fact, it has been argued against by the empiricists using arguments, such as, mathematical concepts cannot be innate if children have to learn them in order to know them.

Ultimately, then, the question is whether doubt can be entirely overcome. This is unlikely to be the case, given that foundational beliefs too could be flawed. This is not necessarily a bad thing; doubt indeed has its benefits, especially when used as a methodological tool – by questioning our beliefs we get an opportunity to check for fallacies, assumptions and prejudices in our world view. What emerges as a result of exposing our beliefs to such rigour is a more sound and objective system of beliefs. To this end, foundationalism aids in overcoming doubt to the extent that we are able to carry on with our daily lives even as we continue to examine cognitively and philosophically whether we are justified in having these beliefs.

Comments:

Good work. I particularly appreciate your attempts to evaluate some of the replies to scepticism. Work on elaborating your arguments fully and supporting them with examples of knowledge from various fields.

Essay

32

Title: How might doubt be overcome?

Name: Poh Sun Zhi Jonathan

Class: 07S03Q

Doubt, or scepticism, is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is a useful tool to test the soundness and cogency of arguments by exposing them to questioning, while on the other hand, unbridled scepticism plunges the doubter into the pit of infinite regress, where nothing in his argument can be ascertained, and where the doubter can be left 'paralyzed' from having to question all the claims and every course of action.

Unbridled doubt or global doubt could be overcome in many ways, the first of which, by appealing to certain self-justifying beliefs, cannot be doubted. In order to ascertain the validity of his knowledge, Descartes began by doubting all that he knew, seeking to find certain truths that could not be doubted, upon which he could build all other knowledge. He finally arrived at the truth that the existence of his self could not be doubted, simply because he himself was able to think, and even if all he has thought about may not exist, the fact that there is such a thinking entity is indubitable, halting, as it seems, the regress of doubt.

There exist also certain contradictions in global doubt, arising from the fact that beliefs are either true or false and cannot be both at the same time. For example, it is impossible to doubt my ability to doubt all things, for how can I not be doubting if I am already doubting? The same also goes for reason, for if it is necessary for reason to be used to doubt, how can I doubt my reasoning ability, for if I could not reason, I could not doubt? The same logic can be applied in many different circumstances, notably in certain inductive arguments that sceptics might pose. For example, a skeptic might propose the possibility that all paintings are forgeries since their originality cannot be ascertained beyond doubt; however it also remains that in order for there to be forgeries, originals must first exist.

Thus unbridled doubt or global doubt can be overcome, for it is impossible for sceptics to apply doubt to all things simultaneously without having to contradict themselves, finding themselves greatly wanting in their own argument. However, even though it is possible for doubt to be halted by proving that it is not applicable to all things, doubt could still be applied to most things and as such, halting it at some distant point might prove insufficient in overcoming doubt completely.

Thus, it would perhaps be wiser to avert doubt by appealing to ordinary language and to common sense. Appealing to ordinary language (as Wittgenstein does) involves having people take a word as it is used in its ordinary context and not remove it to a totally foreign philosophical context, for language only works because people have a mutual understanding of what the word means in a particular contextual environment, outside of which the meaning changes. It is then unfair to understand the word in a context to which it did not originally apply. In its ordinary usage, the word 'doubt' would refer to a lack of absolute certainty with regard to a certain issue, but the focus is usually on the implication that there is a fair amount of certainty, although this may not be strictly the case. Take for example a sentence which goes "I doubt it would rain today". The author is almost certain that it would not rain but he is not entirely sure and he does not exclude the possibility of it raining. However, the word doubt is taken to a whole new level when placed in the context of philosophical doubt, as doubt is now taken to mean an entire lack of certainty; it is no longer about being half-sure of something, but rather it is being entirely unsure of something. Thus the employment of doubt in its philosophical sense can be averted and doubt as a result overcome, if we attempt to abide by the ordinary meaning of words. However it remains that since a word is in part derived from social agreements over the meaning of a word, philosophers may persist in using doubt in its philosophical sense if they all agree to employ it with its new meaning.

Another method of overcoming doubt would be to appeal to common sense (according to G.E. Moore), where the people in question are persuaded to simply abandon philosophical doubt and accept things as they are for, so that they are not being paralysed by the infinite regress of justification which doubt can inflict. Such a persuasion could be grounded in the fact that as much as doubt could be applied to things regarding the senses, the sensation itself cannot be doubted. This is the incorrigibility of the senses, the foundation on which empiricists base their knowledge. Thus to prevent paralysis, practical solutions, such as accepting the sensations for what they are, would be necessary for sceptics to actually be able to continue with life for it acts on a concrete base on which it is possible to construct

other pieces of information, without which one would be entirely paralysed by the lack of certainty. While empiricists appeal to the senses, rationalists appeal to reason, which (as we have discussed earlier) is necessary for doubt. This same reasoning ability can also be used for subjects such as math, geometry etc.

In conclusion, it is necessary to overcome a global, philosophical doubt which is capable of paralysing both argument and arguer by plunging both into doubt and regression where nothing can be taken to be certain and real. Thus doubt can be overcome by finding counter-examples that hold true or by averting it totally; this is necessary for practical considerations in life.

Comments:

Well-considered; you bring up key replies to scepticism and are able to explain some of them well (eg. the appeal to ordinary language). Some suggestions:

- 1) Your penultimate paragraph pertains to more than just Moore's appeal to common sense. In talking about the empiricists' claim of incorrigible sensations, as well as the rationalists' claim of innate ideas or 'clear and distinct ideas' (if this is what you are referring to), you have moved on to discussing foundationalism as a means of overcoming doubt. That should be distinguished from Moore's defence of common sense.**
- 2) Consider also other theories of justification apart from foundationalism, e.g. coherentism or reliabilism. These can be seen as alternative replies to doubt as well.**

Essay **33**

Title: How might doubt be overcome?

Name: Tan Wen Yi

Class: 07SO3P

Essay	Marker's comments
<p>"Our treasure lies in the beehive of our knowledge. We are perpetually on the way thither, being by nature winged insects and honey gatherers of the mind." – Friedrich Nietzsche</p> <p>Indisputably, humans are knowledge-seeking beings; in fact, this could very well be the essence of our sentience. Yet the rise of philosophical doubt and scepticism, which attempts to doubt our knowledge claims, threatens to overturn the structure of knowledge that we have painstakingly constructed over the centuries. Nevertheless, before we all succumb to the view of the sceptics, it may be wise to examine their various arguments in detail for the purpose of uncovering possible ways to overcome them, as will be discussed in this essay.</p>	
<p>As mentioned, before proceeding to debunk the sceptic's arguments, we first need to examine them in detail. The most common one would be the infinite regress of justification, which argues that any claim to knowledge is only as good as the evidence supporting it and must therefore be supported by evidence, that is, further beliefs. Yet these beliefs must in turn themselves appeal to further beliefs and so on, ad infinitum. Thus any claim to knowledge leads to an infinite regress and ultimately, the whole of our belief system rests on nothing. Therefore, we cannot claim to know anything.</p> <p>Another well-known sceptical argument is as follows: Our only access to the physical world (assuming it exists) is through the senses, and our only access to these perceptions is in turn solely through the mind, so how do we ensure that our perceptions reflect the physical world when we are confined to the boundaries of our minds? We cannot very well step out of ourselves to seek the objective, independent reality. Moreover, our senses often deceive, as in the case of how straight straws appear bent in water and parallel railway tracks appear to converge in the distance. Thus, our only means of acquiring knowledge about the world is unreliable. For all we know, we could be part of a closed belief system, where our set of beliefs is as false as it is self-sustaining, trapped in an eternal dream, or simply brains in a vat, wired up to a computer which maintains the illusion that we have complete physical bodies. All these lead to the conclusion that perhaps all we can be certain of is that only we ourselves have minds (solipsism), or at least that we cannot know there is a world external to our minds (scepticism about the external world).</p> <p>Yet another sceptical argument is scepticism about the future, as pointed out by David Hume: a basic assumption in our everyday lives is that the future resembles the past. But the fact that the future has resembled the past in the past does not establish that it will continue to do so in the future. To think it does is to use evidence from the past to establish a claim about the future, and this is the very action being questioned. Thus we cannot know anything about the future as any appeal to past experience inevitably begs the question.</p>	Yes

The three arguments of the sceptic as presented above may appear formidable; however, upon closer analysis, one would find that it is not impossible to defeat the sceptic. One special form of arguments that does so is known as transcendental arguments, which first establish the conditions of possibility for something being the case, before going to show that the sceptic presupposes what is being denied, thereby contradicting herself. A classic example of such an argument would be Descartes' Cogito, which defeats doubt about one's existence by showing that it would be impossible for one to doubt if he did not exist. Transcendental arguments thus defeat global scepticism (that is, the consistent doubting of all beliefs) by showing that to doubt all knowledge claims would include doubting the very claim of global scepticism itself.

Of course, not all sceptics doubt everything; they may doubt selectively, in particular common-sense beliefs like the claim that a physical world exists. However, according to Hume, scepticism should be moderated by what we cannot help believing. We have natural inclinations towards certain beliefs that might be termed common-sense beliefs; we cannot help but act in accordance with those beliefs, namely in the complete conviction that others have minds, and that the future resembles the past. As supported by Thomas Reid, although it is theoretically possible to doubt these beliefs, they are not in practical doubt-worthy, for to doubt them would leave us paralysed with no good basis for action, disabled from carrying out even the most mundane day-to-day business. For example, how could I be sure that what is food today would not be toxic tomorrow? Since even the most persistent sceptic has no problem conducting everyday affairs, one can infer that scepticism of common-sense beliefs must be left aside as soon as life demands action. The merest possibility of being mistaken about common-sense beliefs gives us no good reason to doubt them; they have as good a claim to our assent as any other beliefs (more so than any weird beliefs we might be led to by doing too much philosophy anyway), for they are so fundamental to our way of thinking as to be impossible to reject.

This brings us to another strong argument to overcome scepticism – namely, the appeal to ordinary language. The sceptic claims that we cannot know anything because we cannot be certain of anything. However, in our ordinary lives we claim to know all sorts of things about which it is at least conceivable that we could be wrong. By equating knowledge with beliefs of absolute certainty, the sceptic is making a radical departure from the way the word "knowledge" is typically used, fabricating a peculiar philosophical definition in place of the original. But the sceptic has given us no good reason to accept the change. After all, words are meaningful because of social agreement on their definitions; they derive their meanings from usage in everyday contexts. We cannot just use words to mean anything we please! If I were to substitute the word "the" with "biscuit", for example, others would hardly understand me. Similarly, by trading on the mere possibility of being mistaken, philosophical doubt has altered the original, proper meaning of the term "doubt". By rejecting the sceptic's self-constructed definitions of "knowledge" and "doubt", we can overcome her arguments.

Do you mean living?
Give examples.

Good

<p>In fact, the most widely-accepted definition of knowledge is the Justified, True Belief (JTB) account. This proposes that a subject S knows proposition P if and only if:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) S believes that P. 2) P is true. 3) S has adequate evidence for P. <p>By the JTB account, [insert 1] certainty is not [insert 2] a condition for knowledge. Instead, what is needed is strong justification, and this can come about in different ways according to three different theories, namely foundationalism, coherentism and reliabilism. Foundationalism advocates the search for incorrigible, foundational beliefs upon which a superstructure of more complex beliefs may be constructed. These foundational beliefs are self-justifying and need no further evidence, thereby also halting the infinite regress of justification. Such beliefs may come from either experience or reason, depending on whether it is the empiricist or rationalist stand that one adopts. Meanwhile, coherentism deems justification for knowledge as a matter of the relations between beliefs. In other words, for a belief to be justified, it must cohere with the rest of one's beliefs. Finally, reliabilism evaluates justification according to the mechanism that produces it. The more reliable the mechanism, the better justified the belief. Such justification may be external to the mind, as in the case of a sea captain who uses a compass for navigation (thereby knowing the correct route to take) without actual knowledge of how the compass works. Thus, the JTB account of knowledge defeats philosophical doubt and scepticism by giving up certainty for justification as a condition for knowledge.</p>	<p>1: absolute 2: necessarily</p>
<p>On a final note, it has been proven in this essay that doubt can be overcome, by means of transcendental arguments, the appeal to common sense, the appeal to ordinary language, as well as the JTB account of knowledge. However, it must be noted that philosophical scepticism is not without purpose; on the contrary, it is a theoretical exercise that serves to investigate the strength of our knowledge claims, thereby clarifying what we can or cannot know, as well as establishing the nature of knowledge and justification. It is thus a useful tool that fosters a spirit of critical enquiry in us. Hence, in not subscribing completely to philosophical scepticism, we should nonetheless recognise its value and contribution towards a better-established body and theory of knowledge.</p>	<p>Not necessarily. Some philosophers require more certainty within the JTB framework; this is especially the case after the Gettier Problem.</p>

Comments:

Background on scepticism can be shortened. Spend more time giving examples. You have been quite thorough. Tie together The Cogito and foundationalism; Coherentism & Reliabilism can also be seen as responses to doubt in ways different from foundationalism.

Essay **34**

Title: Compare the roles played by reason and experience in at least two academic disciplines.

Name: Sim Jingwei

Class: 07S03A

The academic disciplines of mathematics, the experimental sciences and psychology are three interdependent, yet distinct, branches of knowledge. Since historical times, they have been used significantly to understand the physical world and human condition. Such forms of knowledge are furthered by two means: experience – the sensory observation of sound or visible changes, for instance; and reason – an internal reflective process that draws meaning from pre-existing ideas. Both reason and experience are used to differing extents in each discipline. Only by appreciating this fact can we discern the limitations of our knowledge and apply it realistically.

We first need to recognize that not all these disciplines involve the external world to the same degree. The goal of mathematics is to build up coherent principles like calculus from foundational operators and numbers. This system can exist detached from external reality. It exemplifies the rationalists' claim: sensation, which deals with appearances rather than logic, cannot disprove what is proven true by mathematical reasoning. On the other hand, scientific inquiry generally involves external phenomena, and psychology, studying human and animal behaviour. As science and psychology aim to explain events usually existing independent of the knower, we cannot merely depend on our own reasoning to make informed judgments.

With the nature of the disciplines established, the significance of reasoning differs in each. Reasoning is the primary process of mathematics. In setting up mathematics, mathematicians initially had to eliminate contradictory principles and devise rules of their own, all through reasoning. Furthermore, the system of mathematics can be used even if one reasons within a sensory "vacuum", as long as he has been educated in mathematical principles. For instance, a child would deem $2 + 3 = 5$ correct if he had been taught to define the symbols 2, 3, 5 and the addition operator as such. Reasoning, however, plays a more secondary role in the scientific method: when framing a hypothesis, one's reasoning is influenced by theories and experience. To design an experiment to discover photochemical reactions in plants, for example, we would have read up on botany or recalled experimental observations. When physically testing a premise, reasoning enables us to avoid sources of error and evaluate the resulting data. Similarly, a psychologist must draw links between a subject's deeds, words and thoughts. While it is technically possible for him to "know" his own mental processes by reasoning, this alone cannot give psychology credibility as an academic discipline. A psychologist thus needs to venture into the external world, making observations about others' behaviour before interpreting them.

For all its significance, knowledge gained through reason has its own constraints. Analytic knowledge (definitional, self-justifying; as opposed to synthetic propositions that result in new information) is usually involved in mathematics. Although 100% universal and objective, the resulting information is of limited use – individual equations cannot justify themselves when not in context of a mathematical system; they just are. Furthermore, the complex reasoning processes involved in science and psychology are not conclusive. They are only as accurate as their supporting empirical facts are reliable. Reasoning itself cannot be completely free from social biases, especially in psychology where behaviour is subjective and dependent on other factors (c.f. how Jean Piaget's studies on psychosocial development in children or how Freud's theories have been disputed endlessly). Neither can the process of inductive reasoning escape doubt. For instance, a skeptic would reject the conclusion that "all metals conduct electricity", since it was derived from premises applying only to *some* metals, *some* forms of electrical current and under *some* environmental conditions – those tested. The role of reason in science and psychology might thus be to offer as many comprehensive explanations for phenomena as possible, and to throw up more areas of academic research, rather than to give definite conclusions. Mathematics, in contrast, demands elegant, precise proofs.

Experience is only secondary in mathematics, but instrumental to science and moderately-important in psychology. Empiricists say that mathematicians first 'discovered' analytic truths by experience, observing recurring numerical patterns or using objects as variables in equations. Education makes use of the value of experience, harnessing visual examples to simplify concepts, such as using "three groups of two apples give six apples" to illustrate multiplication. However, the theoretical understanding of mathematical principles is still its focus. In science, sensory data triggers the reasoning process – recall how Newton's observation of an apple falling led to his discovery of gravitational

force. Even if *a priori* scientific knowledge existed, sensory experience would be required to uncover it. When senses cannot suffice, reasoning fills the gap, but this is done with less effectiveness or credibility. For example, models of atomic structure replace each other as and when ideas are generated or more 'conclusive' evidence is found, yet it is beyond human means or thought to verify whether the latest model actually corresponds to fact. On the other hand, mathematical axioms, once proven, are not prone to being 'replaced'. Sensory experience is quite crucial in psychology, and comes in the form of listening to subjects or watching subjects' movements, even before drawing conclusions about them.

Due to the unreliability of our senses, it is physically impossible to avoid experimental error in fields that involve empirical methods. This is not applicable to mathematics, but to the sciences, it is. In science, the veracity of our knowledge would be dependent on the state of technology or resources available that enable our sensory experience. For instance, the structure of antibodies could not be observed before the advent of electron microscopy. Whilst experimental science involves increasingly high-precision knowledge, psychology depends primarily on qualitative data. The problems associated with empirical observation affect the sciences to a greater extent than they affect mathematics.

Knowledge in all three fields will have to be judged by differing yardsticks, since the roles that reason and experience play in each of them have determined by far how credible or useful each of them are. While mathematics is a self-contained system and thus accurate in itself (extended only by reasoning from foundational concepts), science is dependent on sensory processes and synthetic content, developing propositions about things only partly- (or not at all) accessible by the human mind. Besides coming to conclusions about his own mental processes, the psychologist has the difficult task of observing others' behaviour and second-guessing their thoughts, using his own reasoning skills. Psychology straddles the middle ground of pseudo-science. When validating knowledge in these fields, we need to realize how limited our senses and reasoning abilities are in each context.

Comments:

Excellent work. You've not only shown a good grasp of rudimentary epistemology, you've also applied the concepts well to the three fields you've identified. This is a substantial comparison of the roles of reason and experience, with very appropriate examples. Perhaps you could:

- 1) spend a little more time discussing the relative roles of (and nature of) induction and deduction in science and math;**
- 2) qualify some of the statements in this paper for which I've indicated I hold some reservations.**

Essay 35

Title: "No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience." To what extent do you agree?

Name: Tan Bee Neo Melissa

Class: 07S03L

Empiricism, a branch of foundationalism, asserts that experience as prescribed by our five senses— sight, smell, hearing, touch and taste— is the ultimate bedrock of knowledge. On the other end of the spectrum, rationalism posits that each man possesses a set of innate ideas which will be rediscovered through reasoning as he grows wiser. These two schools of thought have been in long-standing opposition since their emergence in the epistemological debate. To a considerable extent, I feel that Man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience to encompass knowledge gained through reasoning. This is evident in the way rationalism is used to acquire knowledge in the areas of Mathematics and ethics. Furthermore, empiricism has other flaws, such as the doubts cast over the incorrigibility of empirical knowledge and the inability of knowledge acquired through empirical means to account for abstract concepts that cannot be derived through sense experiences alone. Yet, despite these criticisms, many of our daily tasks still make use of 'empirical truths'. This essay acknowledges that while some knowledge can be derived experientially, others cannot and thus a middle ground ought to be struck between the use of reason and experience in the formation of different kinds of knowledge.

The empiricists claim that through our sensory experiences, our minds have the ability to form concepts about stimuli which allow us to recognize and take on beliefs about it on subsequent encounters (Cardinal et al, 2005). Lockean empiricism would label the sensory experiences a man has as *sensations* and the concepts or 'internal sense' as *reflections*. For example, when eating a hamburger, a man would be using his senses of sight, taste, smell and touch to perceive the hamburger he believes he is in possession of. As he encounters these sensations, his mind is retaining a mental copy of this so that he can thereafter reflect upon this concept of 'hamburgers' anytime, even when he is not actually perceiving a hamburger.

The empiricists argue that knowledge acquired through our first-hand experiences are "immune from sceptical doubts" (Cardinal et. al, 2005) because the immediate presentation of sensory experiences to the mind (which is characteristic of human consciousness) permits no room for doubt and confers upon it self-justification and incorrigibility. It is only when we form inferences on our primary sensory observations (superstructural knowledge that events and objects exist) that we create the possibility of error. This perspective contends that knowledge cannot go beyond that of sensory experiences; without them in spheres of Chemistry and Biology, there would be no need to draw "spatial and temporal connection among data" to form new knowledge (DiSanto et. al, 1990). For instance, taxonomic classifications of all organisms would be impossible without empirical data; knowledge acquired through observation also forms the foundation of ecology and biodiversity. For these reasons, empiricist foundationalism claims to be "the heart and soul of knowledge" (DiSanto et. al, 1990).

While the conclusion above may appear to be reasonable, it cannot account for the existence of knowledge which is not dependent on sensory observations. Such knowledge tends to assume the form where innate ideas or reason plays a primary role. The rationalists would argue that in Mathematics, for example, sensory experiences should concur with the truths of mathematical reasons but they are not necessary requirements for the acquisition of mathematical knowledge; a mathematician is still capable of producing mathematical theories without actually having to encounter these truths using his senses. Other considerations include the innate capacity for humans to grasp languages and that of an inborn moral sense which are unlikely to have origins that can be perceived directly.

Similarly, empiricism does not fully account for abstract ideas which we can understand but are unable to experience using our senses. For instance, complex ideas like 'justice' are not objects which we can directly perceive, yet we can still acquire the concept by observing just acts. It remains unclear as to how the observation of just acts alone can lead to the formation of the concept of justice, hence leading us to question whether sense data alone is sufficient for us to obtain knowledge.

Empiricism does not convincingly account for concept formation either (Cardinal et al, 2005). To follow up on the previous example of the hamburger, it seems that the consumption of that one hamburger will allow me to conceptualise hamburgers. If I were to travel to a different part of the world where hamburgers were oblong and not

circular in shape, my current visual experience may tell me to reject my previous mental concept of the hamburger and yet I am able to recognise the similarities and modify my own concept of the hamburger. This suggests that people in different parts of the world may have a dissimilar concept of hamburgers from me. If our concepts of things are not universal truths, one man's knowledge of a particular thing would never be the same as another man's, so it is unlikely that his individual experience is the sole foundation of knowledge.

Other shortcomings in empiricism include the lack of credibility in the 'translation' process of our sensory experiences. When humans express their sensory experiences through language, we will inevitably be categorizing these experiences in relation to our previous experiences. This 'translation' of sensory perceptions may be open to human error (e.g. overlooking important details) or mis-description. As a result, the value of our knowledge becomes subject to the accuracy of the 'translation' process and not the sense data alone. Under such circumstances, Man's experience is likely to go beyond his sensual perception, along with his 'translated' sensations.

It has also been put forth that empirical truths may not be completely incorrigible. Humans may be influenced by their background assumptions that originate from their expectations and experiences, so despite being exposed to the same stimuli, they could respond differently.

Consider the following example: a girl who had her first encounter with a fierce dog goes away thinking that all dogs are unfriendly and dangerous. Her apprehension will affect all her future encounters with dogs as she distrusts the animal and believes that it will harm her. This girl is unlikely to try to befriend another dog on her own initiative because of her first experience even if the dog she encounters later could be smaller or more docile. However another child, a boy, who has several pleasant encounters with dogs, will show great enthusiasm in befriend another dog because he expects dogs to be friendly. When both children are introduced to the same dog, their preconceived notions about dogs will influence the 'translation' of their sensory perceptions more significantly than what their senses may tell them. This will in turn affect their behaviour towards the animal.

In conclusion, it can thus be seen that the knowledge derived through experiences alone will be insufficient to satisfy all forms of knowledge we have in the world. There needs to be a compromise struck between rationalist and empiricist ideas so as to allow us to function normally with indubitable basic truths. We must understand that reason will always be more prevalent in mathematical, logical, geometrical and moral spheres of knowledge where absolute certainty can be attained. However, in other fields of knowledge like Science, the same precision of knowledge cannot be achieved by reasoning alone as empirical data is also essential. The immutability of mathematical knowledge is also not common to every area of scientific knowledge. Nonetheless, it is undeniable though that the further expansions of many scientific theories often rely heavily on the use of reasoning and experiments are then performed to prove the hypotheses made. In view of these examples given, I believe that Man's knowledge can go beyond his experience.

Bibliography

Cardinal, D., Hayward, J. and Jones, G. (2005). Epistemology, the theory of knowledge. London: Hodder Murray.

DiSanto, Ronald L. and Steele and Thomas J. (1990). Guidebook to Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. New York: William Morrow and Company, pg. 163

Comments:

You bring up good counter-arguments against empiricism and you show a very good grasp of the issues raised by the empiricists and rationalists.

Some suggestions:

- 1) **Work on writing topic sentences for each of your main arguments. Make sure these sentences address the question.**
- 2) **Account for the empiricists' criticism of a priori knowledge — that it can be circular and not really informative.**

Essay **36**

Title: "No man's knowledge here can go beyond his experience." To what extent do you agree?

Name: Nicole Quah

Class: 07S06R

In the great debate between rationalism and empiricism, time and again people will find themselves wedged in the mire between arguing for either of these two great pillars of foundationalism. What is reason if there is no data about which we can reason, and what is the quality or use of data if it has yet to be processed? The argument seems to spring back and forth with no clear resolution in sight. Indeed, while this is the case for most accepted bodies of knowledge, it fails to be applicable to the specific set of knowledge we term theoretical knowledge. Now empiricists may argue against this fact based on several grounds, either that this theoretical knowledge is not independently useful (meaningless, basically) until it has been shown to have practical application, which would require the collection of sensory data, or that despite its classification as "theoretical", this knowledge still essentially requires concepts that cannot simply be derived if one's slate of experience is completely blank. It would seem then that experience is the ultimate limit of our knowledge, and it is tempting to argue so given that existence without experience seems both pointless and counter-intuitive, what more the concept of "thinking" or "knowing". Yet careful consideration reveals the loopholes that can in fact be exploited to demonstrate that while our intuition may dictate otherwise, it is indeed possible to establish knowledge beyond one's experience.

To start the ball rolling, consider the analysis of the forms of knowledge as cursorily introduced. Functional knowledge can be described as all the pieces of practical information we need in order to go about our daily lives with some form of purpose. For example, the proposition that my keyboard lies in front of me, and that typing on it will result in the production of my essay, is a piece of knowledge I involuntarily accept in order to perform daily activities, whether or not I be a proponent of scepticism. In this regard, functional knowledge essentially concerns itself with the physical world around us, and is thus inextricably tied to experience. The formation of concepts such as "pushing an object will cause it to move forward" are essential ideas we form during our infancy as we interact with the world. However, it is possible for a person's functional knowledge to extend beyond his own, direct experiences. This set of knowledge mainly encompasses common-sense related advice passed on from generation to generation, such as a mother's remarks that "if you go out and play in the rain you'll likely end up with a cold". These pieces of knowledge were formed based on some people's experiences, and hence are bound by "experience" in general, but are not necessarily limited by the individual's experiences as a person need not have actually tried playing in the rain to know that he should not do so. In this sense, a person's functional knowledge can extend beyond his own experience by instead relying on the experiences of others. Of course, some may take issue with this stand by claiming that what I have not experienced myself to be true should not be called knowledge, or that trusting the words of others requires a sense of confidence in the relationship that is only built up through experience. In this sense, if one had to be especially picky about the scope of "experience", I would have to agree that functional knowledge is inherently about experiential knowledge and hence is always limited by experience.

However, the issues are significantly different when it comes to the matter of theoretical knowledge. Theoretical knowledge can be seen to encompass mathematical knowledge and other related fields of knowledge such as theoretical physics, which in themselves form only one tiny portion of the great set of truths governing our world, that we may term the "*holos*". What is the true nature of theoretical knowledge, then? Would it be justified to consider mathematics simply a tautological expedition into the realm of the abstract, that really bears little significance given how mathematical axioms seem to be based on fundamental principles that are, by the definition we have ascribed to them, true? The clear counter-examples to this claim would be the usefulness of mathematics in describing physical phenomena, such as Balmer's discovery of the simple mathematical rule $m^2/m^2 - n^2$ behind the lines he observed in the hydrogen spectrum giving him the power to predict other lines that had not yet been observed. Yet in that case, could one not argue that such knowledge only becomes relevant when applied to the physical world and so its usefulness is inherently defined, or limited by sensory experience?

In answer to this, what one must take note of here is that we are considering whether or not one's knowledge is permanently limited by one's experience. And in the case of theoretical knowledge, then, we see that mathematical descriptions of physical phenomena yield much greater power and insight into their nature, and that this understanding far surpasses the boundaries and limitations of the sensory observations available to us currently. For example, Dirac's solution to an equation allowed him to postulate the existence of the positron many years before it was observed by

Carl Anderson. Even more dramatically, perhaps, we can see how the equations regarding the energy state etc. of an atom essentially provide all the information we might need to know regarding the forces within it and its interactions with other particles. Much of this information is derived through further mathematical investigation from certain established facts, and often are based little on the results of experimentalists beforehand. As a further example, take Einstein's postulation of the theory of relativity. The tools he used to derive his theory were basically conceptual thought experiments, mathematics, and the intuitive understanding that Maxwell's equations should be preserved. What we hence see from this is that it is, in fact, possible for one to derive greater insight into and about physical phenomena with simply pen, paper and quite a large dose of brilliant thinking. Others might claim that these conclusions should not be considered knowledge until they have received experimental validation, but in truth these validations only serve to pacify the faint-hearted. Those who have faith in the power of mathematics, its obligatory manifestation in all parts of the physical world, and the soundness of their argument know that it is only a matter of time and technological advancement before the necessary physical proof arises, and that the abstract proof was with them all along.

What then, of the fact that constructing such theoretical knowledge should still be, theoretically, impossible to a person who has not yet had experience, and therefore that experience will, by default, always be that insurmountable barrier between ourselves and our quest for knowledge? This argument is actually irrelevant because the issue at hand is whether or not one can have knowledge that surpasses what one has experienced, and so we find that while most forms of knowledge and general understanding of the world are arguably *built upon* our sensory input regarding the physical world, this does not mean that one cannot know things his experience does not allow him to fully understand. Fundamental concepts, for example, such as dimensionality (specifically in 3 dimensions), that we comprehend because of the nature of the sensory instruments we have been provided with, are easily challenged by notions such as 4, 5, 6- or even 12-dimensionality. Even though we do not have the capacity to fully grasp or imagine how such concepts would manifest themselves, this does not mean we do not know their (mathematical, perhaps) descriptions, effects and the phenomena they cause. We possess working knowledge of these concepts that does, clearly, exceed the confines of our experiential understanding.

On a final note, we find that the debate between rationalism and empiricism is actually not quite applicable to this question as we are really concerned with whether experience is a *limit* to one's knowledge, and not whether someone's knowledge has to ultimately stem from experience. With regard to this, careful analysis of theoretical knowledge does in fact prove the statement untrue, and it is on these grounds that I largely disagree with it. Nevertheless, if one were to take issue with the lexical interpretation of the question, it is possible too to view knowledge as outlined above from another angle, namely that if one accepts that certain mathematical axioms can be derived regardless of what environment one is placed in (take for example the concept of zero given our world, or the concept of integers/discrete objects given a hypothetical continuous world), those pieces of knowledge do not arise from experience, but rather from the mind's probing into a different realm entirely independent from the physical world. In this case, experience is not the ultimate source of such knowledge, as one does not need certain physical experiences to derive foundational mathematical concepts and thence greater networks of such knowledge. Once this has been established, we can see all the more that man does in fact have knowledge that far surpasses his experience. As mentioned before, man, through reasoning, can have access (albeit just a little) to that world which governs our world, and the knowledge of the existence of such a realm in itself, and the limitations of the physical world compared to that realm yields him much power. Kant distinguished between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world, and save for his inclusion of moral values, the idea proposed by the character Pygonopolis in *A Mathematical Mystery Tour* (A. K. Dewdney) is somewhat similar. He states simply, "Holos the source. Cosmos the manifestation." But unlike Kant, we do have a way of describing that other world and through that, of understanding our experiential (or phenomenal, if you wish) world better. And this greater level of knowledge has clearly gone beyond, both in terms of source and not, one's possible experiences.

Comments:

A well-focussed and directed piece that makes a convincing argument for the viability of knowledge derived beyond experience. I particularly appreciated the examples (Einstein, Dirac, Balmer) you raised to illustrate how knowledge of physical phenomena could in fact be derived with less dependence on experience than one would intuitively expect. Perhaps in your references to how mathematics can help us to construct theoretical knowledge, we can find some room for the discussion of the nature of mathematics itself: I'm not sure that it is a forgone conclusion that math is "entirely independent from the physical world", and that it therefore does not arise out of human experience at all.

Essay 37

Title: A priori knowledge should always be preferred over a posteriori knowledge. Discuss.

Name: Cheryl Quah

Class: 07S06R

When searching for a suitable bedrock of knowledge, knowledge of a form that is indubitable and incorrigible and that would thus allow us to affirm the certainty of resultant beliefs, two different foundational systems become apparent. One identifies certain, fundamental knowledge as knowledge in the form of innate ideas, knowledge that we arrive at or rediscover purely through faculties of reason. The other regards this as the knowledge that we gain from sensory experiences. Locked in debate for centuries, these two systems of knowledge appear quite at odds with each other, and as such beg the pertinent question as to which of the two is to be preferred. The former, *a priori* knowledge, seems to oft be more desired due to the absolute certainty it presents, perfectly fulfilling the very conditions of the search for it. Yet desirability is not dictated on single terms; rather it can be couched either in terms of the certainty of the knowledge or its usefulness. It is then possible to see that *a priori* knowledge and *a posteriori* knowledge really share equal ground, for where one prefers certainty, *a priori* knowledge reigns, yet where one prefers usefulness in gaining knowledge about the physical world in which we conduct our lives, it is *a posteriori* knowledge that is more adequate. At the end of the day one finds that both systems complement each other and should be used together for constructive development of all that we know.

A priori knowledge stems from the rationalistic enterprise and has its roots in mathematics. Such knowledge is an extension of the axioms in mathematics that are taken to be self-evident and true, and thus which render true all succeeding knowledge of increasing complexity that is built upon them. It is a form of knowledge that requires only our mind and faculties of reason, removing any reliance and dependence upon the senses. *A posteriori* knowledge on the other hand refers to knowledge first gained through observation and experience. Such sensory data and input form the basis from which further knowledge may be derived, and clearly give us access to our world and physical environment. A comparison of the two reveals that each proves the more preferable in different aspects.

Compared on the grounds of the certainty of the foundational as well as superstructural beliefs, it can be seen that *a priori* knowledge proves the stronger. Firstly, *a priori* foundational knowledge is by nature and definition completely self-evident and true. Whether considering the axioms of mathematics, Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*, or such analytic statements (statements true by definition) that constitute *a priori* knowledge (e.g. all men are mortal), one finds that each and every piece must be exactly as it is, and the truth-value of all such knowledge cannot be questioned. Subsequent superstructural knowledge, which similarly requires no experiential input, such as in the realm of mathematics, also holds to be indubitable. *A posteriori* knowledge, by contrast, is only ever contingently true, or in other words such knowledge can conceivably be otherwise. The properties and characteristics of our physical world which we deem to be true based on sensory experience may quite possibly be imagined to take on vastly different forms in other locations or under different circumstances, without ever running into contradictions. These properties are simply as we ascribe them according to our observation, and are not otherwise self-evident or inherent in the nature of what we describe. We therefore cannot arrive at a concept of contradiction, given how it is possible for us to ascribe any property in our descriptions and as such it is clear that we may currently very well be quite wrong about such descriptive matters. The contingent nature of *a posteriori* knowledge thus becomes grounds enough to justify regarding it with diminished certainty.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that an influence on the rationalistic enterprise and the search for *a priori* knowledge has verily been the notion of the fallibility or deception of our senses. The most common example of this would be illusions, where what is presented to our senses does not match up with what should actually be. Even so, supporters of *a posteriori* knowledge in the form of the empiricist approach to knowledge may claim that the 'true' nature of what one observes aside, one cannot possibly doubt the nature of our sensory experiences. This sensory data simply 'is', and as an aspect of our very consciousness, presents itself as incorrigible. Yet a second criticism remains that sensory data may only be treated as incorrigible if it has undergone absolutely no processing or categorization, and remains in its original form as simply 'given'. If one were to construct knowledge from an undifferentiated group of sensations however, it would necessitate a conceptual organization of these sensations, entailing comparisons and relations between past and present experiences and therefore in the process introducing room for doubt and error. In this examination and comparison again, *a priori* knowledge emerges unscathed, for knowledge gained before or

without experience and reliance on the senses is not subject to such room for doubt.

Yet apart from the certainty of the knowledge presented to us, one can imagine that another factor that might lead some to a preference of one form of knowledge over the other would be the usefulness of this knowledge in providing us with information about the physical world around us. When judging *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge on these terms, the tables are turned and now *a posteriori* knowledge appears the more desirable. If one is entitled to make the assumption that we do have access to the nature of the constituents of our physical world, bypassing the challenge of Berkeley that this would never be possible, it is evident that the knowledge gained through our senses is the one that allows us useful knowledge about the world, the only access we have to this world being our senses. *A posteriori* knowledge forms the basis of many fields of science and inquiry, enabling us to advance our understanding of the mechanics of our physical world, and allowing us to make changes to the manner in which we conduct our lives.

A priori knowledge, on the other hand, becomes limited by the very conditions that determine its certainty. Analytic statements are viewed as tautological, useless at providing us with new information about the world; knowledge apparent to us and gained strictly through reason alone forever remains only in the mental realm. Mathematics, while infinitely useful in fields outside itself, cannot escape the realm of abstract concepts without the invocation of observation and experiment, which form the basis of the scientific enterprise. Though it may be cited for its use in physics and other fields that do construct new knowledge about our world, mathematics still needs to draw on experiential knowledge in the process. It thus becomes clear that in the context of useful, practical knowledge, *a posteriori* knowledge is to be greatly preferred to *a priori* knowledge.

As we each proceed in our discourse concerning the classification and justification of our knowledge, it is crucial to note that it would not be prudent of us to subscribe to solely *a priori* or *a posteriori* knowledge. Both systems of knowledge have evident strengths as well as flaws, and each can satisfy our need for certainty and utility of knowledge in turn. It becomes apparent then that taken together, the two forms of knowledge, inasmuch as they appear to be at odds with the other, do actually serve to complement each other, allowing us to strike a balance between reaping the benefits of certitude and functionality. Thus it is imperative that we learn to recognize the value of *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge in contexts relevant to each, that we may understand the worth of both, and that we may be more successful as we strive to develop and collect a more comprehensive and inclusive store of knowledge for ourselves.

Comments:

You make some very good qualifications here and manage to weigh the relative merits of the two types of knowledge successfully and convincingly. Your language use is precise and you handle epistemological concepts and terms with ease. This essay will benefit from the use of specific examples to illustrate *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge, so that your readers can see more clearly what you mean when you say there are benefits to balancing comprehensiveness and accuracy in knowledge.

Essay **38**

Title: A priori knowledge should always be preferred over a posteriori knowledge. Discuss.

Name: Lim Jiin

Class: 07S07A

Essay	Marker's comments
<p>A posteriori knowledge, knowledge whose truth is determined by empirical investigation such as sensation and reflection, is seen by rationalists as inferior to a priori knowledge, which is obtained solely based on reasoning, and which is necessarily true. They argue that since our senses sometimes deceive us, they therefore should not be trusted, as the information we gain through our senses can never be completely certain, and will always be subject to change. However, only a limited body of knowledge can be gained a priori, for it is not possible to gain any new knowledge about the physical universe prior to experience. Therefore, this essay argues that in terms of certainty, a priori knowledge may be preferable as it is eternal and necessary. However, when evaluating the two types of knowledge based on which gives us new information about the world, a posteriori knowledge is preferable to a priori knowledge. Although a posteriori knowledge may be dubitable, it gives us our knowledge of the natural and social sciences; this is vital to our understanding of the world around us and our ability to function within it.</p> <p>Rationalists have preferred a priori truths over a posteriori truths due to their certainty. They are self-justifying, and therefore do not succumb to the infinite regress of justification. For example, mathematical knowledge, such as that $2 + 1 = 3$, is self-evident; further information will not prove it false. Knowledge that is true by definition is also a priori. To take Kant's example: "a bachelor is an unmarried male" is certain knowledge as a bachelor is defined as an unmarried male, and they are hence essentially the same thing.</p> <p>On the other hand, when it comes to a posteriori truths, it is difficult to ensure that one has obtained all the relevant empirical data required to come to a reliable conclusion. For example, based on one's experience of only having seen white swans in Europe, one may conclude that all swans are white. However, the discovery of black swans in Australia proves this conclusion wrong.</p> <p>Furthermore, while sense data themselves have been argued to be given and indubitable, this is in fact not true. Empiricists argue that it is impossible to doubt that one is having a certain experience at the present moment. For example, it is not possible for someone to doubt that she is really having the sensation of warmth when she is currently experiencing this sensation. However, knowledge of one's sense experience prior to categorisation is but knowledge by acquaintance. Such pieces of knowledge simply 'are'; they cannot be put into propositional form and therefore cannot be either true or false. It is only through interpretation of the sense data that knowledge claims about the sense data can be made, and factual knowledge about the physical world external to the mind obtained. However, this very categorisation of sense data involves an inference that may be wrong, as the categorisation involves linking the present experience with many other dubitable experiences in the past. The simple fact that these other experiences are retrieved from memory, which is sometimes inaccurate, makes them open to doubt.</p>	<p>Effective introduction</p> <p>Mention 'incorrigible'</p> <p>Give an example of a dubitable experience in the past.</p>

Therefore, it can be seen that the only indubitable knowledge that can be gained through experience is that experiences of sense data exist at the present moment; all factual knowledge gained a posteriori about the world external to our minds is indeed subject to doubt. Hence, with regards to their certainty, a priori knowledge should indeed be preferred over a posteriori knowledge.

However, the body of indubitable a priori knowledge is limited, and is not very useful in giving us new information about the world around us. Analytic a priori pieces of knowledge, such as knowledge that is true by definition, as well as the basic claims of mathematics, simply express what is already contained within the concept, and therefore do not tell us anything new. Hence, although mathematics may be applicable to the external world, new mathematical knowledge, which is gained a priori, can at most involve the establishment of new mathematical relationships.

Additionally, as Descartes argued, even though one can do thought experiments without the use of sense data, and derive 'clear and distinct ideas' such as that "all mountains have valleys", it does not follow that there are mountains in the world. Therefore, it can be seen that knowledge gained a priori may not correspond with what actually is the case in the world.

Meanwhile, although synthetic a priori truths such as "every event has a cause" do join two different concepts together, they in fact determine the way the mind is structured to make sense of the world, rather than tell us anything new about the world external to our minds.

As can be seen, the body of a priori knowledge is limited, and it is not able to give us new information about the world around us that have the potential to aid in the advancement of society.

On the other hand, although a posteriori knowledge is dubitable, absolute certainty is not necessary in the carrying out of everyday tasks, or the running of a society. Taking this into account, knowledge gained a posteriori is constantly able to give us new information about the world. For example, knowledge of the natural sciences has been and will continue to expand, with new species of animals and plants being discovered, and new chemical elements found.

Mention that such application will require experience

Perhaps talk about functioning on a daily basis

Additionally, this new information gained about the external world and how it works can often be put to practical use, such as knowledge of the natural sciences. For example, the way electricity works is a piece of knowledge without which many of the conveniences of modern life would be impossible. Experience also gives knowledge of the social sciences, such as an understanding of the relationship between employee morale and productivity, knowledge that is necessary to ensure the maximisation of productivity in the workplace.

Knowledge from the two fields mentioned above can only be gained a posteriori. For example, it is not possible to arrive at the generalisation that "all metals conduct electricity" before first knowing what the properties of a metal are. These properties of a metal cannot simply be deduced a priori, but require empirical gathering of data through scientific experimentation. Similarly for the relationship between employee morale and productivity, it is not possible to predict without experience that employee productivity will increase with improved morale. Instead, observations will have to be made, and studies done on this relationship before arriving at this piece of knowledge.

In conclusion, when using certainty as a criterion, a priori knowledge is preferable to a posteriori knowledge. Factual knowledge gained a priori are eternal and necessary, while factual knowledge gained a posteriori, with the exception that experiences of sense data exist at the present moment, are all subject to doubt due to the very inference involved in interpreting sense data into a propositional form. However, when the ability of the knowledge to tell us information about the external world is instead used as a criterion, a posteriori knowledge is preferable to a priori knowledge as it is able to give us new information about various aspects of the world around us, while a priori knowledge can, at most, include the establishment of new relationships between already existing concepts, some of which, like maths and geometry, are applicable to the external world.

Comments:

This is a work of excellent quality. It shows good understanding of epistemological concepts, is very well structured, and successfully makes a case against the statement raised by the question. Well done.

I've made some suggestions within the paper, but will add here that you should always strive to illustrate your paper with well-chosen examples of knowledge. You've done this well in this paper, but can afford to give even more sophisticated examples. E.g. String Theory, Theory of Relativity. Through these examples, you may yet find further arguments for the a prior way of knowledge construction.

Also try to elaborate on the examples instead of only citing / listing them. This helps to convince readers more.

Finally, tie your conclusion back to the question directly: for instance: "One cannot then say conclusively as the statement in the question does, that a priori knowledge should always be preferred over a posteriori knowledge, for as this essay has attempted to show, there are instances in which...", etc.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this issue in one way or another.