

MESSAGE FROM THE PRINCIPAL

In this issue of KS Bull, we bring you some of the best essays that our students in GP and KI have written over the past months.

If you are looking for good tips on how to communicate with impact and how to write essays that are memorable, some good places to look are Commencement Speeches. Steve Jobs spoke to a Stanford crowd at the 2005 Commencement and inspired us with his down-to-earth stories built around three themes: connecting the dots, love and loss, and death. The speech is a compelling read. Google it.

J K Rowling, best-selling author of the Harry Potter series, spoke of the benefits of failure and the importance of imagination at the 2008 Harvard Commencement. Her text was simple yet powerful, peppered with wisdom wrought from personal and painful experiences. One of the best examples of rhetoric can be found in this paragraph:

"If you choose to use your status and influence to raise your voice on behalf of those who have no voice; if you choose to identify not only with the powerful, but with the powerless; if you retain the ability to imagine yourself into the lives of those who do not have your advantages, then it will not only be your proud families who celebrate your existence, but thousands and millions of people whose reality you have helped transform for the better. We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better."

Another compelling speech is Samantha Power's, at the 2008 Commencement of Pitzer-Claremont College, where she warned us to be wary of those who claim to have specialised knowledge on the way things should turn out, in our lives or in the world:

"The experts deal in probabilities, but you all have the chance to decide on possibilities and make what is possible real."

Power uses quotations, compelling examples, humour, personal illustrations and poignant stories – devices used by the best writers – to support five key themes by way of exhorting the young graduates:

"As you figure out your path in life, try to follow your nose; be sure to create quiet time so you maximise the chances you will be able to hear your gut when it speaks to you; by far the most important quality one needs in life is not in fact talent; it is resiliency; find friends who have your back; and please be a good ancestor."

Read the text for yourself. Great advice. Great speech. Great writing skills.

Enjoy.

AuspiciuM Melioris Aevi.



Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)
Principal
Raffles Junior College



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Do foreigners bring more problems than benefits to your country?

Aakriti Jain
07S06L

In today's globalised world, foreign immigrants and workers are becoming a common sight in many countries. Singapore too, is seeing an increasing number of foreigners on her shores, both as tourists and migrant workers. There has also been much debate over the influx of foreign talent, as many local Singaporeans feel that foreigners are a threat both to their jobs as well as to the social stability of our nation. While some of these concerns are valid and just, I maintain that, on the whole, the benefits we gain from foreigners coming to our country far exceed the problems created.

One of the common complaints against foreigners is that the increasing number of foreign workers here is a threat to the job security of local Singaporeans. Many feel that these foreigners are taking up jobs that would otherwise have gone to Singapore citizens. This seems to be a valid concern, considering the increasing number of foreign workers here, from countries like India, Bangladesh and the Philippines. Thus, it appears as if foreign workers may have exacerbated the problem of unemployment in Singapore.

However, I feel that these concerns are exaggerated. Firstly, these foreign workers often just cause a shift in the kind of jobs available rather than actually reducing the actual number of jobs. For example, many of the foreign workers in Singapore are those holding low-skilled jobs, such as construction workers from Bangladesh and domestic helpers from the Philippines. These workers, by taking over some of the lower-end jobs, encourage a shift to more high-skilled jobs among the Singaporeans. Singapore is moving towards a knowledge-based economy and as such, the highly educated workforce of Singapore is not very disadvantaged by the influx of low-skilled workers, as the jobs they take over are more than compensated for by the jobs created. There is a shift towards a more skilled population and workforce, which is beneficial for Singaporeans. Hence, foreign workers have only filled the vacuum created by Singaporeans unwilling to take up such jobs; they have not threatened the employment prospects of the locals.

Skilled immigrants can also be beneficial to Singapore. As it is often said, Singapore's only resource is people, and as such, it is important for us to increase our talent pool and attract prominent names to our country. Such foreign talent can stimulate the growth of our firms and industries and bring about greater economic growth for our country. This growth will also attract more foreign firms and investors here, creating many jobs for Singaporeans that can more than compensate for those that might have been lost. Furthermore, Singaporean workers can learn from these experts and upgrade their own skills and expertise, thereby increasing their productivity. For example, Singapore has recently been successful in attracting the renowned Dr Alan Colman to the Biopolis. The benefits of his research can now be passed on directly to Singaporeans, and he can also boost Singapore's reputation as a leading hub in biotechnology research, attracting more researchers here. Thus, the benefits brought about by the increase in foreign talent in our country more than outweigh the losses.

Furthermore, it is important to remember that "foreigners" do not only refer to those who come here to work, but also includes tourists. In this respect, it can be seen that these foreign tourists bring many benefits to our country. The Singapore Tourism Board (STB) is promoting Singapore as a perfect weekend getaway for people in the nearby region and with the opening of the Integrated Resorts in the future; tourism seems to be

adding towards becoming a booming industry in Singapore. This is a positive sign for our economy as local, especially those in the hospitality industry, benefit greatly from the tourist dollar. Thus, it can be seen that tourists can bring great benefits to our economy.

Besides economic benefits, foreigners can also bring social and cultural benefits to Singapore. Foreigners bring with them the culture of their home country and this can add vibrancy and enrich the cosmopolitan nature of our society. Our traditional mixture of Indian, Chinese and Malay cultures is now being further enriched by Spanish, Italian and French cultures. Walking down Clarke Quay, one is now bombarded by a wide range of sights, smells and sounds from the diverse restaurants of every culture possible. This increases the social vibrancy of Singapore and truly promotes us as a world-class city which is open to all foreigners.

Of course, there is some concern that the influence of other cultures may not always be a good thing for our society. Singapore is traditionally a conservative society and the influx of too many so-called Western values and ideals may cause uneasiness among our population. For example, the increase in foreigners in Singapore has brought along an increasing awareness of homosexuals in society, and a greater call for them to be accepted as part of society, as they have been part of a culture that is more open to alternative lifestyles.

This is attested to by the opening of several bars here which cater solely to homosexuals, as well as by the government announcing that it will allow homosexuals to hold jobs in the civil service. This has resulted in a uproar amongst the more conservative Singaporeans. Thus, if the values and ideas brought by these foreigners to Singapore are in conflict with local ones, there may be some antipathy towards them which could diminish our social unity. Although this concern is valid, I think that overall, the increase in cultural and social vibrancy brought about by these foreigners outweighs this problem. It may in fact encourage us to be more open-minded and accepting of diverse views and lead to a more tolerant society.

In conclusion, I feel that foreigners, whether as workers or tourists, are an inevitable part of the Singaporean society. Rather than focusing on the potential problems that they may cause, we should realise that, in the end, foreigners will bring many economic benefits to our society, increase the cosmopolitan nature of Singapore and create a more tolerant population.

Comments:

Good work. Sensible, fluent and balanced arguments here. Keep it up! Discussion could have also considered the sentiments of the lower educated in Singapore, as well as the policies in place to help them.



Do foreigners bring more problems than benefits to your country?

Cheryl Yang Yanru
07S06L

With the advent of globalisation, there have been vast improvements in travel technology and a great reduction in barriers that have limited human interaction previously. This has led to an increase in labour mobility, where workers from different countries can now migrate overseas in search of better career prospects and standards of living. To gain from the benefits that these foreign workers can bring, Singapore has adopted a panoply of pro-immigration policy, in order to encourage the influx of more foreign workers, who have the potential to give our economy a much needed boost. However, some critics have decried this move by the government, as they feel that the problems brought about by these foreign workers pose an imminent threat to our country's social and economic stability, outweighing the possible benefits they may bring. In my opinion, I feel that the worries expressed by these opponents are unfounded. With appropriate fiscal policies undertaken by the government, I strongly feel that the influx of foreigners has the potential to bring about more benefits than problems.

Some people may feel that the presence of foreign talent in Singapore is a threat, as they have the ability to displace local workers from their jobs. Moreover, the presence of those workers implies that there will be stiffer competition for the jobs that are available in the economy. If this problem is not tackled effectively by the government, it may lead to problems such as higher unemployment rates and a general sense of displeasure among the masses, which have the ability to affect the well-being of fellow Singaporeans. In a Straits Times survey published recently this year, a large proportion of Singaporeans are found to have a negative impression of foreigners, especially towards those from countries such as China and India, as they felt that they represented a huge threat to their 'rice bowls'. Thus, the replacement of local workers by foreigners in their respective jobs can be regarded as a serious problem that is of utmost importance in Singapore.

However, it is also important to note that the presence of foreigners here has the potential to produce positive spillover effects. With the influx of more foreign workers living and working in Singapore, other foreign firms and investors may be encouraged to invest and set up their headquarters here as well. The investments made by these overseas firms can lead to a multiplier effect, which will in turn boost our economic growth and enable our country to remain prosperous and competitive. The presence of many multinational corporations in our country, such as IBM, American Express and Apple, attests to the potential benefits that foreigners can bring us. Perhaps, with the inflow of more foreigners, other foreign firms will also be interested in setting up a branch office here as well. This can then lead to the creation of more jobs in the long run, which will benefit our local workers greatly. Hence, it is possible for foreigners to bring about benefits to our country as well.

Yet, some critics state that the presence of foreigners can affect our social stability as these immigrants have the potential to cause social problems if they are not integrated into our society properly. Without appropriate policies to ensure that these foreigners are assimilated into our Singaporean society, these immigrants may end up mixing around with only fellow immigrants of the same ethnic group and risk isolation from the rest of the Singaporeans. This phenomenon may in turn escalate into higher crime rates and social unrest, which can disrupt the peace and harmony in our nation. Therefore, these critics feel that the influx of foreigners should not be encouraged as it poses a threat to our nation's social fabric.

On the other hand, the presence of foreigners can also add more diversity to our culture and values, enabling Singapore to become a global city with a certain buzz around it. When more foreigners migrate to Singapore, they bring along with them their unique culture and values that will further enhance the vibrancy of our mosaic of ethnic cultures. This will help Singapore in our development to become a city with this 'X-factor' and bring our nation one step closer to being on par with other cosmopolitan cities such as Boston, London and New York. By sealing its reputation as a country with a melting pot of cultures and values, Singapore is likely to achieve benefits such as an increase in tourism rates, which can in turn boost our economy and establish our nation as a brand name. Therefore, the inflow of foreigners is something that should be actively encouraged by our government due to the myriad of benefits that it can bring to our nation.

Most importantly, the presence of foreigners also helps to enlarge the talent pool and improve the quality of our labour force. Singapore is a country with very limited natural resources. Hence, we depend heavily on our human resources to keep our economy running. In recent years, the emergence of an aging population has affected the dependency ratio adversely, putting a strain on our diminishing labour force. Therefore, it is essential to encourage the influx of more immigrants so as to fill up the shortage in our labour force. The import of foreign talent can also help to increase the quality of our workforce, enabling it to be more efficient and productive. For example, the presence of Dr Alan Colman, of "Dolly the sheep" fame, in our local biomedical hub has helped to add more credibility to the biomedical research done here. Recently, under his leadership, our biomedical hub has successfully become the first in the world to produce clinical stem cells, a feat that has established our reputation in the international arena. Another example would be that of Dr Yoshiaki Ito, a cancer specialist, who has also contributed much to the research of cancer treatments in our local medical industry. Thus, from the examples that are listed above, it is evident that foreigners have the potential to bring about many benefits to Singapore by contributing positively to our labour force.

In conclusion, after weighing all the possible advantages and disadvantages that foreigners bring, it is crucial to decide if the intended benefits will outweigh the negative side effects that may occur. In my opinion, in order to maximise the benefits gained from the influx of foreigners and to minimise the possible problems that they may bring, the government and the citizens of Singapore have a large role to play. Firstly, the government should implement appropriate fiscal policies to encourage the influx of foreigners and to ensure that they are well integrated into our local society. Pro-immigration policies such as the allowance of foreigners to work in Singapore for a six-month period so as to encourage the presence of more foreign talent should be broadly implemented. The establishment of a Citizenship Day, an event for new citizens of our country to take their oath of allegiance in front of Members of Parliament is also an appropriate way to welcome these people and to make sure that they feel at home in Singapore. The public can also help in the assimilation of foreigners by being more accepting of the differences between them. This can then help to create a more harmonious and peaceful society and ensure that the potential benefits that can be gained from the presence of foreigners will far outweigh the possible side effects that can occur.

Comments:

Fluent, coherent and balanced arguments with a good range of examples. Keep it up!

How will global warming change the face of politics in the near future?



Tan Zhi Xu
07S06L

In today's fast-paced and industrialised world, it is hardly rare to see cars on congested roads. Clouds of smoke emerging from factories, as well as bustling airports with aeroplanes rapidly transporting passengers and goods between far-off places may seem common. What is overlooked by the average man is instead the negative impact our everyday actions have on the environment. Global warming has long been identified as a problem our world faces. Given the increasing awareness among the general populace and heightened pressure from environmental interest groups, politicians are now faced with tackling the problem of global warming and unsustainable growth. Global warming will thus play an increasingly important role in shaping the face of politics.

As the average Joe becomes increasingly concerned about his environment, politicians have spotted the trend and jumped on the bandwagon to take advantage of the recent fervour. The United States' presidential race has thus far seen many candidates hurrying to boost their green credentials. While Barack Obama of the Democrats supports the cap-and-trade emissions scheme, Republican candidate Rudy Giuliani on the other hand campaigns for more lax control in the face of slow economic growth. Debates between presidential candidates have yielded varying conclusions; however, the importance placed upon global warming and the environment cannot be neglected. In another example, the Tories in the United Kingdom have traditionally campaigned on a green platform. Yet with Gordon Brown's Labour Party proposing new green legislations, they have lost their edge and recently moved to various social issues such as youth crime. Global warming has caught the attention of the general public. Politicians, at the mercy of the public's whim, are thus not spared from showing concern.

Moreover, global warming has become such a concern that there is now a trend of international and regional initiatives targeted at reducing emissions. The Kyoto Protocol, aimed at reducing carbon dioxide emissions, has many signatories, with countries setting targets for themselves in a worldwide effort to 'save' the Earth. Although there were countries which did not take part - the United States is a key example - one can spot the trend of global warming as a common issue which requires the cooperation and participation of many countries. More recently, as Germany took the rotating seat in the European Union (EU) council, tackling climate issues was one of their main concerns. It is not difficult to expect global warming to continue bringing politicians and politics from different countries closer in the near future.

Yet, one can also spot another trend the issue of global warming has brought about, the bullying of less established countries. While the Kyoto Protocol targeted predominantly carbon dioxide emissions in the developed world, leaving the developing world more space for development (and pollution), there has been a recent turn of events. The EU initiative to reduce emissions by 8% by 2025 has seen the old EU club bullying newer EU members. During the most recent request for pollution permits, 'important' members like the British, Dutch and French were awarded above 90% of what they requested. On the other hand, countries in the new EU region received merely 40-50% of what they requested. This apparent disparity highlights the possibility of heavyweight countries with bargaining powers taking advantage of smaller and less influential countries at precisely the time when energy (and hence pollution and global warming) is necessary for their development. Global warming can thus be said to have increased the use of bargaining power and unfair

bullying in politics.

Also, the leaning of governments on large industries or multinational corporations (MNCs) may be forced to end in the near future. Vested interest groups have always had a part to play in politics, as have large companies employing many workers and contributing to a large proportion of a country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Industries such as the automobile industry or national airline carriers have often enjoyed special liberties provided by politicians eager to gain popularity. In the face of global warming, this might change instead. Lobbies by car companies against the mandatory reduction of emissions per mile within the EU have seen no significant impact. Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, could indeed be applauded for sticking to her policy targets, despite the stake at home, given Germany's large car manufacturing industry, producing labels like Porsche. Many airlines also enjoy fuel subsidies, providing an edge for them to compete with other modes of transport especially in short-haul flights. Scientific research has proven air travel to be the most carbon intensive mode of transport, yet due to the overwhelming concern for the survival of domestic airlines, it would take some time before governments would leave such major companies to market forces. Taking the global concern for global warming into consideration, however, makes it plausible that governments would be less easily swayed by large firms in the near future.

Lastly, global warming has also brought an about turn in politics, renewing the historical tendency to lay claims on territory for natural resources. National boundaries may have been demarcated clearly many decades ago (although some are still being hotly contested), yet, a large region of Earth still belongs to no one - the Arctic. Recent times have seen a Russian submarine placing a flag in the seabed and collecting samples from the Arctic while Canada's Stephen Harper personally made a trip to lay claim to the territory. With global warming comes the melting of polar icecaps and resources previously inaccessible or too expensive to be feasibly harvested can now be targeted. This has captured the interest of many countries around the region because the United Nations once set the boundaries of each country's claim to 20 nautical miles beyond its borders, leading to overlapping claims by different countries. In fact, the United States has recently expressed renewed interest in making its claims known as well, despite the long wait of more than ten years it would probably be before it would rectify its claim. As evident, natural resources now have an increased role in politics, egged on by the phenomenon - global warming.

Global warming is, as the name suggests, a global issue and requires the cooperation between leading bodies of various countries. While this has played an important part in shaping the face of politics today and most probably will in the near future as well, one can question the extent of its impact. Despite recent interest in renewable energy in China, much of the effort has come from the private sector instead. France's standing as one of the cleanest countries due to its use of nuclear power also provides Sarkozy more freedom to focus on other issues during his term and leverage upon which to criticise his peers. The impact global warming will have on the world of politics in the near future is undeniable. The extent, and direction towards which, politics change, however, varies from country to country.

Comments:

There is obvious evidence of extensive reading and a good memory for details here! Arguments are comprehensive, original and incisive - which made for a thoroughly engaging read.

You might also want to explore the argument about the impact of oil on politics- especially dependence on and relations with Middle Eastern countries - and how the dynamics of these relations could possibly change in the near future, if we were to look for alternative energy sources.

Is work-life balance a realistic aim in today's society?



William Leon Kwek Xiu Xiong
07A13A

The term "work-life balance" has invited its fair share of scepticism and criticism in recent times. In today's highly globalised and intensely competitive environment, can one afford to deviate from the single-minded pursuit of riches, or, at least, job security? The balance of career commitments with those of family or even personal leisure has proved tricky for both societies and governments, with practices to achieve this lofty goal mostly deemed either tokenistic or plain ineffective. Yet, if we were to observe Singapore as we know best and examine other developed nations, especially the United States or the Scandinavian countries, we find that work-life balance is not only realistic, but being practised as we speak. The resounding lesson for us - a focus on non-work commitments does not have to compromise productivity; it is possible to achieve both ends.

Surely not, says the majority of Singapore's workforce. Our exposure to foreign competition and talents mean that feeding our families can be a challenge in itself, especially for those in the middle to low income range. This can be examined on two levels. Firstly, private companies and workers have to embrace this whole notion of work-life balance, because they are the ones who can directly implement policies and are the ones who are directly impacted by the consequences. Unfortunately, investing in work-life balance is a risk, one with intangible long-term benefits, and one which few companies are willing to take. The profit motive and bottom lines are far stronger areas of emphasis. On the second level, governments have to take on a proactive role in the promotion of work-life balance. Yet, in Singapore, known for her highly innovative and productive workforce, the government's message of maintaining economic advantages is far more resonant than that of work-life balance, and we cannot blame the government for it. In societies where economic success is a priority (it is important everywhere, the question is whether they are at risk of losing it, or struggling to achieve it), work-life balance has played second fiddle. The common mentality is that economic survival or prosperity has to be accompanied by a work-centred lifestyle, and this is the most common reason cited to explain why work-life balance remains an idealistic prospect.

However, even if this were the case, what are we to say to the evidence that economic prosperity and a focus on personal life are not mutually exclusive? In fact, it is suggested (and proven) that work-life balance improves productivity rather than diminishes it. Workers are more motivated, in better mental and physical health and in a better position to contribute more to society and to their employers. Consider France, where there is a strong emphasis on the importance of family life. Women are encouraged to have children, and parents are encouraged to take care of them. Yet France remains an economic superpower not just in Europe, but in the world. The same may be said for Sweden, with her pro-family policies that provide employees with an outlet for their family duties.

The precise mechanisms through which this can be achieved are multifarious. The most common example is that of flexible working hours, which leave workers to decide the most convenient periods to be in the office so long as productivity and efficiency are not compromised. Working from home (via the use of the Internet), especially in times of child birth, is not uncommon. More encouragingly, governments are leading by example. The civil service in the United States is at the forefront of promoting working practices that leave employees with space and time for other pursuits. To reiterate my point: Sweden and the United States

immediately come to mind when discussing economic progress in the face of globalisation. There is a clear alignment of personal interests with the company, or even, national goals.

Also, it is not only family that is being discussed. Companies look to maximise employees' welfare and reach a balance between work-time and play-time. Fortunately for Singapore, several large multinational corporations are doing just this. McDonald's Singapore brings its employees overseas for a time of relaxation and recuperation on a regular basis. OCBC Bank has its own version of a "Sports Carnival", where employees feel the heat of the sun as opposed to corporate pressures for once. Is it a coincidence that both companies are leaders in their respective industries? Clearly, achieving a work-life balance is not as unrealistic as we initially perceive it to be.

We return to the starting point of our discussion - does work-life balance have a place in today's society? The above examples suggest that it is not only possible, but also, to some extent, beneficial for both companies and countries. Of course, there are several conditions to keep in mind.

Firstly, it is clear that prevailing mindsets play a pivotal role in determining the extent to which work-life balance practices can be successful. People have to believe that personal and family time can go in tandem with career aspirations. Only if people truly embrace such attitudes will the intended effects of work-life balance, a healthier and more efficient workforce, be observed.

Secondly, not unrelated to the first, is the role of the government. On the one hand, the civil service in Singapore abides by its five-day work week policy fairly well. On the other hand, the Prime Minister's constant harping on maintaining competitiveness may in fact lead to adverse consequences for work-life balance. In last year's National Day Rally, the Prime Minister issued a warning of the dire consequences that await those who are left behind in the global race for success. It is little wonder that many Singaporeans find the idea of work-life balance fairly hard to swallow. If the government were to take a more vocal and consistent stance in promoting work-life balance, we could be on our way to seeing some change.

In conclusion, the absence of visible efforts to achieve work-life balance in Singapore does not mean that it is incompatible with the goals of globalisation and competitiveness. There have been sporadic attempts to rectify the situation, which may suggest that it is a matter of "how much" rather than "if". It can even be said that work-life balance has a larger place in today's society, so that we remain, fundamentally, human at heart rather than cogs in a well-oiled machine. Work-life balance is not and should not be just a catchphrase.

Comments:

Strenuously argued stand. A full answer with appropriate examples.

Is work-life balance a realistic aim in today's society?



Juliet Liew Shan Meng
07A13A

It is said that the society we live in today runs on gears well-oiled by coffee - the drink that has become the modern-day workers' drug. This analogy mocks the predominance of work today and how it appears to have taken over all remnants of our personal lives. Even so, achieving a balance between one's career and one's personal life - be it building a family, friendships or pursuing personal goals - is not an unrealistic goal to strive for in the face of seemingly overwhelming odds.

Unfortunately, the odds can be particularly demanding. With the globalisation of economic activity and the increased integration of the labour force, there is an undeniable strain on all workers. Job competition on a global scale is perceived as a threat to increase one's work productivity, or face the dreaded O-word - outsourcing. Pressure on this scale takes a toll on workers, and it is normally their families that are neglected in the process. Therefore, to many in this situation, a work-life balance can appear not only unrealistic, but even unheard of.

With so much emphasis on careers today, it is not surprising that a set of values and ethics have evolved at the workplace. It is even less surprising then that these business ethics have negative implications for one's personal time. For example, in Asian countries, particularly in Japan, leaving work punctually at five o' clock is regarded as a sure sign of 'skiving' (local slang meaning 'shirking one's responsibility') on the job. In order to convey the impression of being hardworking, many workers therefore remain at the office till late - sacrificing time with their families in the process. The overwhelming social pressure to put one's career first can indeed make achieving a work-life balance an unrealistic task.

Furthermore, there is greater access to higher education today and people easily equate their careers with life ambitions such that there may appear to be less of a need for a personal life. After all, if self-actualisation and one's career are one and the same, a work-life balance to allow time for individual pursuits would seem unnecessary. The rising proportion of singles in developed economies seems to exacerbate this trend, as there is less of a need to set aside time for family. In view of this, it would appear that as work-life balance is unrealistic, societal expectations and lifestyles may have changed to make it no longer desirable.

On the other hand, there is growing evidence of a change in perceptions that may be retaliation against today's workaholic lifestyle. Where it was once acceptable for the father, the breadwinner, to be absent from the daily comings and goings of his own family, it is now increasingly frowned upon. The lack of strong parental guidance in a child's growing years has been blamed for problems ranging from behavioural problems in children to social ills such as crime. For working parents, a work-life balance is therefore an important and perhaps the only realistic way of raising healthy children in a world today that may not be conducive for a child's growth, given influences such as the sometimes less than desirable messages by the media.

Even in the workplace, there is evidence of retaliation against a lifestyle that revolves around work. A survey of top business professionals by Forbes reveals that having flexibility in working hours to allow for time with the family is an increasingly important criterion in accepting job offers. Some managers surveyed even

remarked that they would sacrifice higher pay for a job that offers a reasonable salary but gives them time to spend at home. As businesses the world over are realising that accommodating a work-life balance is an important strategy to attract and retain top professionals, achieving such a balance becomes more of a possibility.

Governments have also come round to the realisation that economic prosperity is not driven by economic activity alone, as the social health of a country is similarly important. Measures such as the Five Day work week and granting paternity leave in Singapore may be limited in helping its people achieve such a balance, but are evidence of the shifting social perception that having a personal life and a family life are important. With this perception changing at the policy level to support the change at the ground level, it is no doubt that finding a balance between the workplace and the home will be an increasingly possible task.

The same technology that is often blamed for distancing people is slowly evolving to bring people together and help them balance their careers and their families. Web-chat services and free video-communication services such as Skype allow business professionals on overseas trips to stay in touch with their loved ones. In Japan, there is even an online service that lets parents "play" with their young children through the web. Technology is therefore giving the "work-life balance" a new twist by allowing people to stay in touch with home even when on the job.

Ultimately, it may depend on one's personal definition of what a work-life balance is. If it is defined as spending equal amounts of time at home and at work, achieving such a demanding balance may be unrealistic as it may place too great a strain on the working individual. However, if one defines it as having quality time with one's loved ones, then it may be possible to build relationships with friends and family that can withstand the test of time, and the test of not having time.

Comments:

Good work! Thorough, comprehensive coverage of points and with appropriate examples. An interesting read - very enjoyable! Keep it up!

"Science encourages doubt; religion quells it." How far do you agree?



Andrea Gan Yingtian
07S06L

photo ~~Karl Marx once said, "Religion is the opiate of the masses".~~ Indeed, the seeming perennial conflict between science and religion is reflected in the implicit assumption in the statement that "science encourages doubt; religion quells it". That religion, based on the intangible substance of faith and belief, has a ~~numbing narcotic effect~~ on scientific progress is an issue that has, and will continue to affect all spheres of society. Yet, it is narrow-minded and myopic to claim that only science promotes the questioning of uncertainties, consequently leading to scientific discoveries, while religion only seeks to stifle all such attempts and to impede scientific progress. Rather, this writer believes that both science and religion encourage the probing of possibilities, and both try to quell that very doubt by trying to provide answers at times to a large extent.

stance Many critics argue that history provides countless examples in which religion indeed vehemently tried to stop scientists and researchers from pursuing a deeper understanding of the world. A classic example would be how Galileo's hypothesis that the earth revolved around the sun was deemed outrageously blasphemous to the Church, as religious leaders then firmly believed that the sun and all the other planets revolved around the earth. Now, we know beyond a shadow of doubt that the earth truly revolves around the sun, as astronomers have proven so through empirical study. In his time, Galileo faced interrogation, threats and even incarceration for pursuing his research. While few can deny that religious doctrines and fear of God's wrath may be significant factors that hindered the progress of science, could it be that the figures of authority who wanted to secure their power and control over the masses have also played a part? If so, then perhaps it would not be religion per se that quells doubt, but power-hungry leaders who did not want to cause chaos and opposition who did so under the guise of religion.

In today's society, while the separation of the Church and the State has resulted in a significant diminishing of religions hindering scientific discovery in such a fashion described above, morals and ethics stemming from religious beliefs still continue to affect the scientific and political sphere. The banning of controversial issues like cloning and stem-cell research in many countries is testimony of that. It is indeed a valid argument that while science opens up such new realms of exciting opportunities; moral standards seem to be a stumbling block. Yet, it is important that moral standards serve as a check and balance to ensure that the frenetic pace of science does not go out-of-hand, for what is scientific achievement if it eventually leads to disregard for the sanctity of the very life that it tries to improve? Hence, while it must be acknowledged that at times moral and ethical standards do seem to be roadblocks on the scientific journey, they are, to a large extent, justified.

However, there are many instances where both science and religion do not claim to have all the answers, and encourage deeper analysis and questioning of uncertainties thus. Science acknowledges that man's ability to comprehend the world through empirical methods is limited, and even the religions admit that they will never have all the answers as the ways of their gods are higher than theirs. The highly contentious issue of creation and origin, for example, shows how science and religion both promote uncertainty. While scientists in the past were adamant that the Big Bang Theory and Darwin's Theory of Evolution were correct, Lee Strobel, a lawyer and journalist who wrote the book "The Case for Faith", discovered that a large majority of scientists now see loopholes in their arguments that creation came from absolutely nothing, as it defied the

cause-and-effect laws of the physical world. Different religions, on the other hand, have varying explanations on how the world came to be. For example, while Hindus believe that the world originated from a unique mass, Christians believe that their omniscient and omnipotent God created the world. As the mystery of life continues to be an enigma, the debate and pursuit of possibilities go on. Therefore, we can see that both science and religion have their own limitations and it is because of such limitations that they both also encourage questioning of uncertainties.

Steven Weinberg, a famous physicist once said that "the more the world seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless". Indeed, in today's age of information and technology, efficiency and cold scientific explanations seem to have stripped people of wonder and awe, and self-doubt even at times numbing us as sentient beings. The intangible substances of faith and belief in things greater than ourselves, are often dismissed as irrelevant in today's modern, fast-paced and mechanised world. After all, the famous scientist Peter Atkins once proclaimed that those who believed in God were "probably mad". While respecting religion is highly personal, it does seem apparent that science, and not religion, quells doubt in individuals.

The late John Paul II once said "Science can cure religion from error and superstition; religion can cure science from idolatry and false absolutes". Indeed, perhaps science and religion have such a symbiotic relationship. Both science and religion encourage doubt and try to answer the unexplainable and even hinder doubt at times, but both should be highly respected for their different but equally important roles in shaping the world we live in today. As long as science and religion do not override each other's roles or diminish each other's importance, the benefits of the symbiotic relationship between them can then be maximised.

Comments:

This is a fluent and balanced piece with several insightful arguments. Keep it up.

"Science encourages doubt; religion quells it." How far do you agree?



Chung Ming See
07A13A

In this highly modernised era that we live in, many people have reached a sort of consensus when it comes to science or religion – that while science has advanced tremendously it has not overtaken religion. ~~The two are not mutually exclusive~~, and the reason is that ~~religion provides some form of explanation to all other things that science has failed to explain~~. Science has given us many answers as to the 'what' – what a particular phenomenon is and how it has possibly occurred – answers that are objective, and supported by empirical evidence. In this way it quells some of the doubts we have. Yet at the same time, because there is only so much that can be derived from ~~empirical evidence~~, it leaves much room for speculation as well. Religion, on the other hand, answers beyond the 'what' and provides us with both the 'why' and the 'how' – 'why' not as in what mechanisms or reactions took place to give birth to a particular phenomenon, but what larger reasons, if any, lie behind this occurrence, or why it was allowed to occur. More importantly, religion provides moral guidelines as well, thus in this way quelling doubt as to how we should behave as human beings. Yet ironically, it is precisely because religion attempts to address so much doubt without any objective basis that it has provoked a large extent of scepticism as a result. Also, due to its subjective nature, there is much doubt over how religious texts should be interpreted. The fact that religion has not successfully 'quelled' doubt has been obviously manifested in the world today – we only have to look at religious extremism, or the numerous disagreements between the hundreds of religious sub-groups, ranging from fanatical evangelists to staunch atheists, as examples. Ironically, because science takes a less radical view of things and is more open to question, it has been more effective in quelling doubt. In contrast, because religion ventures into the more complex occurrences of our universe and strives to quell doubt beyond what can be explained by science, it also becomes more subjective and more contentious in nature, which can trigger a backlash of scepticism.

The scientific method has always been thus – a hypothesis is first established and then investigations are carried out to prove it. In this way a theory previously established by someone can be challenged by another so long as the alternative theory is supported by logical, empirical evidence. In this way, science is constantly changing and strives relentlessly to bring us closer to clearer answers as to how things work. Science explains the mechanics that allow a car to move; it explains how cancer cells may spread through a person's body and how a tsunami may have occurred due to displacement of water by sudden movement, for example. It does not explain nor claim to be able to explain why a seemingly healthy soul is suddenly stricken with cancer at that time of his or her life or why so many innocent lives were simply lost, without any great wrongdoings on their part. Science has provided us with the means to do many things – we can now clone living things, if we must; we can make use of stem cells to grow organs, and we can put another to death in a quick, painless way, just as we can similarly postpone death to some extent. Science does not tell us if it is right to do these things, if we should indeed practise cloning or euthanasia. Because of the objective nature of science and because scientists acknowledge the limits of sciences, doubt is encouraged. Albert Einstein himself has previously stated that science cannot do without religion, thereby acknowledging the limits of science. Theories are frequently revised – for example, there are still huge debates over what caused the extinction of dinosaurs billions of years ago after two scientists discovered sufficient geological evidence to contest the widely accepted theory that it was an asteroid that caused it.

On the other hand, religion quells doubt by providing us with explanations beyond the physical world.

Christianity, for example, teaches that God has plans for us, plans that we do not necessarily know of, which are why certain events happen to us which may seem simply absurd. Buddhism, on the other hand, advocates the concept of karma – when something bad befalls someone, it is usually a punishment for something bad one has done either in this life or in a previous one. Furthermore, it provides some sort of guideline with which to govern our behaviour. In Christianity, there are the Ten Commandments, which forbid Christians from doing certain things such as lying, stealing, committing murder or adultery and so on. Similarly, Buddhism preaches charity to others and doing good to gain 'merit'. Catholicism, similarly, upholds the sanctity of life, thus indirectly forming a stand on issues such as abortion.

And yet, it is precisely because of this nature of religion which quells doubt on so many deeper levels by providing divine explanations, that has led to a huge backlash of disagreement and scepticism among people especially in this era where views are increasingly modernised and liberal. This is not to say science does not give rise to fervent disagreements, it does too, only that the disagreement and scepticism that has been sparked off by religion has manifested itself in more ostensible and extreme ways. This is in part because religion, unlike science, is more all-encompassing and doesn't make as many disclaimers. More importantly, because religion lacks a basis as objective as science and can be used to quell any sort of doubt, many politicians also start to abuse it to quell any sort of dissent, hence the line between the two blurs. This is of course closely linked to the subjective nature of religious texts and how they can be interpreted in so many different ways. Thus, because religion is very open to interpretation and yet can be used as a justification for almost everything in times of doubt, people are becoming increasingly sceptical of it as the sole explanation to what they do not yet know. For example, there is currently a gigantic uprising of the evangelical movement in America which advocates the protection of Israel and the Jewish people. This movement has gained over tens of thousands of supporters and may have a huge impact on foreign policy. The motivation behind this, of course, is supposedly God – pastor John Hagee talks of the Second Coming and the anti-Christ and how they will have to go to war to defend Israel. Such radical views have in turn sparked off much heated debate. Some question – 'doesn't the Bible say thou shalt not kill?' Others have pointed out an excerpt from the Bible which says it is acceptable to kill non-believers as well as homosexuals. Opinions differ not only between believers and non-believers but among believers themselves as well. Of course, politics has to be taken into account as well – Hagee has much clout and capital to be gained from rallying so much support for his movement.

In this way, while religion claims to be able to explain more than science does, it is also ironically because of this that it sparks off greater and more complicated doubts than science does, which can have huge repercussions on society. It has a slippery slope obsession to it – because it attempts to quell so many doubts and yet inevitably leaves many loopholes, it becomes more susceptible to misinterpretation and abuse, and in this way sparks off greater doubt. For the most part, religion soothes people and gives them hope, doesn't it?

Comments:

Sound approach – you've raised most of the key issues relevant to the question.

"The rise of China is one of the most serious threats the world has seen in recent years." Comment.



David Chan Tar Wei
07A13A

During the 3rd Plenum of its 11th Committee in 1978, the Chinese Communist Party voted to terminate the disastrous Cultural Revolution that had wreaked untold confusion and animosity within its borders. More notably, the Plenum heralded the advent of Deng Xiaopeng, who had then officially triumphed over the "Gang of Four" to become China's leader. Deng's ascent proved to be a paradigm shift – as a result of his "Four Modernisations", China has experienced close to 10% GDP growth each year, and his market initiatives, such as the creation of the Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Shanghai, have characterised the rise of China on the global stage. Yet this raises the question: to what extent is this phenomenon destabilising in the world today? While some have lauded China's growth, not only on an economic but also on a political level, many have viewed its rise as an anathema – fundamentally threatening to the international order in this new era.

In many ways, there is reason to accept the claim that China's rise is one of the most serious international threats, given that it has evolved into a potential superpower with the capability to challenge established Western states both economically and politically. The sheer size of China's labour market is a comparative advantage in itself, and the country has often been lambasted for siphoning the jobs of local Americans and Europeans – much to the chagrin of Western politicians. While these countries also do benefit from the cheap labour in China, most fail to see beyond the threat posed by this 'Factory of the World' in terms of local job losses. That said, the growth of the Chinese economy has often been criticised for expanding at the expense of others, when viewed through these prisms. Moreover, the undervaluation of the Chinese yuan has created a chimera of sorts in international trade – with its artificially low value providing a cost advantage for its exports. Politicians on Capitol Hill have long berated this situation, arguing that the staunch refusal of China to comply with international financial norms is a threat to the world order in itself. One would expect the Americans to pass such indicting remarks, given that China's unwillingness to compromise has often been blamed for America's gross trade deficit. Yet the fundamental point to note is that China's rise as an economic giant has led to a concomitant strengthening of its willpower against the Western states, and if this is to continue, one may then argue that this insidious threat posed by China may emanate into actual destabilising conflict, and may truly be said to be a serious threat.

This is further exacerbated by the inroads China is making in the various regions of the world, symptomatic of its perceived rise not only as an economic powerhouse, but a political and cultural giant as well. Antonio Gramscio once termed the spread of cultural influences as 'cultural hegemony' and the recent proliferation of 'China Inc' into South Africa and Zimbabwe is indicative of this pervasiveness. In the June 2007 issue of the journal *Foreign Policy*, editor Moses Naim reported that China has already entrenched itself as one of Africa's key partners, and labelled this rise as a significant threat to the 'soft culture' that has been hitherto purported by the Americans, to quote Joseph Nye. The recent purchase of oil fields in Somalia by CNOOC, China's national oil company and China International Oil and Gas (CIOG), its local subsidiary, is also noteworthy in that it represents the threat posed by China in terms of its energy consumption. Placing nationalist sentiments aside, the United States' earlier rejection of CNOOC's bid to purchase UNOCAL (Union Oil Company of California) in 2006 is indicative of this new wariness nation states have towards China's rise and energy needs. Even Africa is increasingly recognising that China's foray into their region may be a serious threat. Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's President, articulated, 'China must not come to tap Africa's resources and leave

it empty-handed'; his sentiments only confirm the nascent fears countries have towards China's actions.

Intuitively, China's rise may then be said to truly be one of the most serious threats to the international order. Yet it is plausible to suggest that as states engage with this new giant, they can benefit from its ascent and hence, China's rise may not be as serious a threat as previously envisaged. Consider the new Strategic Economic Dialogues conducted between the United States and China in 2006 and 2007 between China's vice premier Wu Yi and United States Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson – while tangible fruits are few and far between, the fact remains that this diplomatic engagement has transcended from mere discussion to that of greater cultural understanding and economic cooperation that may serve to nullify the 'threat' posed by China. Granted, observers such as political scientist Samuel P. Huntington may claim that this cautious rise of this 'Chinese Sinic Civilisation' belies its destabilising influences, but the important point to note is that the extent to which a 'threat' manifests itself as a 'threat' is contingent on states' response to it. As such, even Singapore is attempting to work together with China rather than against it. Initiatives such as the Suzhou Industrial Park of 1997 indicate Singapore's acceptance of China not as a 'serious threat' but as an economic and political partner. Under the aegis of ASEAN, it has also benefited from the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area and in this sense, one can then argue that China's growth as a superpower is not a zero-sum game and its rise is not mutually exclusive from that of others.

On the other hand, when juxtaposed with other international circumstances today, the rise of China does not appear to be that significant a threat as apologists would have one believe. In the first place, China's rise ought to be associated with the ascent of the developing countries, such as India and Brazil, in the recent years. Goldman Sachs believes that Brazil, Russia, India and China, otherwise known as the 'BRIC' would collectively pose a significant economic and political threat to the developed world in the near future. Hence, it may not be the rise of China alone that may be threatening but the collective advent of these new powerhouses that may prove destabilising. The recent belligerence of Russia perhaps reflects this belief – its burgeoning desire to assert international autonomy and authority is already raising eyebrows in Brussels and Washington.

Likewise, the scourge of international terrorism makes the threat posed by China pale in comparison. The political exigencies presented by terrorism now arguably outweigh that presented by China, and while that in no way nullifies the belief that China's advent is a serious threat in itself, the fact remains that it is not as serious as the former to mandate complete attention as yet.

In conclusion, it is largely agreed that China's rise is indeed one of the most significant threats facing the world in recent times. Yet the extent to which this threat materialises into actual conflict and destabilisation as postulated in Huntington's 'The Clash of Civilisations' remains to be seen. Ultimately, if states are willing to accept China's 'peaceful rise', as mentioned by Deng Xiaoping, and engage with it, there is hope that the rise of the Chinese 'dragon' would engender more benefits for the international community than detriments created by its potentially destabilising influence.

Comments:

A full, comprehensive answer with sound, convincing examples. Keep it up!

"The rise of China is one of the most serious threats the world has seen in recent years." Comment.



Zhang Rui
07S03L

Napoleon famously said, "Let China sleep, for when she awakens, she will shake the world." Now, centuries later, Napoleon's words seem to be coming true as China has "awakened" over the past three decades and begun to make her presence felt all over the world. Currently, China has made for herself a name as an economic powerhouse with its 1.3 billion strong population and modernised industries. However, the influence of China is beginning to gradually increase in terms of her political and cultural clout as well. The upward march of China is seen as a threat to many, especially the Western powers, who stand to lose the most as their dominance in the world today is being eroded by China's rise. The question then remains – is China's rise a genuine threat to global stability and welfare or is it merely an unfair vilification of China's image by Western countries?

Perhaps the most intimidating aspect of China's rise is its tremendous economic might. Previously, under the rule of its revered leader Mao Zedong, the communist state kept its doors closed to foreign contact and consequently shut out most investments and trade from the outside world, which effectively impeded China's economic development for more than two decades. With the next leader Deng Xiaopeng, China's economic policies began to change; the opening up of the Chinese economy allowed the huge inflow of investments and goods, along with capitalist ideas, new technology and information. Today, China is the single largest producer of a wide variety of goods, including rice and textiles, among others. The economic might of China is undeniable as its huge labour force poses a serious threat to employment worldwide.

Furthermore, China's refusal to speed up the appreciation of its currency has exacerbated the situation as more and more labour-intensive jobs and multinational companies' plants are relocated to China, being attracted by its immensely cheap labour costs. The phenomenon of increasing job losses to China has fuelled much discontent in Western nations, whose workers, especially the low-skilled ones, face unemployment in their home country. In a study done by the World Trade Organisation, it is estimated that 40% of jobs in the United States can be potentially outsourced to countries such as China and India. These jobs include those of scientists, mathematicians and editors on the high end, along with customer service officers and clerks on the low end. It is then no wonder that workers and unions in these developed nations are upset with China robbing them of employment opportunities and doing their jobs at a fraction of their wages. Such discontent against China may cause severe conflicts between China and Western nations, thus threatening global stability, especially in the economic arena. Already, there have been many instances where China and the USA are in a political gridlock. The controversial issues include the large trade deficit the USA incurred against China, the undervalued yuan in China and most recently, the saga of a wide range of defective made-in-China goods. With two of the largest superpowers in the world today fighting to gain dominance, the stability of the world may be threatened as the rivalry between USA and China is played out on the international stage.

In addition, China also has many internal issues which may prove to be a nagging problem for the security and prosperity of the Asian region. The most pressing of problems that plagues China is Taiwan. As the island state continues to insist on gaining independence from China, the mainland has declared more than once that it does not rule out military action as an option, in a bid to show its tough stance against Taiwan.

With China having the largest standing army in the world and her military becoming stronger each day, the possibility of a full-scale war breaking out in the region is not impossible. Furthermore, it is also likely that the USA will intervene in the case of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan as the USA has vested interests in the island. The threat of war is compounded too, by the tension between China and Japan. The relationship between these two Asian giants is also a concern for Asia, affecting both economic and political arenas. Ultimately, China's ties with several countries are in question – these are delicate relationships which may trigger conflicts that will affect the stability, security and prosperity of the whole world.

Having said that, China's rise has definitely brought about much positive impact in many parts of the world as well. Economically, the cheap labour costs in China have allowed many goods to be sold to consumers at a lower price. Although the recent recall of many Chinese goods, ranging from toys to pyjamas, has called the quality of Chinese goods into question, the fact remains that there are still many high quality Chinese goods available, produced by reputable manufacturers. The opening up of China's economy has undeniably benefited many Western MNCs, their investments reaped large profits over the years as China's economy grew at an astounding pace. With China's gross domestic product growing at double digit rates each year, the demands for imports in China will invariably rise as well. The increased demand for goods will be met by foreign producers, leading to huge export growths for many countries in the world. Thus, not only is China providing goods to the world at low prices, it is also consuming much of the imports from other countries, bringing about global economic growth.

With globalisation as a contributing force, China is also beginning to wield its cultural might as Chinese influence spreads across the world. People are clamouring all over the world to learn the Chinese language as individuals aim to gain a share in China's phenomenal growth. The result is increasing multiculturalism and a spread of Asian influence in Western countries and even African nations. This is beneficial to the globalised world which increasingly values diversity over homogeneity. The Chinese fever may yet prove to be a strong competitor against the dominant American culture in today's world. Not only will the Chinese language become more fashionable as a business language, the values and virtues of Chinese culture will also spread among people. Such a force will undoubtedly promote multiculturalism and seek to break the monopoly of Western cultural influence.

On top of that, the increasing interconnectedness of the world also increases the vested interests that China has in Western nations. With globalisation, the economies of China and Western countries will only become more closely integrated. This was evident when earlier this year, Chinese stock markets were severely affected by the US stock market crisis stemming from sub-prime mortgages. The advent of the Internet also allows for the exchange of ideas and information, causing the mindsets of countries to gradually be aligned through dialogue, discussions and collaboration. Although China and Western countries currently have disagreements, it may be argued that these stem from each country seeking to protect its national interests rather than a clash of fundamental ideals. Therefore, with increasing cooperation and exchanges between China and the rest of the world, it is unlikely that wars or hostile confrontations will break out because China will try its utmost to settle issues in a diplomatic manner in order not to hurt its own interests.

In conclusion, China's political leaders have more than once emphasised the need for China to adopt a 'peaceful rise', an ideal which is comforting to the rest of the world which is intently watching China's every move. Although there are many outstanding issues that China has yet to resolve, these are common disputes even among other nations. Furthermore, these issues can be resolved in a civilised manner. Instead of viewing China as a threat, the world should look at the possibilities that it has brought and will bring as it seeks mutual benefits.

Comments:

A well-argued essay! Would you say that there are far more serious threats that countries should work together to solve?

"We worship the young and scorn the old." What is your opinion?



Goh Siau Rui
07A01B

In a world where the media constantly promotes the young while allowing the old to be largely relegated to the background, it would seem as though our culture is one that worships the young and scorns, or at the very least, disregards the old. In many ways this appears to be the case, but perhaps this is only true in certain areas – notably commercial and profit-maximising industries seeking to squeeze out profits from the 'next big (often young) thing'.

Our supposed 'worship' of the young is most evident perhaps, in our obsession with youth in so many areas of our lives. They front all the vehicles of pop culture – in advertisements, on television, in the music industry, in fashion. Our unrelenting focus on the young in these key areas seems to be symptomatic of a larger culture that celebrates – venerates even – the young. Indeed, Apple's popular advertisements for their iPods are a clear indication of this, with the predominant use of music from younger bands such as the Caesars, Gorillaz, and the advertisements featuring (presumably) young people grooving along to the tunes. The fashion world celebrates the lithe, nimble bodies of the young with many of the models barely in their 20s, and this again, points to a culture that worships the youth.

In contrast, when it comes to the old, there seems to have been a proliferation of negative stereotypes about them pervading our mindsets. That they are old and therefore 'senile' and possibly irrelevant in the workforce, that they are all cantankerous, grouchy old people – these are the traditional perceptions people have of the old. It would seem that we have allowed these notions to take hold, especially where employment is concerned, with many employers in Singapore expressing reluctance to take on older workers because there is a higher chance that they are less 'mentally agile' than their younger counterparts. In part this cannot be helped because the old generation is, on the whole, less techno-savvy than the young, and with technology an increasingly and largely unavoidable aspect of work life these days, it would seem as though we dismiss the abilities and skills of the old readily. Coupled with the aforementioned 'ageist' notions, some go so far as to scorn the ability of the old to contribute at all to society. The increasing number of old folk sent to homes because they were a 'burden' is surely some indication of our blatant disregard and scorn for the old.

However, it would be overly simplistic to polarise our attitudes toward the young and old as such. While we sanctify the youthful qualities of models and starlets, there is little indication that we 'worship' the young as a whole. It is the super fluid elements of youth – their unlined faces, their more able bodies – that we are celebrating. In the case of athletes, their youth is arguably their pinnacle of sporting achievement, the fact that their youth allows them to achieve these things that we admire is, by and large, mere coincidence. Beyond that, however, the argument that we 'worship our youth' is threadbare. Just as we celebrate the achievement of the young, just as we obsess about their youthful appearances, we are harsh on their unbecoming antics that are put down to the inexperience of youth. The 'yob' culture in Britain for instance, comes under much fire for their immature, anti-social acts and is censured harshly by newspapers all over the world. In a similar way, the aforementioned models and starlets are not let off scot-free either – whether it is Lindsay Lohan careening out of control, Kate Moss smoking pot or Paris Hilton drink-driving – these are not glossed over by the media, and most definitely not venerated acts. How can we be said to 'worship' the young if we relentlessly (and sometimes mercilessly) point out their flaws?

In a similar way, it is extreme to assert that we 'scorn' the old. There is no such revulsion or contempt for the old among the vast majority of people. After all, we will become like them in just a few decades. Respect for the elderly is perhaps something espoused in almost all cultures and in Singapore, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew emphasises the need to stay true to our 'Confucian values', of which respect for the elderly is fundamental. That said, the older generation is also perceived to offer something different and more valuable than the young – experience and arguably, wisdom. In the film industry, Maggie Smith and Judi Dench continue to reap success and admiration from fans for the simple fact that age has not robbed them of their acting skills, probably even giving them an edge over younger counterparts with their experience in the industry. Even commercial culture, traditionally the strongest champion of youth, seems to be shifting to recognise the old as something more than 'fuddy-duddies' to be put up with. The number of advertisements featuring older celebrities has increased over the years, bringing across the message that we 'worship' the old in some ways too.

It would be far too hasty then, to generalise our culture as one that simply worships the young and scorns the old. Neither clauses are wholly true – just as there are aspects of the young that we celebrate, so too are there of the old. Just as there are aspects of the old that we fail to appreciate just yet, so there are aspects of the young that we condemn.

Comments:

Great work, Siau Rui. Yet another highly articulate, cogent and insightful piece that made for an engaging read from start to finish. You might want to give more specific examples in that last argument to make your case more convincing.

"We worship the young and scorn the old." What is your opinion?



Elsbeth Ong En Li
07A013A

It does not take much to see just how much emphasis we place on our youth. Walk to any bus stop, or flip open any newspaper, and one is bound to see advertisements boldly proclaiming the Age of the Youths in the winning smiles of teen models or even in the carefree flinging out of arms. What allures us less, unfortunately, is the liver-spotted old man bent over behind the billboards, and the unhappy letters from the older set sighing about yet another case of age discrimination in job selection.

In the dynamic society we live in today, it is often the youths who are portrayed glamorously as the purveyors of our new age, while the old get left behind. As our society moves forward with the additional growing sector of an aging population, this looks set to change, with an emphasis on 'youthfulness' rather than on actual youth. Still, the prevailing attitude is that the young should be adored with their fresh new ways, as old mindsets entrenched in society limit the capabilities of the old to prove themselves.

Certainly, it is the young who get much of the attention nowadays, especially in the media. In Singapore, the Straits Times has a whole section devoted to issues pertaining to the youths, and, yes – you guessed it – none for the elderly. Youths, an important demographic, play an increasingly active role in the media, with the many causes they want to promote and the various 'cool' sub-cultures they stand for. The only articles that talk about the elderly, it seems, are those highlighting the plight of old men and women abandoned by their families, or letters bemoaning their inability to get a job. This is in some ways a fairly accurate portrayal of the situation of the young and the old, especially considering how many other countries face similar problems. Many countries in Europe, for instance, increasingly show off their buzzing youth cultures proudly while neglecting the issues of the old.

However, to regard this as a comprehensive portrayal of what is actually happening would be to grossly mislead oneself with the biased truths of the media. To sell papers and magazines, it is optimal to put the most attractive images and issues on their front covers. Furthermore, if any reader would care to look deeper, they would probably find sections covering financial planning limited with only the occasional advice to the elderly on how to save up in case of an early retirement. Being a fairly static demographic with few great advancements, they do not generate as many newsworthy articles. This does not mean that they have nothing to do or that they are scorned by society though. It could even be said that they are more involved in society in some ways, just that these simply do not always make for attention grabbing headlines the way some youth issues do. The elderly communities in Australia, for instance, do conduct many activities among themselves, and their joyful camaraderie has earned them the respect of those living around them. A return to old pastimes in sections of the American Mid-West has been seen as certain admiration by the larger population for skills such as knitting, which some young people in fact turn to. Behind the brash symbolism of dynamic youth, many quiet unspoken movements are increasingly making their presence felt.

The image of the young has further problems. Many black sheep exist, as their vibrancy does not always take the form of dance moves or new ideas. Complaints about rude or offensive behaviour by youths in public are small but significant spots that undermine their image as the new deities of our generation. This view is especially prevalent among the more mature members of our population, not simply in terms of actual

age, but also in terms of mental age. Some might argue that these grouses, coming from elderly people, are unnecessarily pedantic views that limit the freedom of choice which the young exercise. Yet, in many quarters, the trend is increasingly to respect the views of the old, as they themselves move on from flighty tendencies to a serious consideration of issues affecting others in society. The values imported by the old indeed have many valid concerns, but an unfortunate limit to their influence reinforces the perception that they are simply out to nag youths and other people with mindsets formed in an irrelevant period.

As much as the image of the young may fixate our minds, the talents of older people have not gone unnoticed. Many developed countries around the world are increasingly realising the value of older people and the skills they can impart to the young. Britain, for example, has implemented policies protecting the rights of the old in some industries. While Singapore Airlines may promote the nubile Singapore Girl as a means to attract customers and enhance its branding, British Airways continues to hire and keep flight attendants who have proven themselves. Some of them are in fact twice the age of those on Singapore Airlines! When it comes to the crunch, however, there are many who prefer the confident service of older hostesses on British Airways to the occasionally faltering service of the pretty young things on the latter airline. Unfortunately, such policies have not completely taken root in society. Many industrial sectors drop their older workers once they reach forty in order to make way for promising new upstarts. The fresh new insights the young may bring is often cited as a reason to inject new blood into the company – at the expense of losing some of the most crucial members of their companies. It is hard to quantify whether doing so indeed boosts a company's revenue or progress, but one thing is for sure – it is not about to boost the company's standing with its workers. Those in their forties or fifties are ironically the very ones who are supporting their children's education, that they may take over the role of breadwinner eventually. It can only be a win-win situation if the companies keep their workers, and enable them to make a decent living to sustain their economies. The sad truth is that many companies have not grasped this fact. It can only be in society's best interests to promote the needs of the old, and in turn, support the young.

Older people on their part should continue to make themselves relevant and maintain a fresh approach to things.

Comments:

Rather abrupt end – perhaps you ran out of time. Good points, strongly argued. An articulate defence of old people – there's hope for the young generation yet!

"Studying overseas is an over-rated experience." What is your opinion?



Huang Kaiyang
07A01B

A recent article by Newsweek magazine documented the unsurprising upward trend in international students seeking to apply to colleges and universities in the United States, in particular those in the prestigious Ivy League. This surge both in applicant quantity and quality has led to the corollary of a concomitant plunge in university acceptance rates across the board. With over 500,000 international students currently studying in the US presently, it is this trend which is symptomatic of both the rising affluence of the middle class and perhaps the value attached to an overseas education. Why, given all this, might studying overseas still be described as an "over-rated experience"?

I speak on behalf of my peers when I assert that for many of us, this preliminary examination will affect the chances of those who are planning to do precisely that. Raffles Junior College boasts that over half of its graduating students end up studying overseas, yet it is not difficult to see why the other 50% might choose not to even if they could. Implicit in this question is a subtle acknowledgement of the costs, financial and otherwise, associated with an education abroad.

First of all, there are the prohibitive, and some would say exorbitant, costs of financing one's education overseas. Countries like China and India may be witnessing a rapidly burgeoning middle class, yet more often than not, a university education abroad entailing housing, meals and transport amounts to a very significant hole burnt in the proverbial wallet. London and Tokyo are notorious for their high costs of living, while Yale's total fees for an overseas student recently broke the US\$50,000 barrier. Granted, financial aid is notionally available, but even then one must question the notion of living with debt in order to study abroad. It seems then, that given the opportunity cost of graduating debt-free locally, an overseas education might, by comparison, seem "over-rated".

Yet another potential cost is both the potential intolerance of the locals while one is studying there, compounded by the inevitable homesickness one is also bound to face. It is certainly one thing to display ethnic hubris when one's race makes up 70% of the population, yet stepping into a foreign land as an insignificant minority is truly a humbling, or disconcerting experience, whichever way one views it. Furthermore, the notion of living thousands of kilometres away from the nearest family members makes prima facie a convincing case to study locally and enjoy both ethnic and cultural homogeneity, as well as one's familiar creature comforts. Indeed, to one not willing to face these adjustments to one's routine, then it is fair to say that studying overseas might be all hype and nothing else.

The notion of hype is enhanced, in the Singaporean context at least, by plans to start a fourth university here. Be it a liberal arts college, or a technical university, the increasingly diverse education buffet offered locally makes the pursuit of academia overseas seem a chore. Why study something overseas when you can do so comfortably here? Indeed, the renowned NUS medical faculty stands as an indictment to overseas-educated snobs who see no value whatsoever in a local education.

Yet, for all the potential difficulties an overseas education entails, it deserves to be said that it is far from over-rated. Yes, one may face intolerance, both racial and religious, on an unprecedented scale in an unfamiliar

land. Yet, for every one bigot, for every one Philistine, there are ninety-nine others who will appreciate one's presence and enrich one's worldview. Prejudice respects no borders, and is a similar sight everywhere, even locally. The main plus of studying overseas is the exposure one gets, while studying, when interacting with people of different skin colour, religion, sexual orientation, or even political association. As the Chinese saying goes, "a frog in the well" does not know what the world is truly like until it ventures out of its isolated habitat. Likewise, it is hoped, openness to others is fostered through friendships forged. Indeed, it is these formative years of one's life when studying overseas that will serve as a catalyst for not only intellectual, but emotional and cultural maturity as well.

Yes, one will inevitably face the inexorable heaviness of homesickness, yet rather than seeing this as something undesirable, it is far better to capitalise on it as an opportunity for independent living. Only when you are out of your comfort zone and when you run out of clean underwear will you realise that this time, you are truly on your own. Living and studying overseas can then be seen as a rite of passage into adulthood, where one is responsible for one's finances, health and yes, even underwear.

Yes, local universities are becoming more competitive and by extension proving to become a perfectly acceptable substitute for overseas universities. Yet, if one were to ask oneself what truly matters in an overseas education, everything, including notions of it being "over-rated", hinges on what one desires education to constitute. Defined narrowly, an "education" limited solely to academia can be pursued locally, this especially so if one were a US citizen. With the Ivy League and more in one's backyard, what more could one ask for? Yet, defined more broadly, an education entails not only intellectual growth but the buttressing of it by an immersion of oneself in the socio-cultural milieu of the country coupled with the exposure one receives from new thinking paradigms and outlooks. Indeed, the availability of overseas study programmes in universities ranging from NUS to Princeton to Peking University are all testament to the intrinsic value of a stint overseas, whatever the academic opportunities local education has to offer. I feel that especially given Singapore's reputation to be as culturally sterile as its MRT trains, an overseas education is then no excuse to be culturally obtuse. In this day and age of globalisation (whatever the term truly means) it is imperative that one gets out of the proverbial well and into the real world, so to speak. This is especially pertinent for the 90% of Americans who do not possess passports, and who think that their cultural hegemony implies no need for further cultural exposure. An overseas education is a passport to the world, yet, it must be remembered, this passport to the world is in itself worthy of a diploma.

Hence, while the debate over whether an overseas education is "over-rated" rages on ad nauseam, I assert that, far from being over-rated, it is under-appreciated. Voltaire once noted that "all men die, but not all men truly live." Likewise, the appeal of an overseas education embodies one that mirrors the innate desire in all of us to try something new and exciting. Granted, it may entail cultural dislocation and adjustment difficulties, but these are the few years in one's life when one truly has the freedom to do things which will be unavailable when the shackles of marriage and children (no prejudice intended) eventually ensnare oneself. Yes, there will always be financial difficulties, but for those fortunate enough, to quote the Emirates advertisement ad verbatim, "when was the last time you did something for the first time?" In my humble opinion, an overseas education offers precisely this opportunity, and is something that should not be missed.

Comments:

This was a tremendously enjoyable read, Kaiyang! There were nuanced, insightful, highly articulate arguments here, with a nice touch of humour – albeit a tad colloquial at times. May your aspirations for an overseas education be fulfilled.

"Being monolingual in a globalised world is definitely a disadvantage." Discuss.



Rayner Teo Yunwei
07A13A

In a world of increasing economic, social and cultural interaction, issues of communication and linguistics are inevitably becoming increasingly vital. Two millennia ago, the lingua franca of the Mediterranean was Latin, the language of the Roman Empire. Two centuries ago, anyone worth his salt in the scientific world wrote in German. Up to recent times the language of diplomacy was French. Now, it seems, everyone is desperate to learn English, possibly the first global language in a globalised world. Some might argue that being monolingual is an advantage - particularly if you happen to be monolingual in English. The number of youth in the UK learning a second language is at its lowest in years. English-speaking diplomats in the EU - particularly those from the UK and Ireland - are benefiting from EU enlargement, as the new diplomats from countries as far afield as Croatia and Poland insist on speaking English (however atrociously). Yet this linguistic smugness is not limited to the British; the French in general and Parisians in particular are notoriously and vehemently monolingual, even though EU surveys show that nearly half of France understands and speaks English to some degree of proficiency. The French insistence on being monolingual in public seems to be a manifestation of pride in their unique culture, romanticised as the last fortress standing against the tide of McDonaldisation - even though in private, everyone who is anyone is taking English lessons.

Indeed, language is inextricably linked to culture, and the French desire to preserve their culture, although seemingly neurotic, is perfectly understandable. However, being monolingual closes us to an appreciation of other cultures and traditions. Anecdotes abound regarding the behaviour of Americans overseas, be it loud tourists on quiet streets and beaches, or businessmen and diplomats who put their feet up (literally) much to the horror of their Arab hosts for whom it is taboo. Presumably, learning a new language would acquaint one with the norms of the associated culture, definitely a bonus in this globalised world.

Learning a new language brings with it not merely an appreciation of cultural norms, but other aspects of culture too. Literature, for instance, would be far poorer if everyone wrote in English, although that might seem the case in bookstores in the English-speaking world. Classics of literature, by luminaries such as Goethe, Umberto Eco, Gabriel Garcia Marquez or the Tang dynasty poets, are somehow diminished in their richness, shades of meaning and nuance if read in translation. And of course, knowing the lyrics to a Brazilian bossa nova in the original Portuguese is always impressive.

Globalisation opens up new opportunities, not just for cultural exchange but of course in business too. In the new economic race for riches the proverbial streets paved with gold are not only to be found in London, but in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Mumbai and Sao Paulo as well. Sure, everyone is learning English (or so it might seem), but in Japanese, "yes" might well mean "no", spoken for the sake of politeness. In a world of increasing business flows, being monolingual blinds us to the nuances of other languages, in ways that would be funny if not for the tragedies of misunderstanding and wasted opportunity.

More fundamentally, being monolingual at this stage in history is itself a wasted opportunity. It has never been this easy to learn a new language - globalisation and technology have led to the proliferation of language schools and even DIY tapes or CDs which give you language courses on the car stereo or iPod. Learning a new language has been proven in studies to increase mental agility, presumably from all the simultaneous

translation going on in your head. The challenge of learning a new language, or being bilingual, seems to be a reward in itself, besides all the cultural, social and economic opportunities it might afford.

Being monolingual might seem an attractive option: learning another language might seem a waste of time, particularly if you happen to be monolingual in English; staying monolingual also helps, to some extent, in the preservation of native cultures. For instance, the Mayan culture was largely destroyed as the Spanish colonisers forced everyone to learn their own tongue, and the meanings of the Aztec codices or the Incan 'speaking knots' or khipu are forever lost. Language death is a perennial fear of linguists. However, the benefits of being bilingual or better are clear, at least to the thousands of Americans learning Chinese and Spanish, and to the untold millions in China or India learning English. For the thousands manning custom service call centres across Bangalore, learning another language has helped them up the economic ladder. For the leadership of China, English-speaking Chinese will be a tremendous public-relations coup at the Olympics. For anyone in the world who wants to be a part of the exciting process of globalisation, the disadvantages of being monolingual are obvious. In this globalised world, abandoning being monolingual literally opens up a world of new opportunities. Those who remain monolingual will inevitably be left behind, and those who take on the challenge of learning another language, such as those in the multilingual cities of Singapore, Brussels and Hong Kong, will be best placed to reap gains from globalisation.

Comments:

Interesting essay and full of verve with points thrown in here and there with seeming abandon!

"Being monolingual in a globalised world is definitely a disadvantage." Discuss.



Daniel Isaiah Ong Chin Hao
07A13A

In early 2006, the Economist published an article highlighting the increased number of British and American students who were taking Chinese lessons, their non-native tongue, and sacrificing traditionally studied languages such as Latin or Greek. These students, the weekly concluded, were motivated to do so by the phenomenal rise of China in the 21st century, and believed that by learning the Chinese language, they would have a competitive advantage in being able to do business there. Indeed, all current trends point to an increased emphasis on being multilingual in various countries' education systems. With the new globalised world, economic, political and social activities have spread across borders, and no longer is it possible for states to adopt isolationist and insular stances in a world that Thomas Friedman argues "has been made flat" by advances in communications and transport technology. Ergo, increased globalisation means increased interaction with foreigners; increased interaction with foreigners means that communications is crucial. This was something the travellers and explorers of old were cognizant of: Marco Polo's grasp of the Chinese language enabled him to open up trade links between Europe and China, while Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles' familiarity with the Malay language played a part in the extension of the British Empire in the Far East.

The putative advantages of being multilingual are not unfounded. Speaking another language opens up the possibility of communicating with an entirely new community of people, an important consideration when one is cognizant of the diversity of ethnic-specific languages. Early Jesuit missionaries to India and the Middle East in the 1700s were required to learn the languages of their host countries before going. Without the means of basic communication, they would be unable to interact with the natives of the land, much less be able to spread the gospel. Studies have shown that being able to speak the language of one's audience immediately endears oneself to one's listeners, as compared to the seemingly impersonal image presented if one speaks in a different tongue. It is because of this that many politicians including Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi and Singapore's Lee Hsien Loong have made it a point to address various segments of their native audience in their native tongues; this apparently bridges the perceived distance between them and their people.

This ability to endear oneself to people of a different society, brought about by a common language, is crucial in doing business in the new globalised world. Like the British students described at the start of this piece, the knowledge and ability to converse in a particular language immediately enables one to do business in another country more easily than if one was to hire a translator; one is immediately more personable and able to interact with foreigners to a greater degree. Multinational firms such as General Electric and Hewlett Packard often make it necessary for country managers to be able to speak the tongue of the country they are posted to for this reason. Knowing the tongue of another country allows one to harness the business opportunities availed by globalisation.

The economic benefits are not only limited to being able to expand business to other countries – it also enables individuals to work in foreign countries. Migration flows today show an increase in the well-educated, English speaking migrant who seeks work in the developed market economies (DMEs). The ability to speak another language has arguably made the world an oyster for people who seek to migrate to another country, by vaporising the supposed language barrier to labour flows.

Politically and socially, the most important aspect of being multilingual is the ability to understand another person clearly and without error. History has provided us with a long list of gaffes and misunderstandings through bad translations that have led to strife or war; one needs to look no further than when translators mistakenly converted the King of Athen's conciliatory message to the King of Sparta as an outright declaration of war in the classical era. Being monolingual and dependent on translators disadvantages one in their ability to truly communicate with another, and understand his or her full meaning.

Thus, it is indisputable that being multilingual is advantageous in the new globalised world, and being monolingual renders one disadvantaged vis-à-vis the others who will take advantage of the opportunities globalisation avails. By being able to speak another language, one immediately opens up a world (pun intended) of economic, political and social benefits, in addition to the intangible benefit of projecting a more 'personal' image to the people who speak the other language. Undoubtedly, being multilingual has no disadvantages, only advantages; being monolingual on the other hand is akin to voluntarily isolating oneself from the new globalised world, having to work through a translator (who is arguably more cognizant of the advantages of being multilingual than oneself) to be able to communicate with others.

However, even as we have established that being multilingual is advantageous, the extent to which being monolingual is disadvantageous is debatable. In a world of many languages (in Myanmar alone there are an estimated forty-seven of them), the ability to speak one more may not be able to acquire one the full set of economic, political and social benefits described earlier. For the Prime Minister of Myanmar (as of 2007), Than Shwe, the time spent learning all forty seven languages might be a price too high to pay to reap the full benefits of being able to converse with each of the native people groups. Being monolingual in a globalised world may be a disadvantage, but arguably, being able to converse in few languages only lessens the disadvantage of not being able to converse with all. Diversity and non-uniformity is inherent with globalisation; being multilingual merely ameliorates the extent of disadvantage within such a situation.

Moreover, the putative disadvantages of translator error and projecting an 'impersonal' image may no longer hold true in today's context. The acknowledgement of globalisation's diversity has led to an acceptance of the fact that language barriers exist, and the stigma of a translator in the realms of business and politics has gradually become less prevalent in today's world. Moreover, the ability and number of translators have increased in response to the increased demand that is a corollary of globalisation – no longer are the gaffes and errors of translators as commonplace as they were a century or even a millennia ago. Today, a visitor to New Delhi, India, can hire a proficient translator for less than US\$ 100 a day (for the less demanding, amounts much lower will suffice), and immediately the world of business opportunities is opened. Communication can be purchased for a price in this era.

Moreover, being monolingual can be non-disadvantageous – if your chosen language is English. In the long run, sociologists predict the gradual emergence of English as the lingua franca of the globalised world with other languages gradually made obsolete as more and more nations plug into the global economy. Even today, English is the lingua franca of the Academic and Business arenas; even the chairmen of Chinese firms that are largely isolationist can stumble through a few sentences of English. If one believes Francis Fukuyama, who in his book 'The End of History' suggests that western liberal democracy has prevailed over the ideological battles of the past millennia, indeed the cultural homogenisation may one day see the emergence of monolinguals, rather than today's multilingual.

To conclude, being multilingual in today's world is undoubtedly advantageous to individuals and firms, allowing one to harness the opportunities availed by the globalised world in the social, political and economic realms. Although being monolingual excludes one from taking advantage of such opportunities, the extent to which it is a disadvantage is debatable.

Comments:

Very good arguments about the advantages of multi-lingualism. However, I feel that when you

tried to show balance by looking over the other side (the disadvantages of monolingualism and the 'impracticality' of learning too many languages) the arguments come across as rather stilted, and run the danger of condemning, even contradicting the arguments in the first half of your essay. You need to take a more consistent stand. Balance doesn't mean contradiction. Your point about lingua franca (Who knows. It might be Chinese in a few decades!) is important, however. Still, a well-written, authoritative essay on the issue. You could look at the cultural baggage (good or bad) of a language – the idea that it contains/encapsulates intrinsic qualities/values associated with the people speaking the language.



'Democracy isn't perfect, I just don't know a better system.'
(Winston Churchill) Do you agree?



Marcus Tan Zi Liang
08S03A

Politics is not a pursuit of what seems to be possible, but rather, a hard decision between choosing the disastrous over the unpalatable. In today's highly politically-driven world, it seems to be the case that everywhere, people are opting for the lesser evil – democracy. Churchill is absolutely right in stating that the highly idealised system of democracy, which has been perpetrated and glorified as the bona fide political direction that the world should head, is not perfect; after all, in a fallible human society, what is? Democracy has seen its fair share of terrible failures and blunders through the unforgiving pages of human history. Yet, the crux of the matter rests not in the relative inadequacies of other systems, as Churchill has blatantly suggested. Rather, there is not one system of politics which can claim itself to be universally above the rest. In a world of differing economic and socio-political structures and varying needs, the political system that best suits the needs of a particular country's best, is the 'better system' for that country.

More than half the countries in the world adopt democracy or a pseudo-form of democracy as the dominant political system. The past few decades – a period rife with international conflict, trade liberalisation and globalisation – saw countries with monarchies, as well as socialist regimes, turn to democracy. Thailand progressed from a powerful monarchy in the 1900s to a democratic state. Countries such as Serbia and Mongolia have also followed suit. Several colonial countries such as Singapore, Nigeria and the Philippines have embraced democracy upon gaining independence. Democracy has its allure and it comes as no surprise at all – for the first time in history, the populace of numerous such countries find themselves equipped and empowered by the newfound authority to evoke change and play a part in the decisions of the state. It is people power that is absent from most other forms of government which makes democracy so attractive.

Democracy appears to be the best political system because in theory it is good, fair and practical. Good because it respects and walks hand in hand with openness, freedom and capitalism – values which are prevalent in the globalised world. Fair because it upholds justice, promotes equality, maintains a system of checks and balances and recognises the mutual symbiosis of state and people. Practical because the implementation of democracy appears to be not too overtly simplistic like a monarchy and not overwhelmingly complex as in a Marxist society. Not only have the governing cadres bought into the idea that democracy is the best form of politics, but the citizenry of many countries too. In theory, democracy and its Madisonian concepts are appealing, or at least relatively more appealing than the rest of the other political systems. Even socialist and communist political systems, such as China, have injected pro-capitalistic ideas and mechanisms into policy making. Pakistan's military junta has also recently agreed to conduct voting – a key democratic practice – in its upcoming elections; it then seems apparent that the running of countries, regardless of political system, requires elements of democracy to be embedded within the administrative engines or ideology.

On the flip side, the perceived universality of democracy and its elements does not justify it to be the best political system relative to other systems. Countries hop onto the bandwagon of democracy partially due to the emergence of the Western democracies, especially the United States of America, as dominant political and economic powers. Democracy in many instances has been utilised as a membership card of sorts to gain access to the global clubhouse of flourishing economies – after all, at the onset of the fervent Southeast

Asian political revolution of the 1950s to the 1960s, a period where many East Asian nations underwent revolutionary political restructuring, the strongest and most influential economies were the democratic economies. The Philippines, opening up to a democratic system of governance, simultaneously opened itself up to trade with the United States on more than favourable terms; this was to the extent that from the early 1980s, the governmental framework of the Philippines developed and emulated that of its democratic, Western counterpart. It can be seen that countries choose democracy for plainly practical, but shallow reasons. In the case of the Philippines and many other developing countries in the world, politics has been pursued not for politics' sake primarily, but rather, for the sake of economics. Democracies have shown greatly in terms of trade with non-democracies, North Korea in particular.

More dangerously, for the past century and even today, the world has been engineered to perceive democracy as the political system of choice. Democracy is certainly not as ideal as we are led to think. The harsh fact of the matter is that powerful democracies have strategically and unconsciously exerted their influence upon the ideologies of other nations in the world ; the US has coerced Iraq to radically adopt democracy as its political standpoint – is democracy necessarily the *modus operandi* for Iraq? That is questionable. Closer to home yet further back in time, the colonial methods of the British unconsciously shaped our Singaporean thirst and hunger for self-rule, one that soon became encrusted ironically with our colonial master's system of democratic rule. Representative, conservative democracy has worked out fine for Singapore, though democracy has yet to produce any good for the perpetual unrest and instability in Iraq. Thus, with regard to democracy, people have in many respects been dictated not by reality but by ideology, one which is and will be continuously promoted by the nations who prosper by democratic systems.

At the core of the issue, other systems are not necessarily worse off than democracy – it is the way in which each system suits the needs of the state and complements the socio-economic faculties of the country that ultimately determines the suitability of each and every political system. Russia is an epitome of this argument. On one hand, it was the failure of communism in the former USSR which gave support to the case of democracy; on the surface, it was as though in the race between two superpowers, US and Russia, communism had a crippling effect on Russia while democracy had enabled the US to sustain itself to the very end. This is untrue. Delving deeper into the failures of communism in the USSR does not explicitly point to the system of communism as more detrimental than democracy; instead, the people were simply not ready, as a primarily agrarian state, to function constructively under communism. When Russia embraced democracy in the late 1980s, there was little, in fact, negative economic growth and political expression from the period of 1990 to the present. Is this the expression of a democratic system failure? Partially. More so than not, it was a failure of democracy to constructively respond and fulfill the social trends and developments of the Russian people.

At the end of the day, no political system is perfect, let alone democracy. The merits of a political system do not rest directly on the system itself. Political systems and ideologies are not 'stand-alone' entities or constructs and will never be. Whether they benefit a nation and its people more than alternative systems will depend primarily on the response of the society, culture and economic state of the country to that particular system. The Ancient Greeks enamoured themselves to an efficient state of aristocracy, while the Medieval Saxons held fast to monarchy. Democracy, being the most prevalent political system of today, shows that it does work, and it has worked for many countries. However, it is shallow to equate popularity with universality. Democracy does not pose the maximum benefits all the time. Whether or not it does will have to depend on the state of a country and whether it is structured to allow democracy to complement its development in multiple aspects. Churchill was right, maybe in the case of his home country, Great Britain. The same cannot be said for the world.

Comments:

Cogent arguments, confidently argued.

'A country should be run like a business.' Discuss this with reference to Singapore.



Adrian Gerard Woon Wei-Xin
08A01C

'Singapore Incorporated' is a term often used to describe Singapore. It reflects the commonly held notion that the country is administered as if it were a business or large-scale corporation. Many corporate practices have been adopted by the Singapore government, such as an emphasis on efficiency, economic expansion and gain, a system of meritocracy in assigning positions and high remuneration for its officers. Yet, some question whether this is an appropriate way for a country to function. In most people's minds, the word 'business' connotes a heartless quest for money, ruthlessness and exploitation. Therefore, some argue, a country should not be run like this as it must have a humanitarian conscience to care for its people, and has to sometimes forego economic gains to pursue other goals. However, while these concerns are valid, there are a great many benefits to be accrued from adopting corporate aspects. Greater efficiency enhances competitiveness, meritocratic promotions ensure that the most capable people are in charge and high salaries serve to keep corruption relatively low. In the case of Singapore, these practices were in part responsible for the nation's leap from developing to developed status. Thus, to a great extent, countries should be run like businesses, though governments should temper this with non-corporate practices as well.

People are intuitively mistrustful of corporations, as they perceive them to be exploitative in their single-minded pursuit of profit, which leads some to argue that governments should not follow this route, as they must have a humanitarian side as well. It is true that governments have a responsibility to care for their people, even when they are not economically productive. The disabled and elderly are prime examples of this. In the true sense of business, these groups would be left by the wayside, as they do not contribute to profits. However, in the case of Singapore, these groups are looked after. For example, the elderly were given CPF top-ups in this year's government budget, and the government has unveiled a scheme to buy back flats from the elderly while still allowing them to live there for another 30 years. Thus, governments must adopt policies, which are driven by humanitarian rather than economic aims.

Furthermore, in some cases, governments must also sacrifice economic gain to achieve other national goals. An important one would be the issue of equity in society. Having no taxes would be beneficial for economic growth as there is a greater incentive to work hard to get more; more money is available for investment and money can be attracted from abroad as the international rich look for places to store their wealth. However, one of the reasons that taxes are necessary is to redistribute the wealth from the rich to the poor. For example, the two percent increase in GST from 5% to 7% was necessary to afford greater handouts for the poor, which resulted in Singapore being less competitive as costs had increased. In addition, strategic necessities sometimes override economic goals. For example, it would make economic sense for Singapore to import its water from Malaysia as it is much cheaper than developing Newater and constructing desalination plants, but the government has to override economic sense in this case as depending on Malaysia for this essential resource renders the nation vulnerable. Hence, unlike corporations, governments may sometimes have to sacrifice economic gains to achieve other important goals, such as equity and security.

Despite the presence of aspects that require states to not behave like firms, the inclusion of business practices in the administration of a country can bring about benefits. One of this is an emphasis on efficiency. Singapore is famous worldwide for its efficient civil service. The country recently topped an international survey on ease

of doing business, due in part to its lack of excessive red tape. Being efficient gives Singapore an economic edge, as investors will be more inclined to establish operations here where things can be done fast and well, unlike countries like India, whose bureaucracy has increased exponentially since independence and where trials can take more than a decade to be heard.

Having a meritocratic system of promotion ensures that the best people are in charge of running the country. In Singapore, this means that people can become Ministers in their thirties, over the heads of more senior people. This is unlike countries such as Japan, where seniority plays a major role. Concentrating on talent rather than other factors is an advantage as it allows full utilisation of resources. With the best people in charge, it is more likely that the country will be run well.

Furthermore, high remuneration is a characteristic of corporations that Singapore has employed and used to its advantage. Civil servants and government officials in Singapore enjoy very high salaries and bonuses. For example, the Prime Minister is paid more than the President of the USA. This serves two purposes. The first is the attraction of talent. With salaries pegged to those in the private sector, it is more likely that able individuals will join the public sector. With bright people in the administration, countries are more likely to function well. Moreover, high salaries serve to keep corruption low. If one is already paid a lot, one is less likely to dip into the official coffers. In the case of Singapore, this appears to have worked, as Transparency International recently ranked Singapore as the least corrupt country in Asia, and fifth least corrupt in the world. Corruption is a problem that plagues many developing nations. Thus keeping it to a minimum through high salaries has been a great benefit to Singapore, as it boosts investor confidence and prevents wastage of national funds.

To conclude, it is indeed true that there are aspects in which governments should not emulate businesses. While corporations are merely out to maximise their profits most of the time, states must have a humanitarian conscience and care for their people regardless of their economic contributions. In addition, they must also balance economic gain with other national priorities, among the most important being equity and security. However, many business practices do serve states well, as the case of Singapore exemplifies. Efficiency, meritocracy and high remuneration are defining characteristics of the Singapore government, and have played a major role in the nation's success by making it globally competitive in the economic sphere. Perhaps, states should aim to behave like social enterprises, which combine business practices with social responsibility as a primary goal. Therefore, to a great extent, countries should be run like businesses, though governments must take into account other priorities that corporations do not heed.

Comments:

A very well developed and sustained argument. Your ideas are clearly presented and well substantiated. Perhaps you could also focus on a couple of areas, e.g. the provision of social amenities (e.g. transportation) and the protection and security of rights. Government with a heart – this could be discussed in greater detail.



'A country should be run like a business.' Discuss this with reference to Singapore.

Geneve Ong Ern Hui
08S07C

In the context of contemporary Singapore, many who feel they have a stake in the country have engaged in the popular debate over whether our little island should be run like a business. Detractors have thus far asserted their disagreement by pointing out that in order for the principles of a business to work in accordance to our government's ideals, we have to align ourselves with its goals – primarily of profiting as much as possible. Not only is this not viable in the context of Singapore, they say that it will also wreak disaster upon our society. However, it is my opinion that some admirable practices of businesses would be beneficial for a country like Singapore.

The main contention against the notion of a country being run like a business is that the primary intention differs. While it is recognised that a firm is set up for the purpose of gaining profits, one cannot so confidently say the same about the priorities of a country. The aims of good governance are therefore far more sophisticated than that of a business; besides the definite goal of economic stability and yes, profiting for the sake of continued security and survival, our government has to take into account other factors that contribute to the success of this country. These may include the extent of cultivating a national identity and subsequently, a sense of rootedness and belonging to this small island, achieving a level of happiness and satisfaction amongst its people and maintaining the fine balance of racial and religious harmony within our shores, among others. While the main goal is surviving and progressing in this fast-paced world, a multitude of factors, which are our secondary goals, contribute to this.

As such, with the knowledge that the aims of Singapore as a country are far more difficult to balance than that of a business, how can we safely say that it should be run like one? This strategy of putting the issues of money first is a flawed one as detractors are quick to point out. After all, by focusing our energies solely on the pursuit of financial stability and wealth accumulation, we are effectively neglecting the lower and middle classes of blue-collared workers, heartlanders, the elderly and the less privileged among Singaporeans. These social groups are already struggling to feed themselves and their families, and clearly are not a part of this heady pursuit of greater wealth. They have neither the expertise nor the capital to go about participating in such activities in the first place, and as such, the government needs to take a step back to help them climb out of this rut. This is not within the pragmatic means of how a business is run – after all, in the pursuit of profits, one does away with employees who do not pull their weight – but a country cannot afford to be this heartless in light of its far more intangible goals.

However, those who continue to insist that it is ridiculous for a country to be run like a business should reconsider their stand on the issue, for it is my belief that they are missing the point. The point is this: it has never been said that the only way by which a country can run like a business is by placing financial security at the forefront of its concerns. After all, assuming that profits are the only concern of a business is both a blanket and one-dimensional take on things. A country like Singapore can in fact take a few leaves out of the books of corporate giants, and these lie mainly in the way things are run in such successful businesses. The organisational structures allow for a clear-cut hierarchy among employees, ensuring the effectiveness of each person's role in the company. All work must be vetted by a higher authority that is almost surely to be more experienced. Work is disseminated down the hierarchy, ensuring that each person involved does something

that is pitched at his level and tapping on his expertise – that is the ideal system of a conceptual business. This can be very effectively implemented in the running of Singapore as well. The use of the Cabinet, the legislative and the executive councils as the senior members of the government, and the grassroots leaders and GRCs as junior members has proven to be a good use of manpower. While the grassroots leaders and junior ministers are able to take care of simple situations “on the ground” – in the heartlands and around their communities – more problematic issues are relayed to people with more power and more experience on their hands; that is, the Cabinet or in severe cases, the Prime Minister himself. This hierarchical system mirrors that of a successful business whose activities are transparent and whose actions are wholly accounted for.

Also, the use of quarterly or yearly reviews in a typical business can be helpful in marking out the financial milestones and goals of a country. For example, this year’s National Budget Plan sought to benefit the masses through greater dissemination of profits via Baby Bonuses and the Central Provident Fund. This only came after what must have been careful observations and reviews of the activities and concerns of the Singapore citizen. This is akin to how a good business is run, with consistent reviews of its financial goals and re-alignment of its policies. However, unlike a business, markers that indicate success are much more difficult to define. While a business can monitor its relative success through the increase in monetary goals via sales and services, the indicators of success of a country are largely unquantifiable – how is one supposed to quantify the level of national pride of Singapore citizens, or determine the absolute value of our elderly’s happiness? It will take a very keenly tuned government then, to pick up these indicators through other means.

As such, we cannot completely align our country’s policies and aims to those of a business as working in such a vacuum would be to the disadvantage of our people, but there are definitely best practices of corporate institutions from which we can glean some useful pointers. Should a country be run like a business? The answer, then, would be in practice but not in principle.

Comments:

A balanced, objective and intelligent response. Just watch that slight tendency to get a little too casual (conversational) in your tone.



"Every man is the architect of his own good fortune." Do you agree that man is the master of his own destiny?

Arunapuram Gokul Rahul
08S06N

There are some people who proclaim, when faced with a negative prospect for the future, that it is their destiny. Yet this word holds a variety of definitions that, though generally similar, differ on a few key points. To some, destiny can be controlled and moulded through one's actions but to others, destiny is definite, inflexible and not malleable. Another point of contention, among those who believe that destiny is controllable, is the true 'controller' of destiny. To some, it is a supernatural being making decisions on-the-fly while to others, the controller is not one omniscient and omnipotent being, but society and individuals. Despite all the disagreements, it is generally accepted that humans are, indeed, in control of some aspects of their lives, especially in the reaction of each person to situations. This would lead to the deduction that even if man cannot directly influence the circumstances around him, his actions are autonomous to some extent and thus he is the true master of his own destiny.

Opponents to the view that destiny can be controlled, repeatedly use the argument that a vast majority of the factors influencing one's life cannot be controlled, and thus one's actions have no bearing on one's future. Despite the glaring logical jump, which can be bridged using some theories discussed later, let us term this 'version' of destiny 'fate', if only to avoid confusion in the course of this discussion. These opponents sometimes attempt to draw others into their belief by reminding them that there are times when things go horribly wrong despite all the careful planning put into it. Such things were 'fated' to fail, and thus failed. At this point, it would be important to make a distinction between the followers of two theories - fatalism and determinism. Although both claim that what is destined/fated to happen will happen, the difference is in the approach to, and extent of, the lack of control.

A fatalist believes that anything fated to happen will happen, regardless of any measure one takes to prevent it. If one were fated to die tomorrow, he would perish despite all medical treatment. Similarly, if one were fated to win the lottery, he would win it, even if he, for reasons that are his own, hires someone to rig the draw. According to the fatalist theory, you have the free will to do whatever you please, but the outcomes are left to 'fate' and are not influenced by your actions.

A determinist, on the other hand, believes so strongly in a 'cause-effect' relationship that every single movement of an atom now is believed to have been determined at the time of the 'Big Bang'. To bring this into context, the decisions one makes affect him, and the others around him. However, it is predetermined that such a decision will be taken. The 'Butterfly Effect' is linked to this theory, and states that a tornado or tsunami in one part of the world can be caused by the small air vortices caused by a butterfly flapping its wings halfway across the world. Absurd as they may sound, both the 'Butterfly Effect' and determinism have enjoyed a modest following.

It is not uncommon to hear, or overhear, a conversation in which one person suggests to another that perhaps he was 'destined to take such a decision'. Also, elderly and traditional folks are sometimes guilty of taking a fatalist's approach to life. If you are going to die, you are going to die. Why bother? Determinism and fatalism survive because there are times, usually negative, when one does not want to take responsibility for one's actions. With frequent use, these beliefs may spread to daily life. Sliding down the slippery slope of

worst case assumptions, a person would see no need to continue doing anything, since his actions have no impact on the situation anyway, or perhaps he was destined to die of hunger from his (pre-destined) decision to stop eating.

Stepping away from the fatalistic, deterministic and pessimistic arguments, it would, indeed, be empowering to believe that we can make a difference in this world, or at least in our own lives and the lives of those close to us. Assuming that our actions, thoughts and decisions are not pre-determined or orchestrated by a supernatural being, we are capable of changing the outcome of our lives. When a person becomes handicapped because of an accident or because of a disease, he faces a multitude of choices that will affect his destiny. He could choose to live life to the best of his ability, take up a job he is capable of performing and lead a comparatively happy life. Alternatively, he could choose to sit at home, withdraw from society and feel sorry for himself. Although the above example is limited, it gives a rough idea of the power of choice in our lives.

An individual may not be able to control every aspect and variable in his life, but he is, ultimately, in control of his destiny as he is capable of choosing his responses, physical, mental and emotional, according to the situation at hand. Although it is possible that everything in this world, including this essay, is pre-determined or that regardless of the effort put in, the outcome has been decided by 'fate', the average human lives with the belief that his actions influence the future. Perhaps this is due to the appealing proposition that we actually do have an influence on the destiny of those around us, and our own future. In any case, man has a certain degree of control over his destiny. Similarly, each society, nation, and planet has a hand in moulding its own destiny. External factors may control some aspects of destiny, but we are not powerless either. Even if man cannot be the architect of his own destiny, he can still be the structural engineer who makes sure that it is safe or the interior designer who decorates it to make it more hospitable.

In some ways, each person can be seen as the captain of the ship that is his destiny. Ocean currents and strong winds may push the ship around, but the captain still maintains control over the general direction and bearing of his ship.

Comments:

A sensitive, interesting response!

Should the government promote the arts when only the privileged benefit from it?



Teo Ee Der Ada
08S03E

The arts are an area elusive to define and gather into a conceptual net. For the purpose of this essay, the arts refer to creative endeavours ranging from the visual arts, to drama and music. The fundamental purpose of the arts is to serve as an aesthetic stimulation to exalt the human emotion amidst the humdrum of modern life. Thus, in my opinion, the government should definitely promote the arts as the artistic field does not discriminate by wealth or social class, hence being accessible to both the privileged and the average person. The privileged refers to the class of people who are better-off and therefore possibly enjoy a higher standard of living. Perhaps with a greater amount of disposable income, the privileged can better afford the appreciation of the arts, but that should not act as a deterrent against the promotion of the arts by the government. Instead, the government should tackle the root of the problem by coupling arts promotion with various subsidies to encourage the average person to benefit from what the arts have to offer.

One may argue that the government should not promote the arts as they are perceived as "merely a luxury of the rich". Hence, promotion by the government would serve to benefit a specific segment of society, attributing them with greater benefits which are deemed unnecessary. The government may thus be blamed for widening the social divide or encouraging elitist mindsets by providing a commodity that is seen to place the privileged in an advantageous position. However, it is imperative to note that not only does society require hardware in the form of technical skills, it also needs "heartware" which includes empathy, society-oriented values and emotional fulfilment, all of which can be cultivated through the arts. Thus it is of paramount importance that a country builds up a strong artistic grounding, and the quickest route is through promotion of the arts by the government.

The government should promote the arts as its positive implications on society far outweigh the drawbacks where in some situations, the privileged may be in a position to benefit more. The arts create beauty and aesthetic pleasure, a refreshing and welcoming change from the fast-paced modern lifestyle. 16th century artist Leonardo da Vinci enchants his viewers with the eternal beauty the secret smile of the Mona Lisa. Postmodernist Richard Appignanesi wrote about how the famous "Sunflowers" painted by Vincent Van Gogh succeeded in appealing to the average person; the French government's efforts to promote the arts led to the proliferation of Van Gogh's art piece, ranging from museum exhibitions to posters and even on banknotes. This historic move by the government whetted a greater appetite for the arts, not only for the privileged, but also for the average man on the street.

The arts function to reveal truth and upon promotion by the government, the state of the human condition can be depicted to society and people from all walks of life. John Steinbeck's novel "The Grapes of Wrath" brought America's Great Depression to global awareness. The state of the human condition, when portrayed in greater detail by the artist, teaches and warns readers on the direction mankind is heading. This allows society as a whole to acquire a greater sense of awareness and is compelling corroboration for the government to promote the arts for the betterment of society, even if the privileged have an added advantage. Newspapers may be accurate in reporting on reality, but it is one thing to look at the glaring red figures and another to feel for the victims of the Great Depression. George Orwell's "1984" and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" aptly portray the consequences of social degradation when a society is left unchecked. From these

works of literature, society is able to glean knowledge and keep in mind the views of artists, all of which are essential in securing a country's progress and prosperity.

The arts are able to express religious values and enhance the rich cultural heritage of a nation. In the absence of physical embodiment of the deities people fashioned, many have developed art forms to visually render the unseen. The sculpture of the Aztec Goddess of Childbirth is a powerful image that is able to bind the entire community with a common symbolism of hope. One of the most illustrious expressions of religious values in Western culture can be found in the Gothic Cathedral. Everything from the structure to the stained glass is invested with symbolism. Such is the power of the arts in connecting people emotionally and spiritually. This, for the government, means cultural enrichment of the people and the potential to instil a sense of national identity through the arts. Hence, the benefits extend beyond the group of the privileged, reaching the common masses who can also benefit from the cultural immersion provided by the arts, thereby enriching the emotional and psychological side of community.

The arts have the power to fire the emotions and stimulate the intellect, hence they are able to trigger thoughts and provoke viewers to question the purpose of the artist. An example is Jenny Holzer's "Inflammatory Essay" which draws viewers into an intellectually stimulating feminist declaration, where issues of poverty, freedom and torture are discussed. Hence, this immense ability of the arts to transform viewers into thinking, feeling individuals warrants its promotion by the government.

Even though the privileged may benefit from the arts to a greater extent than the average or a less well-to-do member of society, the government should still strongly promote the arts in view of the many benefits to be gained, culminating in cultivating well-rounded - intellectually and emotionally developed - individuals who in turn, have the ability to contribute a lot more to society. In fact, the situation of the average person having limited access to the arts and hence diminished benefits as compared to the privileged should spur the government to "democratise the arts". This will allow equal access to the arts for people from all walks of life, regardless of occupation and financial background. This can be achieved by the widespread publicity for the arts, coupled with subsidies and grants from the government to financially aid the less well-to-do, bringing them to a level playing field in terms of the extent of benefits from the arts. An example is the Tote Board Arts Grant which subsidises the cost of tickets to cultural performances for students in Singapore. However, the government can do more to encourage the average person to engage in the arts more frequently by introducing and encouraging the appreciation of the arts by blue-collar workers.

In conclusion, the government should strongly promote the arts as its immense benefits to society offset the disparity in accessibility by different groups of people. Granted, the privileged may benefit more from it, but they are not the sole beneficiaries. The average man in the streets can also be positively influenced by the arts. However, this disparity should not be a deterrent to the promotion of the arts and should instead trigger a greater amount of encouragement by the government, concentrating efforts and funds on subsidies to make the arts accessible to all while maximising its benefits.

Comments:

Excellent analysis with relevant and compelling examples that substantiate claims. Clear and fluent organisation too. Essay reflects depth of thought and extent of knowledge. Very impressive!

'Too little, too late.' Does this describe our efforts at environmental conservation?



Tan Chin Yee
08S03B

We are people driven by economic gain; competition for economic growth has never been this intense before, what with China and India pumping resources into their economies in a bid to emerge as the world's leading superpowers. However, one must ask, 'At what cost?'. Indeed, this myopic competition has brought about grave consequences. After former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore travelled worldwide to give his presentation 'An Inconvenient Truth', governments across the globe have stopped to contemplate the costs. Indeed, we have been doing too little to rescue our dying planet, but I do not believe that it is too late to step up the intensity at which we do so.

Inter-government cooperatives were formed, and a panoply of measures have been taken to free our planet from the high volume of waste production and the shackles of our high dependence on natural resources. However, where the environment is concerned, we have not done enough. Admittedly, some people have begun to see the light or at least feel the pinch and realised that our poor environment needs our care. For the past decade, Japanese households have been actively recycling daily waste as part of a requirement to reduce dumping volume. Huge amounts of money have been poured into research for solar powered cars, and factories have been issued carbon footprint systems, all in a bid to reduce emissions, reuse resources and source for alternatives.

That said, I still feel that too little is being done for the environment, in terms of education. Yes, policies have been adopted, laws have been passed, companies are racing against each other to patent their latest biofuel technology, but we have to know that our greatest hope lies in the staggering number of people in this world. Educating them, and not coercing them to mechanically follow regulations, should be the way to go. No number of policies can save our environment if the fundamental belief of the majority is not changed. In that respect, I believe that we have failed tremendously.

Take China, for example. Regulatory panels have been set up to manage its environmental burden. However, its momentum is so large that many companies, driven by stiff competition, ostensibly abrogate the regulations passed, continuing to spew toxic fumes over the city of Shanghai, engulfing millions of people in carcinogens daily. The judicial system is mandated to enforce its laws, but with such a large population and landmass and so little manpower, how can we expect to keep every environment polluter behind bars? Take an even simpler and closer-to-home example – getting groceries at a supermarket. We never do notice all the posters reminding us to bring our own shopping bags, do we? Shoppers request for shopping bags for every other purpose; for wet umbrellas, dirty clothes, or just to carry their things in. Many do not realise that they have become desensitised to the stress that non-biodegradable plastic bags are exerting on the environment. It takes little extra effort to remember to bring a personal shopping bag, or request for fewer plastic bags at supermarket counters. However, we hardly remember these little things which matter – not until we have to pay ten cents a piece – all because this knowledge has not been ingrained in everyone.

We also have done far too little, in the sense that commercial imperatives have outweighed the need for conservation. Even some measures taken to conserve our environment are commercially driven, as seen by the number of research labs racing to discover new methods of processing biofuels or solar companies

pushing their limits in order to patent new types of solar cells. Prima facie, it may seem a good thing that environmental conservation is pursued with such vigour and tenacity. In the process of doing so, we have lost our initial motivation and rationale for research: to save the environment. A recent analysis done by the National Geographic has shown that some forms of biofuel – which are supposed to ease our reliance on the environment and produce less harmful emissions when burnt – are more detrimental to the environment when they are being distilled from plant cellulose. In the name of research and for funding, these research companies conveniently overlook the ugly intermediate processes in order to embellish their final product.

I do not believe however, that it is too late to do anything. Our current momentum has not reached a point where it is too late to turn back. The ozone hole may be expanding, and consequently, sea levels are rising, but people have managed to retard the recession of the ozone layer by finding substitutes for CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons) and reducing harmful emissions from cars using catalytic converters. Paper recycling methods are becoming more widespread, and deforestation rates, albeit still high, are decreasing steadily. Hydroelectric power stations, which jeopardise the surrounding ecology, are slowly fading from the limelight as more environmentally friendly energy sources such as biofuels and high-efficacy solar cells have broken into the market. Water pollution is also being harshly tackled by government panels, which impose hefty fines on companies that intentionally abrogate regulations.

It is not too late, but again, we do not have much time on our hands either. Oil and petroleum, at given amounts, will run out in twenty years' time, Shanghai is still heavily polluted, slash-and-burn farming methods remain a common practice in Indonesia, grandiose plans for conservation stay on paper and are not carried out. Our efforts at conservation have started late and are at a low inertia; much has to be done to educate others and make environmental conservation a top priority, and given the puny manpower we have, we might not get anywhere. We still have time, though, to step up our efforts in educating this generation and bringing what is important – our environment – into perspective. It is only through a focused and concerted effort that we can make environmental conservation possible.

'Too little, too late.' Too little, indeed, for we have a long way to go and a lot to do. Too late? I think not, for the future of the environment lies in the hands of its inhabitants, and there is still time.

Comments:

Passionately argued and more critical than most essays in assessing present conservation efforts. Perhaps you could mention efforts put into educating the public by certain governments and NGOs to present a more balanced assessment of the issue. Also, while it is undeniable that researchers are motivated by commercial imperatives, what can be done to use this to motivate research into clean and green energy?

'Too little, too late.' Does this describe our efforts at environmental conservation?



Soh Ming Quan
08S03A

Heart-wrenching snapshots of polar bears drowning in the Arctic waters and gaping holes in the Antarctic ozone layer have left the global population astounded by the impact of their excessive consumerism and desire for economic progress on the very environment they live in. While the majority of the world population has turned a deaf ear to the atrocities of DDT and the destruction caused by CFCs, they have been awakened by the reverberations of massive damage in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina strengthened by global warming. It revealed that no nation, not even the superpower United States, is immune to ecological hazards. People lament that their environment has been irreversibly destroyed and efforts to rectify the situation have at best been weak and feeble. Yet, environmentalist Al Gore proclaimed in a climatic note in his documentary 'An Inconvenient Truth' that 'together we can resolve the climate crisis'. A massive sprouting of environmental causes following the release of the movie took place, witnessing how politicians and the public alike have come to view environmental conservation seriously. Thus, in light of the growing environmental conscience and the sheer rate at which environmental technologies are developing, it would be prudent to argue that the environmental cause is gaining momentum and an ecological disaster would not be a case of inevitability.

Critics of the motion cite the lack of global efforts in conquering environmental difficulties, in particular the glaring example of how the US refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. While the above example may hold true, it is myopic to overlook the numerous global environmental causes that are already in place. For example, the 1992 Rio De Janeiro Earth Summit and more recently, the 2007 Bali Conference on Climate Change served to show the resolve of many countries in mitigating the climate crisis. Such efforts need not be futile; one can easily look to the Montreal Protocol two decades ago where global efforts have reduced CFC emissions and curbed the cascade of events that could have led to an environmental apocalypse. Thus, numerous global efforts are already in place and as we note the emergence of new environmental efforts, the salvation of the environment would appear less futile and powerless.

Critics also bemoan the ineffectiveness of current levels of technology in mitigating the ecological crisis. While it may be conceded that current levels of technology are limited in their ability to resolve the problem, it is otherwise narrow-minded to doubt the ability of technology, be it current or future technologies, in mitigating the problem. In fact, significant developments in solar power cells have caused the price of solar power to decrease drastically and this has led to more people being able to afford such clean power, including people in developing countries such as India, who have installed solar panels on the roof of their homes. In addition, current research in biofuels manufactured by algae has produced promising results, reducing the need for biofuel crops to encroach on marginal land. Thus, it is evident that environmental technology is undergoing a phase of unprecedented development, and it would be vital to believe fervently in the prospect of technology reigning in the environmental problem.

Indeed, the doctrine of science and technology, being one of seeking practical solutions to problems, has led to the robust development of environmentally-friendly science, nurturing talent as well as solving environmental problems, rendering the environmental cause more robust and feasible. For example, research into membrane technologies has successfully led to the invention and adoption of reverse osmosis as a technique to increase water supply, a pressing problem for many countries with polluted waterways or an

acute shortage of water. In addition, the enrolment of students in colleges offering environmental research has been steadily increasing, and we witness an unprecedented number of papers being published on environmental science. Such is the promise of technology, poised to resolve major environmental problems and carry the environmental cause well into the twenty-first century.

The influence of the mass media has caused a greater awareness about the environment in the general public, and this has awoken a long-dormant environmental conscience that would serve as a precursor to active environmental conservation, rendering the cause less of a futility. For example, the classic-in-the-making, 'An Inconvenient Truth', has incorporated climate change into the social priorities and political agenda of many. The public is hence more informed about the scientific basis of climate change and the threats confronting the environment. More importantly, they have realised that they have a moral calling to protect the environment and this has translated into an environmental conscience that would be pivotal in furthering the causes of environmental conservation, opening up the potential to solve the problem before ecological hazards become imminent.

It follows from the previous premise that people are becoming more aware of the problems confronting the environment and this has translated into a fundamental shift in the mindsets of the people, from one of excessive consumerism to one of environmental conservation. Society is now paying more attention to environmental causes and some members of society have gone to the extent of changing their lifestyles to give full support to the environmental cause. For example, eco-villages in suburban Los Angeles have sprung up as a result of urban dwellers wishing to lead an environmentally-friendly lifestyle. The inhabitants of the villages hold jobs in the city, yet practise environmentally sound policies such as a reduction in electricity usage, commuting by public transport and paying rent to advocates of the environmental cause. Such is the shift that will propel the rate of the environmental cause, address the problem directly and solve the root of the problem.

Nonetheless, while it remains to be seen whether such shifts in isolated individual mindsets will have much impact on the environment, it is evident that as people campaign for and champion the cause of environmental conservation, governments and other political organisations have had to alter their policies and regard conservation as their main concern should they wish to remain in power. This is best illustrated in the Chinese people's protest against government decisions to site polluting industries in residential districts. That was not only a laudable display of civil disobedience against a central government, but also a prominent outburst against the lax environmental policies meted out by the government that have endangered their lives. In addition, Scandinavian countries have advocated the use of public transport in response to the wishes of its people in conserving the environment by taxing cars heavily and increasing the price of taxi rides. Moreover, candidates in the recent US Presidential Elections made a firm stand on climate change; such is the political clout that is revolutionising the face of environmental policies and conservation today.

It follows that as politicians grow to regard conservation in a serious light, global efforts mediated by governments would ensue in a collective bid to resolve the environmental crises, furthering the effectiveness of such a cause as more countries and more people get involved. This is aptly illustrated in Singapore's collaboration with China to construct an eco-city in the northern port city of Tianjin. Masdar City, an eco-city in the deserts of Abu Dhabi, has served to prove that environmental efforts can be promoted and made possible by both the government and corporations. Such global efforts to combat the environmental crisis will make the environmental cause more robust and it will be the perfect antithesis to the inevitability of ecological disaster as industrial giants such as India and China continue to develop.

In conclusion, it is evident from the various examples above that environmental conservation is gaining momentum and affecting all facets of society. It would hence be unwise to dismiss the cause as futile and deem that ecological disaster is imminent, since it would promote a passive approach towards the salvation of the environment in which we live. After all, recent developments have endowed us with the optimism to confront the environmental issue and resolve the various crises. It would hence be more prudent to continue

believing fervently in the prospect of environmental conservation and make the necessary changes in our lifestyles to suit the cause. Only if we can achieve this on a global scale can we truly live up to the Al Gore mantra that 'together we can resolve the climate crisis'.

Comments:

Good authoritative answer with an impressive range of examples.



Is a policy of non-interference an ethical position for a country to take in foreign affairs?

Tan Juanhe
08S06N

In the wake of Cyclone Nargis and the Burmese government's controversial decision to ban foreign humanitarian aid groups from the country, one might perhaps wonder if there is a case to be made for the direct intervention of the international community to prevent further loss of human life. However, while I agree that in situations of dire need, direct intervention in one country's affairs by another may be justified or even necessary, in most normal circumstances, a policy of non-interference ought to be adopted by most countries so as to uphold the sacrosanct right to national sovereignty that every state possesses.

It should be recognised, though, that there are notable exceptions to this general rule. In the case of extreme circumstances where there is a pressing need for foreign intervention, non-interference on the part of nations that have the ability to help alleviate the situation may be seen as negligent or even morally unjustified. This is especially true when there are human lives at stake, when non-intervention will most certainly lead to the loss of these lives. From both utilitarian and deontological viewpoints, feigning ignorance in the face of such catastrophes is unethical as doing nothing to try and avert the danger is equivalent to the condemnation of the people involved to a certain death. When the government of the nation facing the catastrophe is unwilling or incapable of averting it, the nations that can should step in and do something about it. A good example of such a situation is the occurrence of natural disasters, such as Cyclone Nargis, which left many dead and even more homeless. As it is clear that Myanmar lacks the necessary resources to adequately address the damage caused, wealthy nations like the US should consider entering the country and offering much needed aid even if the Burmese government refuses to accept it. Of course, diplomatic negotiation should always be the first option in such situations, and rarely would a country deny such help, but when it does happen, because millions of lives are on the line and rescuing these is of utmost importance, there is an urgent need for intervention and non-interference here would be unethical.

Another exception to consider is the class of events commonly termed "crimes against humanity". When the government itself is actively and unfairly persecuting its people, non-interference cannot be an ethical stand for any nation. Being members of the human race, we cannot stand by and do nothing as crimes like genocide take away the valuable and precious lives of our fellow men. Case studies such as that of Rwanda and Sudan come to mind, when millions of people were killed and almost nothing was done to stop this. The people of these nations were powerless and could do nothing to stop the onslaught, which was often executed by the governments of the countries themselves. In such a situation, because there is no one else who can or will step in, other nations must take up the cause and protect the interests of these innocent civilians. Non-interference is unethical as it would be akin to actively allowing such destruction to take place.

Some may also argue that in today's globalised world, with countries even more interconnected than before, that what a country does at home may have adverse effects on nations around it, and this gives neighbouring nations the right to step in to defend their own interests. This was the case behind America's recent invasion of Iraq, when it was argued that non-interference would have been irresponsible as Iraq may be harbouring weapons of mass destruction which could be used against the US or the world. When faced with potentially deadly spill over effects, it seems that non-interference is not an option.

However, it is worth noting that it is precisely because of today's globalised world that we must take heed before choosing to interfere in another country's affairs. By choosing to interfere, through possibly militaristic means, we could engender a conflict that would have ripple effects on the entire world. Perhaps a policy of non-interference would be more ethical as no nation has the right to make a decision which could potentially impact the entire world. America's invasion of Iraq caused oil prices to spike because Iraq, a major oil exporter, had its economic activities disrupted. This increase in oil prices caused production costs to increase all over the world, as oil is used in many industrial processes, and this hurts the economies of many oil-dependent nations. The US was later criticised by the international community for invading Iraq unilaterally, without considering global interests. When it was revealed that Iraq did not in fact have weapons of mass destruction America received even more flak for making a hasty decision. This goes to show that in situations where information is lacking and circumstances are not extreme, non-interference might prove to be the more ethical option.

Furthermore, one major idea to take note of is that every country has a right to national sovereignty. Members of a country have a stake in the country's future and are directly affected by a country's policies. They therefore have the right to have a say in the way the country is run, either directly or via their government as a proxy. Being outsiders, other nations do not have the right to dictate the policies of any particular nation unless this nation is doing great harm to another, just as how every individual person is recognised as an autonomous entity that can make his own decisions without having to submit to the orders of an external authority. Considerations of national sovereignty is why even in dire circumstances, the international community hesitates to intervene, just as how they stood back during the Rwandan and Sudanese genocides, with the UN Security Council terming them as internal conflicts instead of crimes against humanity. This is also why no country would think of imposing a particular political or economic system on any other, and also why America's invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq to remove their corrupt leaders were seen to be unethical, for it was really none of their business. Hence, in general, a nation should respect another nation's right to govern itself and make its own decisions, and should adopt non-interference as an ethical choice.

Moreover, it is often more pragmatic to leave countries to their own devices, as most governments, being part of their nation's everyday functions would have a better contextual understanding of their country's situation, and would be better able to grasp the nuances of the social landscape. Hence, it is often the case that when an external body intervenes in the running of a nation, it puts in place ineffective policies that could even threaten to endanger the nation's social fabric. When the United Nations stepped in with peacekeeping efforts in Yugoslavia or Cyprus, for instance, it was unable to understand the rich social and historical background of these countries and only succeeded in further exacerbating the internal strife. Five years on, the US is also unable to come up with a coherent system to put in place in Iraq because they have failed to assess the nuanced power play and antagonism among the various ethnic and sectarian groups, thus causing civilian violence to further escalate. Hence, in most cases, non-interference is more ethical than intervention as outside nations, being unable to understand local mindsets and cultures, are liable to do more harm than good.

Lastly, there is a government's duty of care to its own citizens. In general, being elected or recognised as the representative of its country and its citizens, a government's primary responsibility should be to ensure the well-being of its people. More often than not, intervention in another country's affairs consumes resources and manpower that can be better diverted to causes back home, and hence, if the overseas matter is not urgent, it would be unethical for a government to spend resources on the other nations when they are meant for its own citizens. This is why the citizens of Japan have been clamouring for the Japanese troops in Iraq to be called back home. Why endanger the lives of citizens for what is seen to be an unnecessary cause? Michael Moore's *'Fahrenheit 9/11'* also exposed the average American's resentment at the government for interfering in Iraq. Elsewhere, lobby parties have pushed for governments not to send aid overseas but instead to support employment at home, as evidenced by the continued implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy.

In conclusion, unless there is a dire and pressing need for intervention, non-interference is a more ethical option. This does not mean countries neglect other disadvantaged ones. Help and support can be provided where they are asked for, with the successful development of political systems in East Timor by the United Nations and other countries like Australia being a good example. Countries are moving towards discussions and "softer" approaches (think North Korea and the six party talks) and if these can persuade Burma to accept aid through ASEAN, it can work in many other areas too.

Comments:

Lovely! A mature, sensitive and insightful essay. Bravo!



Is a policy of non-interference an ethical position for a country to take in foreign affairs?

Arun Vignesh Selvaraju
08A13B

In international relations today, the fence is a particularly crowded one. Many of the world's governments hold fast to doctrines of neutrality and non-interference, which, in the strictest sense, restrict nations in commenting on and involving themselves solely in the international disputes or discussions which directly affect them. However, in view of recent events such as the genocide in Western Sudan or the failure of governmental relief operations in cyclone-hit Burma, some have asked whether such a policy of non-interference, however politically practical, is ethically justifiable. Ultimately, however, in as much as most democracies around the world have concluded that citizens deserve their autonomy, states should not rush to impose themselves upon their neighbours, but there nonetheless remains some very valid reasons to do so on occasion.

To begin with, it would perhaps be most woeful to examine the argument which is most often employed to approve the moral legitimacy of non-intervention – the need to respect and preserve the sovereignty of states. Benedict Anderson defined the nation as 'an imagined political community [that is] sovereign and limited'. At the heart of the international system, therefore, is a recognition of the inviolable right of every state to manage its internal affairs as it alone sees fit, free from the influence of other governments. This principle, first codified in the Treaty of Westphalia, now features in every interstate organisation. The UN Charter, for example, recognises it explicitly and therefore requires even its most powerful organ, the Security Council, to seek the permission of a nation's government before entering it. Closer to home, ASEAN too stuck doggedly to its belief in the primacy of sovereignty, refusing to allow the censure of even its more notorious members, most notably the authoritarian Burmese state. Viewed in this light, the morality of non-interference is starkly obvious. To allow any state to meddle in the affairs of another would be to endanger all states, since the degree of self-determination a nation enjoys would regress from being an absolute dignity to being merely, to paraphrase Nietzsche, a 'function of power'. Therefore, in order to ensure that all states, whatever their size or military strength, are able to exercise the autonomy they are entitled to, non-interference is necessary and, by extension, ethically sound.

However, it is more than a little unnerving to claim that the mass murder of one's own citizen à la Pol Pot is nobody's business but one's own. It could seem, therefore, that some concerns, particularly humanitarian ones, can and should override the policy of non-interference. Put simply, to stand by in the face of human suffering cannot be an ethical decision, and this is something which even governments are coming to accept. Following the ethnic violence in Kenya earlier this year, political leaders from around the world ignored the rules of non-interference to condemn the slaughter of hundreds of Kikuyu men, women and children. The United Nations took this a step further in April 2008 when it formally adopted as one of the organisation's chartered obligations the 'Responsibility to Protect' the victims of crimes against humanity, even at the expense of the sovereignty of its member states. In so doing, the world's nations admitted that the duty we have as human beings to protect the most vulnerable amongst us is a duty which would supersede the preservation of a country's sovereignty and therefore, that non-interference cannot be an ethical foreign policy position for any state to take when lives are at stake.

This becomes doubly true when one considers that such atrocities are most likely to be committed where governments are the least responsible. Burma's military government has, inhuman as it sounds, acted to bar

the disbursement and distribution of aid to the areas most affected by Cyclone Nargis. Even as international humanitarian groups such as Amnesty International provide evidence to suggest that nearly 60% of North Korea's population are at risk of starvation, its xenophobic political elites have resisted attempts by Russia and the US to trade food aid for a shutdown of its nuclear programme. In an age in which, as Francis Fukuyama claims, "[that] Western liberal democracy has displaced all others" to establish itself as the pre-eminent system of social organisation, some governments remain oppressive, repressive and cruel. North Korea, Sudan, Burma and the other frustrating outliers in the global system are unlikely to accept help from the international community even if they need it and the ones who suffer as a consequence are almost always their people, not their politicians. When the leaders of a country act without concern for and to the detriment of their citizenry, non-interference cannot be a legitimate position for any other country to assume.

It is undoubtedly true that the carefully observed non-interventionist policies of states such as Switzerland come under most strain when the issue at hand is a humanitarian one. Nevertheless, it is worth examining whether non-interference is a responsible policy for governments on other counts as well and here, globalisation seems to have altered what might previously have been a straightforward answer. The increasing interdependence of our world means that even geographically distant events can have consequences for local populations. Lax environmental regulations in China, for example, are likely to engender an increase in carbon emissions which will very directly affect the inhabitants of the South Pacific Island of Tuvalu (due to sink as a result of rising sea levels by 2050). Economic activities are, in particular, so interwoven that the sub-prime mortgage crisis in America has forced European central bankers to respond with a multi-billion dollar stimulus package to keep their own economies afloat (no offence meant to Tuvalu). Therefore, non-intervention is becoming less and less a viable policy stance for nations and so governments which choose not to act even when an issue has implications for their own citizens should not be allowed to resort to a moral defence for their short-sightedness.

All things considered, therefore, the future may appear bleak for a doctrine which is not only losing relevance in a globalised modern world but also straining under the weight of the international community's humanitarian duty. However, this should not be construed as *carté blanche* for the world's biggest, most powerful nations to ride roughshod over the sovereign rights of their neighbours. Russia's attempts to destabilise the governments of Georgia and the Ukraine by supporting Abkhazian separatists or cutting off oil supplies should be rightly seen as a craven disrespect to their governments' authority. Non-interference has an important role to play, but it is not an absolute one.

Comments:

An essay with insight and depth. Balanced, substantiated arguments. Well done!

'The role of the arts should not be to shock but to humanise our world.' Discuss.



Loy Xuewei
08S06Q

A recent art exhibition in Spain held in late 2007 showcased a local artist's latest brainchild: a mongrel taken off the streets and chained to the walls of the studio with a metal collar. The dog, thin and sickly, was not given any food or water, and was left to die slowly and excruciatingly of starvation before the eyes of its viewers. This exhibit shocked the art world – and the animal rights activists – to the core, leading many to question the role of the arts in society, and the educational value of such inhumane and shocking exhibits. The mentality belied in the quote in question – that the arts should humanise the world, and not shock it – is therefore held by some. I, however, disagree – while I definitely view the arts as a force that can humanise society, I do not feel that too much concern should be given to whether a work of art is shocking to the viewer. This is because the shock value is in the eyes of the viewer and thus too subjective to determine; and secondly, being shocked is a reminder of our humanity, and the arts that shock in fact let us take a step forward in humanising ourselves.

In this age of consumerism, society is largely driven by the worldly pursuit of numbers – in grades and money – and status, or by the scientific desire for knowledge and the ability to crack Nature's codes. The arts – here referring to visual arts like paintings, literary arts, music and the performing arts – are thus able to lend a soft humanising touch to this profit-driven bustle by serving as a reminder of our humanity. The arts serve as a hallmark of a society enlightened enough to turn its attention within to explore the depths of its human nature – the perfectly proportioned marble statues of the human form made in the Greek and Roman empires in the years before Christ are testament to the advancement of their civilisations, both in craft and in ideology.

As the arts seem frequently inextricable from aesthetic beauty – centuries of art champion the beauty of the human form and the triumph of the human race – some viewers question the need at all for art to shock. The exquisite paintings of nature and women done during the Renaissance and pre-Raphaelite eras stand in stark contrast to the exhibit of the dying dog mentioned earlier; the role of the arts should not be to shock, some postulate, when similar ideas can be portrayed in a method that is aesthetically pleasing to the viewer, without having to affront him.

However, it is this school of thought that I disagree with, simply because of the subjectivity of shock. Whether or not one is shocked depends on one's cultural background and life experiences; hence it is simply impossible to predict if a viewer will be shocked by the artwork. An example of this would be in the difference between Indian Bollywood films and Hollywood films produced in the United States of America. While semi-explicit love scenes are considered commonplace in American films, the same would be considered scandalising for audiences in India; hence such scenes are almost never included in Bollywood films. This is proof of the subjectivity of shock – what is shocking to one viewer in the arts may be commonplace to another.

In the case of artists that push all cultural barriers to arrive at an artwork that is possibly universally shocking – such as that mentioned in the opening paragraph, of the dying dog – I would like to argue that these works actually humanise us by shocking us. The very reaction of shock is a reminder of our own humanity and mortality; evidence of our spiritual sides and an innate moral compass. Viewers who were shocked by the dog exhibit are actually displaying a very human compassion for other living creatures; viewers who

recognised the artist's intention in that exhibit to showcase the plight of the stray animals in the streets of Spain are showing their humane ability to contemplate the issue. The questions raised – and, sometimes, the answers obtained – by the creation of these 'shocking' artworks serve to make us consider our morals and our spirituality; a human pause in the money-motivated rhythm of society.

The arts that shock also focus our attention on issues that should be addressed; shock value is thus a useful means that artists can use to raise our awareness on important issues. An American artist's controversial T-shirt artwork of a starving African child holding a Louis Vuitton bag served as an attention-grabbing stunt to raise awareness of the plight of children in war-torn countries; incidentally all proceeds of the sale of the shirt went to a charity in aid of the war-torn Darfur.

It must be noted that while the shock treatment in artworks should not be curbed, artists must be careful when wielding this double-edged sword, because shock, when taken to extremes, can take away any attention paid by the audience towards its artistic merits. An example of this would be in the publication of D. H. Lawrence's 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' in the early 20th century, which caused a stir for its (then-considered) explicit portrayals of sex, leading it to be banned from the press. 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' is presently a literary classic for its astute observations of the human – particularly female – psyche; however its merits were largely unnoticed by the early 20th century audience due to their extreme shock at its depictions.

To conclude, the arts are undoubtedly a humanising force, and that is the role that they have played – and will continue to play – since the dawn of history. The quote fails to consider the subjectivity of shock, the instances in which shock can be used to advance the causes of humanity, and finally, that the reaction of shock itself is a humanising force, for it reminds us of our own morality and mortality. The role of the arts, thus, is to humanise our world – and this it accomplishes, sometimes, by shocking. To return to the example cited in the opening paragraph, while not everyone will agree with the artist's methods of portraying the suffering of the animals on the streets, if one viewer walked away from the exhibit thinking twice before abandoning his pet, the arts would have succeeded in casting its humanising touch.

Comments:

You have done a great job answering this question! This essay has depth and insight although there is still room for improvement. Keep up the good work!

'The role of the arts should not be to shock but to humanise our world.' Discuss.



**Mi Xiao
08S06S**

'Let's go, let's go (They don't move)'. When the post-modern theatrical masterpiece 'Waiting for Godot' was first staged, audiences around the world were horrified and even outraged by its gibberish dialogues and disturbing stasis. The shock that the audience experienced was perfectly understandable: for how can a world that had just recuperated from the woes of the World Wars, and faced with the prospect of prosperity promised by the forming of the United Nations, be possibly so absurd, disordered and fragmented? Yet, critics hailed the play for its acuity in its observation of innate hollowness behind the veneer of hectic modern life, for its 'shocking' truism in the depiction of humanity. Indeed, the role of the arts in general, is an intriguing duality: whilst it aims at humanising our world through their representations and expressions, the methods and ways they adopt to achieve such an aim are often shocking to the general public, and sometimes even appalling. The view that the role of the arts is not to shock our world is rather myopic and fallacious, as the shock element is an inherent quality in any work of art.

Contemporary artistic debate often revolves around the 'value of the arts', and one quintessential value of the arts is didactics. In artists' sundry and scintillating portrayals of society, the audience can always gain insight into societal ills that are not easily perceivable. It is exactly because the audience is often unaware of such hidden ills and evils of society, that the role of the arts should be to shock the readers and audience out of their ignorance and compel them to ameliorate or 'humanise' the world they live in. 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', a novel that was said to have 'caused the American Civil War', depicts a world of black slavery and repressions unknown to the white people. The shock, experienced by white Americans in the North, directly propelled them to wage a war against slavery which resulted in a more humane America where abominations such as slavery were no longer in existence. The staging of the drama 'The Crucible' in America during the Cold War is another example of a piece of art aiming to shock the audience. The chilling enactment of the seventeenth century witch-hunt by Arthur Miller shocked the audience with its portrayal of sheer cruelty and the unbelievable paranoia that humans were capable of. Such a shock, though, sent the audience into contemplation upon the irrationality of the 'Communist fear' in contemporary America and facilitated the removal of McCarthy, the politician who perpetuated such irrational fear. Therefore, the role of the arts should definitely be to shock the audience since only through shock, can we realise our mistakes and strive for the betterment of our world.

For the world to progress, the unique gift of the human mind – imagination – is an indispensable agent. Since artistic works are often the most immediate outlets to express our imaginations and creativity, they also function to enhance the development of our world. However, human imaginations expressed through art works are often so fantastic that they may shock the audience into wonder and scepticism. Orwell's '1984' envisions a world where everything is regulated and kept under the control of Big Brother, where the world is ruled by systematic lies and brainwashing. 'Utopia' by Thomas More, however, depicts with fervour a commonwealth that is replete with mercy and justice. Both works shock the readers, either by its profound pessimism or its unrealistic idealism. Similarly, Jules Verne's 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea' shocks the reader by the fantastic submarine machine unimaginable at that time. Yet, such imaginations sow the seeds of yearning and warning for posterity so that they may strive to improve our world. The world of democracy has emerged from the longings of Thomas More, the tyrannical Soviet Union crumbled with the

horror in '1984' and submarines came into reality after the imaginations of Jules Verne. Therefore, the role of the arts should be to shock our world with their unique visions so as to better our world by leading it into an entirely new, and also better, direction.

The view that the arts should strive to humanise our world also holds much truth. After all, the arts teach us to be human. One of the primary purposes of the arts is to unfold to their audience, as accurately as possible, a true picture of human nature. Through such a revelation, the arts not only inculcate good values and morality, but also help us understand our latent nature better so as to prepare us for greater challenges in the world. Shakespeare's drama 'Macbeth' teaches the audience about the self-destructive nature of evil through the tragic fall of Macbeth. Milton's epic poem, 'Paradise Lost', illustrates with philosophical contemplations and symbolisms, Man's 'freedom of choice': "Thou art made sufficient to stand; yet susceptible to fall". It is exactly because of our pliancy and propensity towards vacillation, that we are made to be more cautious of moral choice by Milton's poem. In Mozart's supreme expressions of pain and suffering in his 'War Requiem', we feel a rather paradoxical sense of turbulence and quietude, and thus understand better the nature of death (which is as formidable as it is soothing). To conclude, by expressing our human condition in various unique ways, the arts teach us to be more moral, more self-aware and thus, more human.

The arts' aim to humanise our world, though, is not limited to just making individuals more aware of the very meaning of humanity. Leo Tolstoy views the arts as a primary agent to serve a societal purpose, that is, uniting people together with a common identity. The arts of different cultures have different characteristics. Yet, by viewing such arts which extend through thousands of years of history, we, as humans, can find our common roots and be more united under a common cultural code. 'The Great Gatsby', hailed as the 'most American novel ever', delineates with literary finesse the common dream that all Americans have: the aspiration towards something greater than the self. Through reading 'The Great Gatsby', the reader is made to experience vicariously the sense of ambition experienced by all Americans of all times, and thus, may become more faithful and loyal towards his national and cultural identity. A recent groundbreaking staging of 'King Lear' by the Theatreworks in Singapore incorporated Beijing Opera and Thai Dance to symbolically represent Singapore's eclectic culture. The viewers lauded the drama as 'uniquely Singaporean' and felt strengthened in their feelings towards their homeland. In having a stronger loyalty and love towards one's cultural roots, we are made to be more human since culture is a mark of humanity and civilisation.

On a final note, the view that the arts should only be to shock our world is in actuality, unsound. In modern society, the pursuit of creativity has led many to abandon artistic representation and expression altogether in favour of artistic creativity. Duchamp's contentious painting, 'The Fountain', depicts a single urinal amidst nothingness. Contemporary artistic debates have recently concluded that this work cannot be classified as a work of art since it has no associated meaning. The sheer shock effect it may convey to the viewer by its total absurdity is rendered ultimately meaningless by its lack of any 'humanity'.

In conclusion, I think that the quote 'the role of the arts should not be to shock, but to humanise our world' is only partially sound. Whilst the arts certainly aim to humanise the world through their representations of our basic natures and didactic inculcations of morality and cultural identity, they should also strive to achieve this through shocking us out of our ignorance, or sometimes, complacency. These two purposes of art are inseparable; to isolate one from the other is to misunderstand the inherent values and methods of the arts.

Comments:

A well-structured response with a good grasp of content on this issue.

'Affluence breeds political apathy.' Is this a fair comment on Singaporean youth?**Koo Yi Jing**
08S05A

Post-independence Singapore has been blessed with four decades of unhampered economic progress, brazenly entering the new millennium as one of Asia's most affluent economic tigers. The citizens of Singapore have benefited from political stability, and riding on the waves of globalisation, have enjoyed material comforts far surpassing our regional neighbours, grossly outstripping the levels previous generations experienced. Critics however, have pointed out the alarmingly poignant fact that our government has not been confronted with a sizeable opposition as of yet, and that Singaporeans trapped in their bubble of economic boon and material satisfaction do not seem concerned at all regarding the political situation in the country. Some have attributed this political apathy to rising affluence, but this writer feels that, while affluence admittedly does contribute to this phenomenon, it could actually reduce political apathy, but more importantly, other factors have played more crucial roles in the environment of political indifference in Singapore.

Firstly, young people in Singapore have grown up in a generation of economic and political stability which has furnished them with more than sufficient material benefits. Households, having financially outgrown the heartlanders' estates, have increasingly moved to condominiums and private properties, bringing their children along as well. Besides accommodation, young people have been blessed with increasingly intricate technological gaming and media devices, virtually enjoying entertainment regardless of time and location. High-end restaurants have lined the business and commercial walkways in Singapore, with young people enjoying the fruits (literally) of their forefathers, and more immediately their parents', labour. All facets of young people's lives are taken care of today, giving them no material reason to want to enter the relatively stable political scene, or even involve themselves in an area that has brought about such effective transformation to provide young people with all that they have today.

The Singapore society has been curiously absent from political or social turmoil for the past four decades, living in the absence of wars that rocked the country prior to independence. For young people here, such uncertainty and chaos experienced by older generations is but a fabled historic anecdote ensconced in the vestiges of time. But it is this uncertainty that provided the impetus for political activists to involve themselves in the political arena in Singapore, and now without this, society continues to produce intellectual, highly educated youths without knowledge or interest in politics whatsoever. Without the highly educated young people providing opposition for the long-standing government, or at the very least involving themselves in political processes, Singapore would continue to have a politically apathetic young population. Currently, any opposition to the government is starved of imagination, refreshingly welcomed initially but eventually labours on repetitiveness and lack of a seriousness to effect real change.

Admittedly, the young people in Singapore abstain from politics due to their affluence and their fear of destabilising a government that has proved capable and financially sound all these years. However, increasing affluence levels could provide the opportunity for young people to move on to political issues, given that they do not have to worry about satisfying material needs any more. Young people could base their fledgling careers on politics, either for or against the government. They are also freer nowadays to explore the vast library of information regarding Singapore politics. Due to the information technology age, such information, especially that written by foreign authors, would be available to youths interested in the topic at the mere

click of a button.

Furthermore, affluence could provide young people with the financial backing to enter the political scene. The (outrageous) fees of S\$13,500, for running as a political candidate in Singapore would deter many less wealthy applicants. However, young people blessed with ample finances could afford to take the financial risk involved, and coupled with their education, could enter the political scene and provide refreshing perspectives on Singapore politics. Dr Chee Soon Juan of the opposition has exemplified this; returning from university in America, he got interested in politics and managed to stir up quite a commotion in his fervent remonstrations (and hunger strikes) against the government's credibility and transparency. Affluence could also give political challengers the financial ability to tide over the numerous lawsuits and charges of defamation that commonly afflict political opposition. Dr Chee has withstood these tests, and still continues his campaigns on a low profile in the heartlands of Singapore.

Detractors have blamed political apathy among youths not on affluence, but on other factors. Young people in Singapore are constantly exposed to different but all-encompassing variations of media, whether the television, radio or newspapers. Organisations such as Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and Media Development Authority (MDA) all operate under the stern, uncompromising eye of the government. Being deprived of a more worldly view of Singapore politics, youths have no reason to be politically active, given a lack of issues that could cause unhappiness within the population. Such information, usually written by the Western critics or the diaspora abroad, is not readily available through mainstream media in Singapore for young people to lay their hands on. Thus, the release of information that largely espouses the benefits and goals of the government on the media deprives youths of information, and subsequently, opportunity to engage in meaningful political discussions.

The government has also employed strong-arm, intimidating tactics to deter political dissenters. This has been relatively effective, given the smaller number of opposition politicians evident in the political scene here. Young people, after witnessing prior incidents of dissenters being made an example of, refrain from committing the same mistake by entering the political fray as staunch opponents of the government. Young people prefer to pursue their academic excellence in the form of PhDs and Masters degrees and financial success down a bright career path, rather than to pledge their future to an indeterminate cause without concrete benefits. Such a career path could be hazardous to wealth and reputation, as exemplified by many opposition members who have been unceremoniously branded as 'below-the-belt-liars' (the irony is evident here) and as a result emerging from countless lawsuits as grand, temporarily famous bankrupts. J.B. Jeyaretnam now peddles anti-government leaflets and written materials outside MRT stations, unfortunately not even able to elicit so much as a glance from many commuters peevishly intent on their personal lives. Youths who are witness to such a sorry state that people such as Jeyaretnam have descended to fear to enter the political fracas, even regarding such issues as anathema.

In conclusion, affluence alone does not hamper young people's ability or willingness to participate in the political arena, providing alternative paths to success in economic terms. Affluence also gives young people an anchor, one that we are too afraid to forgo in pursuit of political prominence. Few young people have expressed interest in politics, only that they are for the government, and this involvement does not constitute really effective means to spur the government to constantly work for the benefit of the people, something which only a legitimate opposition can achieve. The stifling of alternative political voices through the media, the need for speakers at the speaker's corner to obtain approval from the authorities, the disallowance of any protests or strikes, greatly hinders our youths' ability to be politically active. All in all, opposition politics is an ill-rewarding career path, and though youths today are blamed for their political indifference, they have too much to lose in terms of material comfort and reputation to even take a tentative step into the hazardous, tremendously one-sided arena that is Singapore politics.

Comments:

Persuasive, interesting and politically insightful!

'Affluence breeds political apathy.' Is this a fair comment on Singaporean youth?



Navene Elangovan
08S06Q

Singaporeans have time and again been accused of being politically apathetic. Singaporean youth, in particular, are accused of being disengaged from the political scene, displaying little interest in knowing the names of our Members of Parliament, let alone the policies they are debating about. A typical Singaporean youth can be said to be affluent, meaning one of a respectable socio-economic standing with access to material items and education to the tertiary level. Whether it is this affluence which causes a Singaporean youth to be politically apathetic is debatable.

On the one hand, it is true that affluence breeds political apathy among the youth in Singapore. A quick glance at the political scene in Singapore shows that bread-and-butter issues take precedence over all else in Parliament. Parliamentary debates are focused on the economy, from how the up-and-coming Integrated Resorts (IRs) will benefit Singapore economically to how the sub-prime mortgage crisis in America has been a damper on Singapore's economy. Hence, it is hard to blame young Singaporeans for taking little interest in politics. It is hard for one who is fairly well-off to be engaged in issues which hardly affect one. Singapore is a developed country where almost everything is provided for. With most of their material needs satisfied, there is little incentive for young Singaporeans to be attuned to an economically-focused political scene.

On the other hand, growing affluence among Singaporean youth can be argued to have led to greater political awareness rather than apathy. As mentioned earlier, a typical Singaporean youth comes from a well educated background. He is well armed with knowledge about the world and is opinionated. With an increasingly educated population, there is now greater demand from the Singaporean youth to break away from traditional bread-and-butter politics. The youth of Singapore, exposed to Western ideals of democracy, demand greater freedom of speech, increased civil rights and less government patronage. An example would be the young Nominated Member of Parliament Eunice Olsen's plea to allow demonstrations in People's Park and to lower restrictions on protests. She, and other affluent and educated young Singaporeans represent a growing demographic of future voters who desire a broader political expression in Singapore rather than one centred on traditional bread-and-butter issues. This desire for change in the political scene shows that the youth of Singapore are quite attuned to politics and this is a result of affluence among them.

However, it is still a gross generalisation to say that affluence breeds political apathy or awareness. A recent survey by The Straits Times shows that many tertiary students were unaware of the names of Ministers in Singapore. This is an indication of our largely politically apathetic youth. Although there has been a slight increase in political awareness, with more young readers writing to the forums of The Straits Times, the mass population of youth in Singapore are still largely politically apathetic. To pin this disinterest solely on affluence, however, is unfair.

There are several other reasons to explain the apathy among Singaporean youth, starting with the bland political scene. The young have grown accustomed to seeing the People's Action Party (PAP) win time and again. The monopoly of the government by the PAP, coupled with the effectiveness of the government in leading the country, has led to a largely contented population. In fact, one would go so far as to say that the youth of Singapore are a complacent lot who believe that the government will be the guiding force of

Singapore forever. They fail to realise that their votes will determine the quality of government coming to power. Thus, many are not well-informed about ministers and political affairs, blindly pledging allegiance to the tried-and-tested government whom they assume can make no mistake. This is by no means a result of affluence among youth. It is probably a mindset passed down from many in the older generation to the young, who place their faith in the PAP and expect their young to do the same.

The un-engaging political scene in Singapore is also another cause for political apathy among the youth. The political scene in Singapore is a largely formal affair. Restrictions on the press and free speech, especially during the election period, do little to entice young, current and future voters from paying attention to politics. Compare the scene in Singapore to that of the US, where lively debates and interviews on television are the norm during election periods. The presidential hopefuls of America have even extended their reach to young voters via popular networking sites such as Facebook and video-sharing sites such as Youtube. Laws in Singapore, however, limit the reach of politics to the youth. Although politicians are slowly embracing blogs and podcasts to engage tech-savvy youths, it is undeniable that the formality and restriction of Singapore politics will still keep youths at bay.

Does affluence breed political apathy? Yes and no. Affluence is a double-edged sword which in some respects, breeds apathy and in other respects, raises awareness. However, political apathy among youth in Singapore is largely a result of the nature of politics in Singapore. In a changing demographic of voters who are more attuned to the outside world and are passionate about many issues, the political scene in Singapore is unable to keep up with the changing demographic. It remains a stuffy and formal affair, where members of Parliament sit quietly while a speaker reads from a script, 'debating' issues which barely engage the youth. The youth of Singapore are a vibrant and dynamic lot, raring and ready to face the world. Sadly, domestic politics is unable to keep up with this young lot. However, I believe that political apathy will eventually be eradicated as our government realises that it must change its tune to engage new voters.

There will be greater political awareness among youth when the government engages them in more ways than one. To render them politically apathetic without first trying to reach out to them is unfair.

Comments:

Nayene, this is a well-written and well-argued essay. There is obviously real understanding of the issues and you have done extremely well to address the question. Written with maturity and insight. A pleasure to read indeed!



'Freedom of the press is no different from any of our so-called freedoms; it must be curtailed.' How far do you agree with the statement?

Andre Chong Wei Min
08A01A

Broadly speaking, the press tends to occupy the narrow margin that straddles the citizenry and the state, serving as a medium of communication between or within both groups. To see the press as a monolithic entity would certainly be strange and to an extent naïve, because the opinions that it puts forth are as varied as its contributors. Those who argue for the curtailment of the freedom of the press often perceive it to be a sinister, unified organ deliberately undermining the social fabric, or the political integrity of the country. In truth, the press is often as conflicted as it is united, and as supportive of the establishment as it is dismissive – curtailing its freedom of expression risks undermining its role as a platform of objective debate, and giving it the subjectivity that only a narrow scope can offer.

Certainly, there is merit in questioning the extent of freedom that the press can and should be granted. It can be argued that bereft of the benevolent hand of censorship, the press runs the risk of veering into politically sensitive territory. The delicate social balance of a country can ostensibly be thrown into disarray by 'seditious' and inflammatory opinions published and distributed by an irresponsible or malicious press. The Rwandan genocide of the 1990s, for instance, assumed its grotesque and fevered proportions through the deliberate aid of the press – Hutus were exhorted through the television, radio and newspapers to participate in the massacre of their Tutsi brothers, who were branded as 'cockroaches' and other less palatable terms through the very same channels. Being an organ of wide reach and easy accessibility, the press possesses an influence more than commensurate to its size, and can easily turn simmering tensions into violence and conflict on a large scale. Perhaps recognising the destructive potential of the press, numerous countries around the world have imposed legislation criminalizing seditious or libellous opinions in the press – even liberal states such as Britain and Austria are part of rather than exceptions to the trend, having legislated against 'hate-speech' or comments that might potentially unsettle the delicate ethnic balance in both countries.

Yet, we have to realise that the destructive potential of the press stems not from its freedom, but rather from occasions when its role has been narrowly circumscribed. There exists a wealth of political views in society, all of which are able to find their way into the consciousness of the public through a free press. The United States, for instance, boasts a host of print and digital media that occupies all segments of the political spectrum, pitting such conservative media as the Republican and Washington Post against the more liberal Economist and New Yorker. For a free press, there exists the scope for intellectual debate and discussion – hateful or misguided opinions can be systematically undermined by contrary viewpoints, and thus discredited. That America's ethnic balance and political system remain one of the most stable globally in spite of her liberal treatment of the press must point to the latter playing a stabilising rather than subversive role. In the free market of 'ideas', irrational and unsound viewpoints gain little currency, and almost certainly fade away.

In contrast, the press has had the greatest potential for damage when its freedom has been most curtailed. Returning to the Rwandan genocide, it is now clear that the press had the influence that it possessed because of the monopoly that the state media held – government control of the airwaves and print media meant that the senseless call to genocide found itself the sole opinion in the public consciousness. There might certainly have been those who had urged calm and restraint, but without access to the press, they

were for all purposes unheard. Clearly, narrowing the scope of the press must narrow the range of viewpoints that can find expression through it, and risks retaining the unsavoury few over more sensible alternatives.

Moreover, even if a government were to exercise discretion in her censorship of the press, allowing for sensible opinions while quashing more radical notions, the latter are merely suppressed rather than entirely eliminated. Banning discussion of racially sensitive matters for instance does little in the way of addressing the underlying issues that are responsible for bigotry and racism. Rather than allowing the latter to be subject to public discussion and thus disproved, they are instead suppressed and allowed to simmer, consequently emerging more potent than before. Moreover, there arises the question of whether governments are able to play the impartial judge, or where the line can be drawn. The experience of the Cultural Revolution where a restricted press functioned as the mouthpiece of a tyrannical government, directing youths to engage in senseless destruction, is a clear revelation of just how far governments can err with regard to censorship. The potential for misuse and abuse by governments is far larger than if the press were left to its own devices, for while the latter is conflicted and held in check by the host of opinions it embodies, the press under the hold of the government has little in the way of checks and balances, being left entirely to the discretion of the government.

Finally, we have to acknowledge the role that a free press plays in hedging against the abuse of government power. It is no surprise that the most exploitative and authoritarian states in the world, such as Zimbabwe, North Korea and Myanmar, are home to some of the most restricted presses. The press, in essence, represents a source of independent opinion, and moreover performs an investigative function, seeking out areas of government abuse and excess. In Japan, for instance, numerous scandals have been uncovered by a vigilant and independent press – the same can be said of most of the liberal democracies of the world. A free press can question senseless government policies; it can apply the brakes on the abuse of power by the state, simply by exposing it to the wider scrutiny of the public.

In conclusion, a free press is not the issue of concern. Rather, it is ensuring that the press remains accessible to the population. That is of essence.

Comments:

A well-argued, thought-provoking and mature essay! Keep up the good work!

'There is no place for nationalism in a globalised world'. To what extent do you agree?



Tan Cheng Yew Philip
08S06A

In today's world of rapid globalisation, catalysed by the vast improvements in telecommunications and eliminations of cross-border differences, countries are interlocked in an all-encompassing web across the globe. Indeed, as Thomas Friedman aptly puts it, the world is now flat. With foreign exchange transactions amounting to \$1,200 billion, it is incontrovertible that globalisation has swept relentlessly across the world. Prima facie, it seems that there is no place for nationalism as the world becomes politically, socially and economically integrated. However, national sovereignty and the protection of one's self-interests by a country will always remain a top priority for the government, hence even in a globalised world, nationalism still remains relevant and important to a country.

As various international organisations are set up to improve regional and bilateral ties, we can see that politically, the world is getting closer and closer. The United Nations (UN), World Bank, ASEAN, NATO and many other groups serve to link countries together and thus render them close to inseparable. This is particularly relevant to the European Monetary Union, in which the European countries adopt the same currency controlled by a supranational financial institution. Such countries like Poland, Belgium and the Czech Republic are often mentioned and labelled as just part of the EU, instead of individual sovereign states. With political cooperation and economic links, these small nations can benefit greatly from globalisation and gain economic and military strength through such collectivity. Nationalism, on the other hand, would only serve to impede their progress as they seek to protect only their self-interests at the expense of their neighbouring countries. By forming a trade bloc like ASEAN or the EU, the countries would gain bargaining power against the rest of the world. Hence in this globalised world, nationalism should be compromised in terms of lack of worldwide recognition of the nation, as recognition of the regional organisation is more significant.

With the advent of rapid trade liberalisation and opening up of many countries' economies, there also seems to be no place for nationalism in terms of protectionist measures and living within one country's own economy. This can be seen by the extreme poverty and slow economic growth faced by North Korea today. However, nationalist examples can be seen by the constant refusal by Qantas to be bought over by SIA, showing that countries would still prefer to keep major industries under national ownership. Smaller franchises, in contrast, are riding on the wave of globalisation as Singaporeans did not even bat an eyelid when Robinsons, a supposed source of nationalist pride, was bought over by foreigners. It is without a doubt that multinational companies are constantly changing ownership as various companies expand and grow across borders. Nationalism in this globalised world, in the form of protectionist measures like erecting trade barriers and implementing tariffs would only serve to stifle the economy; the adoption of measures by America to protect their steel industries through high import taxes, resulted in a lack productivity in such sunset industries. Imagine what would happen to Vietnam whose imports and exports amount to 160% of its GDP, if it employs heavy nationalist measures? Hence, it is clear that nationalism has no place economically in this globalised world.

Globalisation has also resulted in mass immigration and labour flows, as people seek job opportunities in expanding economies abroad. This results in a diminishing sense of pride in one's country as most people leave their home country and never return. This phenomenon is especially significant for Singapore as being

a country with no natural resources, it seeks to attract foreign talent and simultaneously prevent brain drain. Nationalism would not be beneficial to the global economy on the whole since smooth labour flows would result in greater economic efficiency and productivity, as can be seen from the congregation of IT talents in Silicon Valley as well as the dream of many students around the world to secure a place in Ivy League universities.

However, is nationalism really irrelevant in today's globalised world? Drawing parallels to the Hobbesian nature of man, it seems unlikely that a country would fully embrace globalisation and pursue altruistic motives, perhaps even sacrificing its own self-interests for the overall good of the world.

Politically, nationalism is still fervently encouraged as it is the essence to patriotism and a sense of belonging to one's country. Although some countries abide by regional policies, the governance of its own nation still rests on the decisions of the government itself. It is true that many international discussions are between regional trade blocs; however, the fact is that bilateral ties and Free Trade Agreements are still fostered between countries, as can be seen from Singapore's FTAs with the US and India. Brad Glosserman has said that 'everyone is hedging in every direction', showing that beneath the links and friendly faces towards other nations, what really matters at the end of the day is the self-interests of the country. Nationalism of the old in the form of a closed economy like the Soviet Union and China is irrelevant today, but nationalism in the form of safeguarding one's sovereignty is still prominent across the globe.

Furthermore, even though globalisation has led to many economic links between nations, some countries such as those in the EU are considering erecting protectionist measures once again. This is because globalisation can disadvantage a country's economy and may meet with resistance. The poverty rate in Mexico was 75% after the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), as compared to 49% before the agreement. There have also been many complaints in the US about the loss of jobs with NAFTA leading to rising unemployment rates. This shows that many countries are forced to rethink the benefits of globalisation and resist further liberalisation if needed to protect their economy. Malaysia still has quotas specifying the percentage of Malay employees in a company, hence limiting foreign investments and labour imports, showing nationalism is still employed in today's world to safeguard a country's own interests.

Even though globalisation has led to the increased exposure to other nationalities and a supposed loss in national identity for some people, the fact remains that the majority of the people still feel a sense of belonging to their nation, for it is where they grow up and where their family is. The recent global criticism on the crackdowns on Tibetan protestors as well as human rights issues in China has led to a surge of nationalistic pride in the Chinese, as they protest against such criticisms and show support for the government. With such strong national identity present in the world today, it is naïve to think that nationalism would fade away with the wave of globalisation and an influx of immigration.

In conclusion, globalisation has brought about many stronger political ties, greater economic cooperation as well as cultural understanding which have shrunk the world and integrated many countries together. However, fundamentally nationalism will never be a thing of the past, as governments of different countries would still place their own people's needs and security as top priority. Altruistic intentions may grow, as evident in the international aid pouring into China and Myanmar after their natural disasters, but ultimately the world will still remain split. Nationalism still indubitably holds a place in the world today which cannot be eroded by globalisation.

Comments:

Very sharp and focussed both in your examples and arguments. The incisive output makes it a challenge to contradict you. Superlative!

'There is no place for nationalism in a globalised world'. To what extent do you agree?



Audrye Wong Yunqi
08S03M

The seemingly innocuous phrase 'a globalised world', oft bandied about, has been embraced by some and feared by others. Looking at the pace at which things have been developing over the recent years, it appears that globalisation is inevitably 'a fact of life', as previous United Nations (UN) chief Kofi Annan succinctly described. With unprecedented cross-border flows of goods, services, technology, ideas and even culture, national and state boundaries have been progressively blurring. Increasingly, we will no longer see ourselves as citizens confined to a particular country and subscribing to nationalistic ideologies thus implying the irrelevance and out-datedness of nationalism in an era of global integration. Yet to encourage and maintain our current cultural diversity that makes globalisation so dynamic, a certain level of patriotism should be kept, but not nationalism.

The world is now flat, as Thomas Friedmann declared a few years back. Countries are now so interdependent on each other for growth and survival, that any nationalistic feelings, any declaration of 'my country is good but your country is bad', would have significant implications, economic or otherwise. Should a government direct its energies towards stirring up fervour and pride for its country, while disparaging the intentions of other nations, and should the citizens take up the call, it could in fact distract the entire country from more vital issues such as catching the wave of globalisation. Take the everyday citizen's pet concern – bread-and-butter issues. This would come hand-in-hand with economic growth. Taiwan's politicians in recent years, such as the previous DPP President Chen Shui-Bian, came into office riding on a wave of nationalistic sentiments, with his eye on declaring Taiwan's independence from mainland China. But over his two controversial terms in office, his neglect of the country's economic policies and strategies for growth have caused Taiwan to fall from its pedestal as one of Asia's four newly-industrialised tigers, to one lagging far behind Singapore and Hong Kong. Voters have also come to realise that nationalism may in fact have no place in today's globalised world, as it has proved to be a key factor in obstructing the development of Taiwan's economic and political links with other major world players; with other countries reluctant to establish close diplomatic ties (of official recognition), the progress in the signing of free trade agreements is impeded, for instance when Taiwan cut off negotiations with Singapore after the latter did not align with some of Taiwan's political demands. In contrast, China, with its preoccupation of pushing growth and capitalising on globalisation, is now a burgeoning economy with a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. This is an apt illustration of how globalisation could have relegated the idea of nationalism.

Furthermore, pandering to nationalistic sentiments threatens to undermine the stability of an international political framework that engages different nations and aims to foster an atmosphere of cooperation conducive to the progress of a globalised world. The success of organisations such as the United Nations, the World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) depends very much on the willingness of their member nations to put aside any differences and vested national interests, to overcome suspicion of each other's intentions, to work towards a common goal, be it free trade, international aid or food policies. Countries like China with historical baggage and distrust of the West (think of its humiliation at the hands of Western powers during the Opium War), have tended to let nationalistic fervour and hardliner opinions override the diplomatic approach. Anti-Tibet and anti-West riots broke out along the recent Olympic torch relay, as Chinese (even those living in other countries) showed a united and albeit alarmingly nationalistic front, threatening to boycott

Carrefour over French antics (without realising that the company employs well over 45,000 local workers and sells Chinese goods). Alongside, the Chinese Communist Party lampooned the West and the 'Dalai clique', describing the revered spiritual figure as a 'beast' and 'devil'. This nationalism has obstructed the understanding between the West and China, and has made many politicians wary of China's real intentions and brought about a general sense of distrust and at times dislike, as evidenced by the vigorous bickering and irreconcilable differences during demands for free trade and lowering of tariff barriers at the WTO Doha talks, and wrangling over responsibilities for global warming at the series of Bali summit climate talks. This indeed makes 'nationalism' a much feared and detested word today, when we are trying to work together in a globalised, interconnected world.

Globalisation has and will only continue to be possible through a constant exchange of ideas, information and creativity. We must be willing to share with others, work with others and learn from them. Jealously guarding our wealth and talent, being selfish and a suspicion that those around us are out to do us harm often spring from a nationalistic mindset and will not bode well for our survival in today's globalised world. This would be reminiscent of a return to tribalistic days – with different countries keeping to themselves, harbouring protectionist feelings. An outburst in America, the US' increasingly anti-immigration stance, is a manifestation of Americans' fear that the world is catching up and passing them by, with workers losing their jobs because cheaper labour from China, India and Mexico are out to steal their livelihoods. Detractors have called out for the need to take the lead to ensure that America's boat will catch the tide instead of being stranded on the shore, because the rising Asian economies will not wait for them to slowly adapt; a globalised world is also relentless in its progress forward.

Yet this is not to claim that we should sacrifice our sense of identity or belonging to a particular country or place. Many fear that globalisation is making the world a homogeneous, flattened place to live in, with the spread of 'Coca-colonisation' and 'McCulture'. Yes, we must remember to preserve our rootedness, to forestall an identity crisis or a sense of floating and homelessness. But nationalism is by far not the solution – using the word patriotism would be a better answer. Rather than stoking anti-Western sentiments, China should inculcate a sense of rootedness and pride to the country, and utilise this as a driving force to transform and propel its economy forward. We can remain proud of our homeland and our unique culture, heritage and traditions, but this should be channelled constructively rather than venting frustration and anger at other parties, ranting that they harbour little altruistic intentions. Failing to ride the wave of globalisation, Myanmar, with its paranoid nationalistic junta fearful of outside interference, has remained in the backwaters of Asia and its people have suffered.

While patriotism can co-exist with globalisation, nationalism has little use in a globalised world. We look forward to the day when China and Japan can shake hands with sincerity, not overshadowed by past historic, nationalistic events.

Comments:

Well-written and well-argued. I enjoyed reading this essay although I must say you have a tendency to get carried away with the examples. Nevertheless, an essay that is insightful and mature.

Consider the importance of privacy in this day and age.



Mohandass s/o Kalaichelvan
08S03M

Eliot Spitzer, the disgraced governor of New York, bowed his head in shame after being exposed for hiring a prostitute and immediately resigned from his lofty post. The man, who was once earmarked as a future American president, will now always be remembered as one who had an urge at an unfortunate time in his career. Videos and pictures that were captured by surveillance cameras were splashed in the media around the world and the masses were certainly relieved that such a man was caught in the act before climbing up the political ladder and doing further harm. Welcome to the age of surveillance technology where cameras themselves are the new policemen on the block.

Surveillance technology is not a recent phenomenon, however, it has had a revival in recent years. What started out as a way of monitoring high-security facilities such as government facilities and banks has become a way of monitoring people all over the country at any time of the day. And this 'surveillance' does not just end with cameras; it continues on with increased monitoring of entire activities, the monitoring of people moving across borders, increasing access to people's medical records and enhanced finger-printing and identification methods. Although most of these have been achieved and set in place with the noble notion of enhancing security and protecting citizens, it is in direct opposition to our inherent freedom of privacy. The United States Constitution states this in the first charter that the citizens should be given the civil liberty of privacy and freedom as long as they are clear of any wrongdoing or criminal activity. However, this has been hard to practise in today's age of globalisation and inter-connectivity. Therefore, I believe that privacy is a freedom that citizens should enjoy as long as it does not interfere with other more pertinent affairs that threaten national security. The state too, needs to draw the line between national security and the privacy of its citizens.

Most of us seem to think that only celebrities and politicians suffer from the agonising fact that their every step and move is closely monitored. Therefore, most of us do not realise that a lack of privacy applies to the average citizen as well. What started out as a mere paparazzi trying to capture a scandalous moment in a celebrity's life has turned into a national mobilisation that is tracking the movements of citizens all around the country in most developed nations. What has caused this trend to emerge? Sure, the availability of suitable high-tech equipment has expedited this process of monitoring. However, there are more fundamental reasons why countries have increased the surveillance methods and ways at the expense of citizens' privacy. One of the most pressing and pertinent issues in our age is terrorism. Terrorism: this multi-faceted being has caused even the USA to adopt drastic changes to its policies and values that it has clung on to so dearly for the past 200 years since its founding. The people of the USA allowed the Patriot Act to be passed in Congress in 2001 after the devastating September 11 attacks on its home soil. The Patriot Act was revolutionary in the sense that the USA had always emphasised privacy of its citizens and this Act was threatening to tear away all those privileges and rights. Yet, Americans, one of the most liberal nationalities in the world, gladly welcomed it. Why? This has to do with the issue of national security and Americans have made their choice choosing national safety over privacy issues. It thus seems that national security should take precedence over privacy issues as the former forms the crux of a nation's survival in this highly volatile world. However, what happens when the states uses the illusion of national security to deprive its citizens of their privacy on the pretence of more sinister aims?

The most convincing argument against such surveillance and other security methods is that they allow the ruling coalition or government to have carte blanche over its citizens. There is a very high possibility that its citizens may be suppressed and their rights taken away from them slowly on the pretext of national security. This is a reason why we tend to associate such wire-tapping and surveillance methods with bickering countries and shadowy dictatorships because it might end up giving absolute power to the rulers and rendering its citizens utterly powerless. But the fact is such methods of monitoring are very real in our country. A possible scenario of the future might be similar to the scenes of the Jim Carey movie "The Truman Show", where his every action was captured on camera and analysed round the clock. Do people really want this? However far-fetched "The Truman Show" might be in contrast to modern life, we will have to look no further than China for a more realistic scenario of today's world. It is definitely by no coincidence that the phrase, "The Great Firewall of China" came about. China is notoriously famous for its invasive online protocols and surveillance methods that ban mainstream pro-democratic websites and monitor other actions of its people. It is widely known that the Chinese Communist government is afraid that its people will be widely influenced by such Western democratic ideas and therefore is interfering with the privacy of its citizens to ensure they do not get influenced as such. This is an example of how a nation might be carried away in its pursuit of national security such that it severely undermines the freedom and privacy of its citizens.

There can be no arguing against the fact that privacy levels of citizens have dropped and that their intense scrutiny will only tend to get more encompassing in the future. However, it should be made clear that such methods should only be undertaken to enhance national security and not for other malicious reasons. "Privacy" is still an ideal that we can protect and must possess in today's world. It is important to differentiate between the "private" life and "public" life of a citizen. What a citizen does in his "private" life that has no effect and does not undermine national security should not be monitored. The ruling government and security forces must understand the nuances involved in monitoring and tracking and must only use it for lawful reasons. The citizens, on the other hand, must understand the importance of this intrusion of their privacy and accept this partaking of their privacy as a part of their duty as citizens of their nation. This symbiotic relationship will greatly enhance the status of the country and allow suitable agreement and balance to be reached successfully. If either party in this agreement does not follow the terms of the agreement, the nation will surely end up in a chaotic mess.

As for the Eliot Spitzer scandal which was found out accidentally when wire-tapping was done in the name of other national security issues, it can be put forth as an unfortunate incident that has cost a rising politician his career. The crux of the issue still lies in the line that has to be drawn between national security issues and the level of privacy of the citizens that can be intruded upon. It would be quixotic to believe that this age of surveillance is merely a passing fad; rather it remains to be seen if this is a harbinger of our future. If this is what the future has in store for us, the future is not bleak. Rather, it should be looked upon as a time when citizens and government have come together to make an important decision on the level of privacy in the country. The faster this is done, the more hope we have of a safe and "unintruding" future.

Comments:

Mohandass, this essay has indeed addressed the issue between national security and individual right to privacy very well. The climate of fear of terrorism and the availability of technology have been examined in depth. However, other than the political perspective, it would have been better if you could widen the scope of this essay – for example, the intrusion of privacy for commercial enterprise (insurance). You have written a good essay as it is, otherwise. Keep it up!

Are the poor an inevitable feature of any society?



Tan Ian Wern
07S06H

The word "poor" is, in essence, a relative term. One is considered poor when one has relatively less wealth than someone who is better off. In the context of this question, the poor in a society refers to a specific class of people who, on average, are significantly less wealthy than the rest of society. While recent and ancient history has both demonstrated the remarkable resilience of an impoverished underclass; it does not follow thus that the poor are indeed an inevitable feature of any society, although in typical society, they are.

To understand the history of the poor in society, one has to look back at the different forms they have taken in the multitude of societies that have existed thus far. Much of recorded human civilisation before the Common Era existed in the form of slave societies, be it in Greece, Rome, Egypt or China. Slaves, deprived of both their rights and wealth, were one of the most extreme examples of an impoverished underclass. In the Middle Ages, two predominant society types evolved: serfdom and caste society. In both these societies, serfs and the lowest castes shared the miserable fate of being the "poor" in their society.

As cities grew, post-Enlightenment civilisation saw the birth of a new form of an impoverished class in Europe, commonly known as the proletariat. Revolutions and social upheavals eventually led to the establishment of equal rights for all in a significant number of societies, but the essence of a proletariat class – a working class receiving low wages relative to the rest of society and hence only barely making ends meet – is still prevalent in many countries today, whether in Europe or Asia.

Many historians and political economists have had highly enlightening insights into the nature and causes of the "poor" class in society. Karl Marx, widely venerated both within and without academic circles, pinpointed the organisation of labour as the critical factor in explaining poverty. From slavery to serfdom, caste society to capitalism, poverty can be seen as an indirect result of the way society organises its labour, termed by Marx as the "mode of production". Historically, poverty has been the result of systemic oppression of a class of people which specialises in productive labour. This is due to the fact that the surplus product of the poor, explained as the product of their labour exceeding that which is required for self-subsistence, is appropriated by the organisers of labour, in nearly all cases the upper class: aristocrats, noblemen, bourgeoisie and the like. Without a widely maintained and credible system of human rights, constitutions or labour unions, pre-modern societies invariably compromised the poor. Poverty used to be inevitable.

The central cause of poverty lies in the fact that labour has to be organised and systemised in such a way that at least a portion of the surplus product of labour is appropriated for investment in technology and productive equipment, which would not otherwise exist as it is not in the private interests of men and women to do so individually. An improvement in technology is ultimately necessary for the development of higher standards of living, stemming from the improved ability of society to produce a greater variety of goods in larger quantities. Air-conditioning, for example, would not be possible had there been no investment in plastic and electronic technologies. The problem is that while surplus products are appropriated by organisers of labour for such ostensibly productive purposes, it is often appropriated to such a great extent that the wealth is used to maintain the opulent lifestyles of the upper classes instead of being put to productive usage. This in itself is the incentive that motivates people to organise labour like governments and entrepreneurs do.

Excessive appropriation would mean that the labour class is left with income only barely able to sustain themselves, let alone purchase items of luxury and comfort. This is the quintessence of poverty in the greater context of society.

This, in other words, means that even in modern society, poverty remains inevitable. There will always be a group of people earning a greater income than others. The only thing that has vastly improved is the extent to which surplus product has been appropriated. While Victorian England displayed such a bad problem of poverty that the Poor laws had to be enacted and workhouses built for a starving underclass, countries today, such as the socialist Nordic countries and tiny states such as Luxemburg, display a relatively high level of wealth equality. There are indeed still poor people around, but poverty has been mitigated such that today's poor in more developed states are able to afford luxurious and recreational goods, something impossible a century ago.

Needless to say, capitalist economies like those of the United States, Great Britain and Japan still see a considerable level of wealth inequality and thus a significantly more distinct group of poor people, while just a few decades back, the communist Soviet Union and China saw entire societies of poverty, albeit not taking into account the wealthy politburo at the top of the "communist" hierarchy. Modernity is not a remedy to poverty in any society, not as much as the presence of income equality mechanisms such as minimum wages and social safety nets. The difference in modern society lies between the extent to which the poor are indeed poorer than middle and high income earners.

Nonetheless, it is possible for a society to eradicate poverty, but only if surplus products are not appropriated and the productive abilities of individuals do not differ too drastically. In such cases, technological progress will be excruciatingly slow and standards of living will largely stagnate, although society, to say the least, is largely equal. Tribal societies in Africa and South America are examples of such societies, primitive but egalitarian in nature.

From a synthesis of the above arguments, we can thus conclude that poverty is, by nature, a necessary corollary of improvements in standards of living. True, it is not inevitable, but this can only hold true for egalitarian, primitive societies. Society in any form requires that a class of people sacrifice a portion of their surplus product for the sake of the greater good. Poverty can be mitigated, reduced, lessened but not quite eradicated; for as long as a society aspires to the cornucopia ideal, the poor will always cling on like a trawling shadow against a future of light.

Comments:

Ian Wern, an interesting approach that, fortunately, works, although I would have loved to see a more detailed discussion of how poverty can be mitigated, something you hint at more than once but never really come to grips with. What roles do education, meritocracy and welfare play in addressing poverty? Why should we care about poverty? Can it lead to chaos? But you have only 90 minutes, so...

Do foreigners bring more problems than benefits to your country?



Sneha E. Eapen
08S03L

With globalisation and the erosion of barriers separating nations worldwide, our identities as both citizens of a country and citizens of the world are in a state of flux. With the free flow of goods and services across borders and ideas and technology that have been shared worldwide, the free flow of people between countries has become commonplace. Certainly, just as benefits and problems are both present in this era of globalisation, the influx of foreigners into one's home country also brings with it problems unique to the country and the strangers it welcomes. Nonetheless, considering the dynamism of today's world and its shrinking into a global village, it would be prudent and more importantly beneficial for a nation, especially one like Singapore, to accept outsiders with open arms, flaws and all. After all, the benefits of opening up economies to the rest of the world have been immense, let alone the benefits of welcoming the people of the world.

Singapore's unique history and culture should be an important factor that determines our attitude to foreigners. From the very beginning, Singapore, seen as a land of hope and opportunity, was inhabited by people of various races and nationalities, mainly the Chinese, Indians and native Malays. Under the guidance and careful planning of the early founders of Singapore, these immigrants had to learn to work together to bring the society forward and take advantage of the opportunities they had dreamed of. Open to trade, we were able to receive various ideas and peoples along with the exchange of goods and services. Certainly, this historical setting should serve as a guide and influence us in the way we treat foreigners – welcoming them and working alongside them for a mutually beneficial end.

Government efforts today to get people of all races and nationalities to live and work together through the use of policies should also make us more receptive to those outside our home country and to be able to overlook their faults. The government also has policies that make it very attractive and encouraging for foreigners to live and work in Singapore. With a projected significant population rise of 1 to 2 million people, largely consisting of foreigners in Singapore, we locals will have to adapt to and learn to live harmoniously with those outside our comfort zones.

The supposed problems or benefits that foreigners could bring to Singapore are simply a matter of perspective. These perspectives are heavily influenced by age, circumstances and education. There seems to be a gap in thinking and attitude towards foreigners between the founding generation of Singapore and today's youth. While the founding generation had to adapt to a new country's unique ethnic makeup and start new lives with strangers, and the latest generation, truly brought up in the age of globalisation, have also been brought up to accept foreigners, it is the generations in between those two that are facing difficulties; having not been exposed to outside influences as much, they seem more reluctant to accept outsiders and often find them more problematic than beneficial to Singapore.

While today's youth are brought up in the age of the Internet and at a time when the government's policies, particularly in the sphere of education, have attracted numerous teachers and lecturers from overseas, the older generations grew up in an education system classified by race and language. These older generations were unable to experience what it was like to work, live and share ideas with foreigners, and their mindsets have been shaped from young. The rare opportunity of studying abroad compared to its prevalence today,

also shaped the older generation's experiences and opinions. Some belonging to the older generations may thus view foreigners as a mere nuisance, stealing job opportunities from locals and diluting cultural values unique to Singapore. While there certainly are valid social concerns with the significant immigrant population in Singapore, there are undoubtedly benefits as well that cannot be overlooked.

The economic problems of having too many foreigners in Singapore are of particular concern to lower-income families. With globalisation, the outsourcing of low-skilled jobs to countries with cheaper labour and a move to the technological side of the economy results in many poorly-skilled workers in Singapore losing their jobs, often due to their lack of education. Moreover, the large numbers of foreign workers such as manual labourers and domestic helpers could be seen as stealing jobs from low-skilled local workers. However, it must be noted that the attitude of Singaporeans towards manual labour as being beneath them is a primary factor in this phenomenon.

There are seeming social problems also arising from the presence of foreigners in Singapore. A sense of inferiority is sometimes felt by locals when dealing with those dubbed "foreign talent" in Singapore such as expatriate teachers and foreign scholars. A particular mutual dislike between expatriate and local Indians in Singapore is one such example. Among foreign workers, it is also a common complaint that unsavoury cultural habits and behaviour, such as the gatherings of Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan workers in the playgrounds and void decks of Housing Development Board (HDB) estates, are being imported and practised, making locals uncomfortable. Singaporeans may also feel bitter that wealthy foreign scholars simply use Singapore as a stepping stone to achieve their goals, taking full advantage of the education system without contributing in return. The free exchange of ideas may also be seen as threatening the traditional Asian values touted by the government, as well as the cultures which uniquely identify Asians. As a result, patriotism and national identity could be seen to be compromised. Also, physical problems such as an even greater strain on public transport and road networks are a major concern to Singaporeans. The sometimes culturally insensitive behaviour of foreign tourists could be a problem as well.

As valid as these concerns are, there are benefits, although often intangible, that we obtain when foreigners are welcome in Singapore. Materially, the presence of more and more foreigners translates into spending on goods and services which contributes significantly to national income and gross domestic product. Moreover, the setting up of offices by multi-national companies, coupled with the Singapore government's emphasis on training, creates jobs for local workers.

Interacting with foreigners could bring several benefits to Singaporeans. The sharing of personal experiences and knowledge, between local and foreign students, for example, would be beneficial to both parties in a manner that cannot be achieved in any other way. As much as the Internet has greatly expanded our horizons, especially those of the youth, the personal exchange of culture and wisdom has far deeper and more extensive impact on people as a whole.

Rather than detracting from a unique Singaporean identity, I believe that the presence of and interaction with foreigners in Singapore is beneficial. In today's world, where our identity as a nation has to fit in with our identity in the global context, learning from foreigners by welcoming them and their ideas, flaws and all, will carry us far as a nation. As Singapore progresses in the 21st century, it will increasingly be up to the youth of today to seize the opportunities to benefit from cross-cultural exchanges and find a place for themselves in the global village as well as give something in return that is uniquely Singaporean to the rest of the world. After all, the way we deal with the implications of globalisation, particularly, the issue of global citizenry, will define the direction of Singapore's progress in the future.

Comments:

Excellent! argued, Sneha! Lovely!

The following essay won the 1st prize in an essay writing competition organised by the NUS Students' Political Association. It is re-printed here with the permission of NUSPA.



Samuel Lim Yong Peng
09S06W

Some walls do not function merely as human constructs; they are substantial barriers that define the disconnection between the hearts and minds of people with disparate origins, interests and beliefs. These entities occur within ASEAN. While on the one hand they serve to accentuate the uniqueness of a people, by virtue of their cultures and ideologies, they are also an impediment to genuine cooperation and cohesive social progress, an ideal that ASEAN was supposed to transform into reality.

The most fundamental divides in ASEAN took place due to a deeply ingrained intransigence on the part of particular member states on matters governing political stances, manifested in conjunction with the innate inhibitions of member states that prevent them from interfering with the actions of other member states. The Burmese crisis witnessed the repression of many human rights activists who had demonstrated peacefully against the government in the hope of securing a more reasonable set of inalienable rights to work with. ASEAN was slammed by the Western media for adopting too soft an approach against human rights abuses in Burma, as it refused to suspend Myanmar's membership and implement economic sanctions to prevent the abuses from continuing. In my opinion, while such harsh measures were not entirely necessary, ASEAN's member states could have contributed in a more constructive role through the provision of avenues for consensus building talks between the conflicting parties. However, member states were held back by their overwhelming respect for the sovereignty of Burma, a fellow member state, partly because they feared the repercussions of similar circumstances visited upon themselves in the future, and partly due to a precedent of non-interference in domestic politics. This was emphasised by the ASEAN representative Surakiart Sathirathai, who stated that ASEAN's role was merely to generate, and not prescribe, solutions. This implies the gravity of the matter – the walls to progress and heightened liberation in ASEAN are self imposed by member states who lack the courage to convey frank opinions on thorny issues, take an active stance in directing how events unfold, and back measures that though unpopular, serve the greater good.

The walls that are most germane to the people of ASEAN would be those which pertain directly to their bread and butter. Countries such as Cambodia and Laos are being marginalised increasingly with their markets inundated by the onslaught of cheap overseas exports. The poor in these lands lack the ability to emerge from the vicious poverty cycle, with more than 70% surviving on less than US\$2 a day. Transnational corporate interests are pursued, causing an unequal distribution of resources and access to economic opportunities amongst the populace, thus further compounding the problems of inequality. Yet the asymmetries are apparent with established members, such as Thailand and the Philippines, enjoying continued growth from integration.

To me, walls within ASEAN have also transpired due to the recurrent, cardinal theme of self-interest. The single disincentive to countries from stepping beyond their spheres of influence to aid other countries in ASEAN would be the artificial construct that is their mentality – which dictates that any course of action to ameliorate the plight of the less privileged would entail a significant reduction in the living standards of one's countrymen. Consider the recent haze crisis, which erupted four years ago in Indonesia, wherein subsistence farmers sought to expand the fertile land area they had for cultivation of crops by unsustainable methods of slash and burn farming that raised pollutant levels till they became hazardous to public health. Malaysia and

Singapore utilised the ASEAN Ministerial Meetings as a platform to badger Indonesia into ratifying the ASEAN Agreement on Transboundary Haze even with the knowledge that Indonesia lacked the sufficient resources to tackle the problem. The channelling of funds on the part of various member states, to solve what had evolved into a multicausal regional problem, could have been a feasible solution, yet no country was willing to do so because of the perception that the root cause had originated within Indonesia's borders. The general inertia in solving a problem that would engender benefits accruing to the entire region highlighted the lack of socio-centricity amidst ASEAN countries; such self interest not only emerged in the form of walls but rather, the true walls were those that dealt with identity.

I postulate that the difficulties ahead confront ASEAN as a single body, and not as an amalgamation of various peoples and interests. If ASEAN were to abolish all these walls that stand in the way of cohesion and growth, economic progress and societal stability would surely be in sight. Yet, it is this rudimentary change in mindset that is so hard to accomplish, for it mandates acceptance of the interests of countries in this region. In order for one to overcome walls, one, proverbially, needs to think beyond them.

The following essay won the 2nd prize in an essay writing competition organised by the NUS Students' Political Association. It is re-printed here with the permission of NUSPA.



Lee Tang Yin
08A13A

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, the physical destruction of the wall signified the reunification of East and West Germany, as well as a better and more prosperous future. In many countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, these walls still exist, unable to be seen or torn down like the one in Berlin, but are strongly felt by people who, helpless behind these invisible walls, remain at the mercy of those who erected them.

Take a look at the Union of Myanmar, which is governed by a strict military regime. Despite international calls for the Head of State of Myanmar, Senior General Than Shwe, to cease his human rights abuses of his citizens, repeated urges by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) for the democratisation of the country as well as the recent anti-government protests by the monks, Senior General Than Shwe continues his dictatorial reign over Myanmar with an iron fist. While countries like China, which was previously very much a closed economy, are opening up to the international community, the government of Myanmar continues to reinforce its walls against the rest of the world fiercely. And the rest of the world, including Myanmar's closest neighbours, finds it impossible to help the people behind these walls because of ASEAN's policy of non-interference.

These walls, though invisible, come in different forms. First and most obvious are economic barriers that are formed when a country's government decides to alienate itself from the world. This means severe restriction on trading imports and exports with the international community, as well as the non-participation in free-trade agreements that further facilitate the flow of goods and services around the world. In the case of Myanmar, it is a pitiful waste of both natural and labour resources because the country used to be the largest exporter of rice as well as oil, a most valuable commodity, under British colonial rule. The highly literate population then also contributed to making the country the wealthiest in Southeast Asia at that time. Today, surrounded by the thick brick walls of underproduction and corruption, the country is plagued by sky-rocketing inflation rates of 30 to 60 percent on basic commodity prices since civil servants were given a salary increase in April 2006, as well as an uneducated workforce that remains as one of the biggest stumbling blocks of Myanmar's wall because of how, at the international level, the world is moving towards a more knowledge-based economy.

The more intangible walls are the cultural barriers that dictatorial governments erect to stem the flow of exchange of ideas between its people and others in the world. Some governments see this as a wall to preserve the country's heritage and uniqueness. However, just as Plato's allegory of the cave in Book VII of the Republic where prisoners were merely allowed to see flickering shadows of reality, the cessation of communication with the rest of the world makes it impossible for the "escaped prisoner" who has experienced reality to share what the real world is like with the rest of the "prisoners".

However, it has become more and more difficult to keep these walls intact. Globalisation is working its way through them, carving out doors on the walls to allow a greater flow of ideas and culture or even completely knocking these walls down. The process is certainly aided by the geographical proximity of many Southeast Asian nations, such as Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar. Furthermore, with the increasing popularity of the Internet being the most efficient way of exchanging ideas and information, governments will find it hard to restrict information garnered by their citizens. After all, governments may block

websites, but if teenagers are able to get past firewalls, people will probably find a way around restrictions.

Singapore is a good example of a Southeast Asian country that has managed to open her doors to the rest of the world, yet being able to retain the multiracialism and multiculturalism that is such an important characteristic of a Southeast Asian nation. One might see the trends of Americanisation and Westernisation as frightening images of burger-munching teenagers obsessed with the latest hits by popular American artistes or enamoured with the cute young actors in Hollywood films, and conclude that this will be the result of carving doors and opening up to the global village. However, Singapore has managed to open up to brilliant economic prospects and vibrant cultural exchange without her people losing their cultural heritage completely. After all, a Chinese teenager, no matter how "westernised", looks forward to the beautiful small red (but increasingly multicoloured) packet that he might receive during Chinese New Year, even if he might be using the money to buy the latest CD by Justin Timberlake.

'To achieve knowledge, reason and experience are both needed.'
Discuss.

KI

Charlotte Ong Xin Yun
09A01B

Empiricists and Rationalists have disagreed on the source of our knowledge, with Empiricists arguing that experience is the source of our knowledge and Rationalists believing that reason serves as the source of our knowledge. However, I believe that in order to achieve as large an extent of knowledge as possible, reason and experience are both needed. In this essay, I will seek to show how the failings of Rationalism and Empiricism may be resolved to some extent by the synthesis of the use of reason and experience.

Rationalists believe that reason serves as the source of our knowledge and that we are born with innate knowledge which then allows us to utilise our reasoning capabilities to make sense of the world. Such a position, however, has been met with criticism, with the Empiricists arguing that the concept "two", for instance, is merely an analytic truth and only represents the symbol of "2" rather than a concept derived from reason, since without the experience of things in pairs, the concept of "two-ness" cannot be understood - what we merely understand is the symbol "2". Rationalism has been criticised for being unable to uncover truths about the physical world since knowledge that Rationalism offers is tautological in nature; for instance, that a triangle has three sides is a truth that can be uncovered through reasoning but it does not allow for new discoveries of knowledge to be made. Purely using reasoning does not allow us to uncover laws of physics, etc. The use of our experience and the sense data we have of the physical world is needed for us to uncover new knowledge.

Empiricists hold the belief that experience is the source of our knowledge, with Locke believing that we are born without any innate knowledge, that is our minds are *tabula rasa*. We form concepts of the physical world through the experiences that we have. For instance, the concept of coffee is formed from the taste, smell and colour of coffee that we have encountered, such that the next time we experience coffee, we would be able to recognise it as coffee as the concept has been formed in our mind.

However, empiricism has been criticised for being unable to explain how concepts like infinity or relational concepts are formed. How are we able to derive the concept of infinity if we have only ever experienced finite objects? How do we know that the cat is on the mat, when all we can experience is the cat and the mat, but not the cat "on" the mat? Relational concepts seem to be unable to be derived from experience. The concept of the colour red also comes into question. All we can ever experience are various shades of red. How then do we form the concept of red from the various shades of red that we have experienced? How do we recognise a new shade of red when we first experience it, if all the red we know is only what we have experienced?

Perhaps, synthesising Empiricism and Rationalism would allow for a substantive body of knowledge to be formed, as Kant proposed knowledge should be - a synthesis of reason and experience. With reason, we are able to categorise our sense experience and to make sense of it using concepts in our minds, since content without concepts would simply be meaningless noise. On the other hand, concepts without experience of the physical world are used so as to gain a more holistic and complete body of knowledge about the physical world.

We may be able to refute some of the criticisms levelled at using only reason or experience as the source of our knowledge through the synthesis of Empiricism and Rationalism. For instance, the concept of the colour red is derived partly through our experience and reason. Reason allows us to form the concept of the colour red in our minds, which allows us to recognise red as being a spectrum of shades of red such that when we experience any shade of red, we are able to recognise that shade of red as red.

Relational concepts are formed through reason and allow us to make sense of the experiences we have of the cat and mat by applying the relational concept of being "on" the mat to the sense experiences we have. Through experiencing things in pairs, we make sense of the concept of "two", so that "two" is not merely a symbol for us, but a concept with content, the content being our sense experience of things in pairs.

Even mathematics requires the use of both reason and experience. Take for instance, the sum of 12345678 and 235978098. Although the result is an analytic truth and cannot be changed, we cannot derive the answer purely through reasoning. It is necessary for us to add the numbers up and here is where experience comes into play.

Our senses have been said to deceive us on occasion, leaving scepticism over our ability to form knowledge of the physical world based on experience alone. The use of reasoning would allow us to make sense of our sense data in these cases. For instance, railway tracks seem to converge in the distance, but through reasoning, we know this to be unlikely, since railway tracks should remain parallel throughout such that the train can travel smoothly over the tracks. We sometimes see mirages and we know their occurrence is not a true representation of the physical world since it is unlikely that there will be a puddle of water on the road on a hot day, and based on our previous experiences of mirages we can reason that this is unlikely to simply be a repeat of that experience of a mirage. Hence, it may be seen that the use of reason and experience allows us to build a body of knowledge that is as large as possible, forming a bedrock on which the pieces of knowledge may be built.

If however we reject the Foundationalist structure of knowledge listed above, coherentism requires the use of reason and experience as well. Coherentism depends on various pieces of knowledge fitting together or cohering with other pieces of knowledge, forming a web of knowledge. New pieces of knowledge may be added to the web if they support other pieces of knowledge or other pieces of knowledge support them. Pieces of knowledge which cohere the most are in the middle of the web. In order to determine if new pieces of knowledge cohere with other existing pieces of knowledge, reason is needed. The pieces of knowledge may be gained through reason or through sense experience. As long as each piece of knowledge is supported by other pieces of knowledge, a body of knowledge is gradually built up through the use of reason and experience.

Hence from the brief overview of Rationalism and Empiricism and a discussion of some of each of their failings, it may be seen that both Rationalism and Empiricism, or the use of reason or experience as the source of knowledge have several drawbacks, leaving gaps or unanswered questions in our knowledge. Through the use of reason and empiricism, a larger body of knowledge is acquired, as concepts formed by reason are empty without the sense data gained through experience, and content or sense data without concepts to categorise them are meaningless noise. Even if the Foundationalist structure of knowledge is rejected in favour of coherentism, coherentism as a structure of knowledge would require the use of both reason and empiricism to allow us to gain knowledge of the physical world. Thus it may be seen that to achieve knowledge, some degree of experience and reason are needed for this to be possible as relying on one without the other would only allow for a limited scope of knowledge to be acquired, if at all, for the reasons outlined above in this essay.

Comments:

Clear, relevant and focused essay, with good organisation of points. More examples, especially for page 4, would be good too. A couple of areas of ambiguity but I think you should be able to put those points across more clearly once you have more time to think about them. Keep up the good work!

'To achieve knowledge, reason and experience are both needed.'
Discuss.

KI

Hahn Hyo Seok
09A01B

For centuries, debate has raged over the issue of the superiority of either reason or experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. Philosophers from both schools of thought (Rationalism and Empiricism) argued hotly over which school of thought was more effective and useful in achieving knowledge. The Rationalists, who employ reason as the ultimate source of knowledge, claim that ultimately, knowledge is built on a foundation of a few 'clear and distinct ideas'. These ideas are so basic that they are indubitable; our faculty of intuition immediately enables us to recognise these 'ideas' as true. Hence, the Rationalist claims that all knowledge of the physical world is achieved by applying reason and logic to all these indubitable ideas. The empiricists on the other hand, claim that experience is the source of our knowledge of the physical world. They adhere to the theory of *Tabula Rasa*, which claims that humans came into the world knowing nothing, and anything that we can possibly know must come via sensory experiences. Hence, our superstructure of knowledge is based on, and built on sense data. While both schools of thought possess certain merits and advantages, we have to ask if each system by itself can allow us to achieve knowledge. Can only one system be employed and the other discarded and ignored? If we attempt to imagine a situation where either Rationalism or Empiricism is the sole source of knowledge, we will quickly discover that we are unable to derive any meaningful or reliable knowledge.

Take Rationalism by itself for instance. Rationalism possesses certain advantages because knowledge derived through it is so certain. Knowledge is built on *a priori*, self-justifying truths, such as *cogito* ('I think therefore I am'), mathematical and geometric truths and truths of reason and logic. As such, knowledge gained through it is so certain that it is impossible to doubt them. Take the mathematical sum, $2 + 2 = 4$ for example. We can simply derive the answer by analysing and thinking through the sum. Furthermore, there is no way of disproving the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$. It is inconceivable to think of a situation where $2 + 2$ might equal something else. Thus knowledge gained through Rationalism is certain, necessary and eternal.

While this aspect of Rationalism is certainly useful in helping us achieve knowledge, the problem that lies with Rationalism as the only source of knowledge is that it does not allow us to know of contingent truths. Contingent truths are truths that only happen to be true but could be otherwise. An example would be to say the colour of the sky could have been of another colour other than blue if a different kind of gas existed in the atmosphere. These types of contingent truths are very important in the understanding of our ordinary lives but Rationalism simply discards this – hence, Rationalism is flawed in this way.

A more obvious problem of Rationalism is that without any content to analyse, interpret and reason out, reason is useless. Other than a few areas of knowledge such as mathematics, it is impossible to achieve knowledge of anything else, simply because there is nothing new that has been experienced by a person. For example, a Rationalist would not know of the existence of cars until he has actually sensed one through sight (the shape of a car), hearing (the sounds made by a car) and so on. There is no innate knowledge possessed by anyone of cars. Hence if the Rationalist argues that reason is the only source of knowledge, he would not be able to know very much.

On the other hand, Empiricism as a source of knowledge also leads to problems. Firstly, the great danger

of Empiricism is the trap of solipsism. As the Empiricist claims that the only thing one can be certain of is of one's own mind and its ability to perceive, the Empiricist quickly falls into the trap of solipsism. Solipsism is the view that the only thing one can be certain of is his or her mind, what it can perceive. This implies that it is possible that nothing else in the world exists.

Another problem of Empiricism by itself is that while through sensory experiences we can gather data of the physical world, nothing can be made out of it if one does not interpret it using reasoning. Without any form of attempting to interpret or reason with data, the content acquired through the senses just becomes 'white noise' or meaningless. Examples can be seen in scientific experiments. Even after all the rounds of testing and observation, if one does not apply reason and logic to the results, the scientific data means nothing; they just become meaningless figures. However, with reasoning and applying logic, one can deduce, generalise and formulate theories, hence rendering scientific experiments useful. Reasoning and logical workings are crucial to any data gained of the world if we are to gain knowledge and hence Empiricism as the only way of achieving knowledge simply fails.

To reconcile both Rationalism and Empiricism, we can turn to Immanuel Kant's idea of the filters of consciousness. Kant explains that knowledge can be worked out through the filters of consciousness which comprises the Forms of Sensibility and the Forms of Understanding. The Forms of Sensibility enable one to retrieve data of the noumenal world and thus fill up one's mind with content. Then, the Forms of Understanding, the retrieved data, is interpreted and reason is applied to it, thus making sense of it. For Kant, knowledge is equated with the sum of the phenomenal world as sensed by the Forms of Sensibility and the Forms of Understanding applied to the phenomenal world. Essentially, what this entails is that experience is crucial for us to achieve knowledge because it allows us to experience the world and allows us to gain data about the world. Reason is also crucial because only with the application of reason to the data of the physical world can we understand these data and only then can it be relevant to us. Hence, it is quite crucial that Reasoning and Experience are jointly utilised if we are to have any knowledge. One cannot do without the other, as we have discussed earlier.

Knowledge gained through both reasoning and experience has many merits and advantages, as well as fewer problems. One obvious advantage is that the acquired knowledge possesses the merits of both Rationalism and Empiricism. They are certain and also wide-ranging. They avoid the individual problems and flaws of Rationalism and Empiricism by themselves. Hence, in conclusion, reason and experience are both needed in our quest for knowledge as they provide us with reliable and meaningful knowledge which would be useful to our lives.

Comments:

A coherent, cogent and focussed argument. Do take care over the use of rationalism/reason and empiricism/experience. The words in each pair are not synonymous and can't be used interchangeably. Keep up the good work!

'To achieve knowledge, reason and experience are both needed.'
Discuss.

KI

Cheng Xiang
09S06Y

For centuries, philosophers have concerned themselves with one ultimate task: to gain knowledge and understanding of the world. However, the quest for knowledge is not an easy one, for what has come to be known as philosophical scepticism constantly seeks to destroy our claims to knowledge. Over time, philosophers have devised many different theories in order to overcome doubt and achieve knowledge. Some, such as rationalists, seek their answers from reason, while others, such as empiricists, view experience as the ultimate source of knowledge. So far, both schools have their own problems, and I believe that the most successful theory to knowledge is the one which combines both rationalist and empiricist viewpoints. Therefore, I agree with the statement to a large extent. In this essay, I will examine various schools of thought and justify my claim.

First off, let me start with rationalists. Rationalism seems to have its roots in mathematics, as it is mathematics, with its clarity and universal quality, that has inspired many rationalists to seek knowledge from reasoning alone. Mathematics has also been used by many rationalists to justify that it is possible to construct knowledge through reason only. Alone in a dark room, one would be able to obtain mathematical knowledge simply by thinking very hard, and rationalists believe that this is not only limited to mathematics. Through reason alone, they claim we can obtain knowledge of a significant portion of the physical universe, and this knowledge will be eternally true, just like mathematics.

Descartes can be said to be the most prominent of rationalists, and he is also one of the most extreme ones, for he completely doubted our senses as a method to discover certain knowledge. He did not hold it as a principle of life, and sought knowledge from reason alone. One can say that he was successful, for he managed to achieve what no one has achieved before: he managed to come up with a statement which is self-justifying and cannot be doubted, which can be used as the bedrock of our knowledge - the cogito. With the cogito, Descartes brought an end to the infinite regress of reason, as the cogito is true without the need to be supported by another claim. Also, the cogito, a form of transcendental argument, is obtained through logical reasoning only, and therefore cannot be doubted, and is immune to sceptical attacks such as the brain-in-vat argument. Indeed, even if we were to be brains kept in vats and fed false information, the existence of the self is undeniable.

Besides the cogito, Descartes also identified some other concepts which he claims to be the bedrock of knowledge. Such are the "clear and distinct" ideas, which are immediately apparent to us upon introspection. "Clear and distinct" ideas include logic and the basics of mathematics. Such ideas are gained *a priori*, and we cannot conceive of a scenario in which such ideas are false, e.g. $2 + 3$ will always be equal to 5.

However, despite the impressiveness of *cogito* and other similar ideas, they are insufficient as a foundation for us to construct knowledge of the physical world, and are thus not very useful. Descartes attempted to resolve this by linking our ideas and the physical world using God as the medium. However, he had problems justifying God, for the justification he used was widely agreed to be circular.

This limitation of rationalism has been the focus of criticism from empiricists. Hume's criticism of rationalism

is as follows: we possess two kinds of knowledge: matters of fact and relations of ideas. Reasoning can only produce the latter, whereas in reality, our knowledge of the world are matters of fact. Therefore, it is impossible for us to obtain knowledge of the physical world through reasoning alone. Secondly, causation does not actually exist in the physical world, as we never perceive the process of causation, but only the constant conjunction of two events. This dealt a critical blow to rationalism as causation is crucial to reasoning. If causation indeed does not apply to the physical world, then reasoning would not either.

Two rationalists, Leibniz and Spinoza, attempted to answer this problem by claiming that what happens in this world are in fact all necessary, and only appear contingent because we are unable to perceive the truth. However, both appealed to the existence of God to support their claims and thus suffer the same weakness as Descartes' argument.

On the other hand, empiricists seek knowledge from experience. They justify their stand with the incorrigibility of sense data: one can doubt the existence of the perceived object, but one cannot doubt the existence of the perception itself. This argument gives sense data the certainty of a priori knowledge, and allows it to be used as a bedrock for knowledge.

John Locke is one of the most successful of empiricists, and like Descartes, was one of the most extreme. He claims that we were born knowing nothing, with our minds like a blank slate, or *tabula rasa*, and all our concepts come from sense data. It is through the organisation and discerning of sense data that our concepts came into existence. All our beliefs and ideas can be broken down into simple elements of sensation such as, in his own words, that of "whiteness and hardness".

However Locke's argument also faces criticisms. For one, it is difficult to justify *tabula rasa*, and since his whole argument hinges on *tabula rasa*, it is difficult for him to justify his argument. Secondly, some concepts we have, such as mathematics and other *a priori* truths, do not seem to have their roots in sensation. As Plato put it, we may have perceived many pairs and threesomes in the world, but we have never perceived the number 2 and 3 through sense data. Furthermore, we can never perceive things such as infinity, yet we do possess such concepts.

Finally, empiricists have one fatal weakness, which, incidentally, is very much similar to rationalists. By claiming the incorrigibility of sensation, one must suspend judgment of the world, e.g. the statement "I see an apple" is incorrigible but the statement "there is an apple" is not. Therefore, if we follow the theories of empiricism, we realise that we still have no knowledge of the world. If empiricists were to attempt to know the physical world, they would have to attempt to interpret the sense data, and make judgements based on experience, which will give rise to a multitude of problems, such as being destroyed by sceptical attacks, as we do not know how accurate our perceptions of the world are.

So far, we have examined the two extremes of knowledge theories. Both have allowed us access to knowledge, but both have their limitations. Immanuel Kant attempted to bridge these two theories to resolve the limitations of both.

Kant claims that our knowledge of the world comes from both experience and reasoning. He first made a claim that there exist a noumenal world (the world as it is) and the phenomenal world (the world as we perceive it). He claims that true knowledge of the noumenal world is by and large inaccessible to us, for whatever we can perceive lies in the phenomenal world. He then claims that we perceive the noumenal world through filters of consciousness, limited by our forms of sensibility and forms of understanding. Forms of sensibility include time and space and forms of understanding includes causality. It is through these two that we can have knowledge of the phenomenal world. To Kant, reasoning and sense data are like concepts and contents, and either would be useless without the other. The reason that Kant's theory is so successful is that he does not seek to debunk rationalism or empiricism completely. Instead, he claimed that both reason and experience are necessary for knowledge.

In conclusion, I believe that both experience and reasoning are crucial to knowledge. It is important to note that "necessary" does not equate to "bedrock". It is entirely possible that Locke is right, that all our concepts come from experience, but even he has to admit that sense data needs to be organised (by reasoning) to produce knowledge. The failing of rationalists and empiricists is that they both attempt to prove the other wrong, which is not something they can justify. And this is why Kant did not face the same problems as Locke or Descartes, for he did not attempt to establish reason or experience as the ultimate supreme. Without turning to God, we can only turn to experience for information of the world and reason to understand the world. It does not matter if one is ultimately born out of the other, and does not matter if one is the "bedrock" of knowledge. To answer this question, I would say that I do not know if one is the bedrock. But I do know that both are needed for knowledge. Indeed, reliance on sense data is open to sceptical attacks, but I agree with Kant that in that case, we would just have to accept it, instead of completely abandoning sense data and trying to achieve knowledge through other means. Ultimately that would only add to man's limitations, not remove them.

'It is impossible to conclusively justify a given proposition.'
Discuss.

KI

Low Ping Shun
09A01D

'It is impossible to conclusively justify a proposition'- in other words, we cannot know a proposition for certain. Such a position is one taken up by sceptics who deny that we can ever attain knowledge beyond all doubt. In this essay, I will argue that I agree with the quotation on most areas of knowledge but that I find its implications irrelevant to us.

Let us first consider arguments in favour of the quotation.

Firstly, sceptics would argue that whenever we attempt to justify a proposition, we are caught in an infinite regress of justification which makes us wonder if our justification has any true ground. The sceptic's answer would be that there is no ultimate ground on which our beliefs are based on; therefore, we cannot conclusively justify any proposition. Consider the following attempt to justify the proposition, "Raffles Junior College is a mixed school". Perhaps we may justify this belief by saying because we have seen boys and girls studying there. The sceptic would then question how we do know this and we would possibly reply that because our senses are reliable enough to tell us that. However, the sceptic can still carry on questioning that belief and ultimately, we struggle to find any further justification. The main difficulty therefore is that when we justify any proposition x , we have to ensure that the beliefs that justify x in turn have to be justified by other beliefs, leading to an infinite regress of justification and ultimately it seems there is nothing that really justifies our beliefs.

Secondly, sceptics may argue that we may be living life in a dream and therefore cannot justify any given proposition. This is because we often think we are awake when we are dreaming and thus we cannot distinguish when we are awake or dreaming. In other words, our whole life may be a dream for all we know. This seems to lead us to conclude that we cannot conclusively justify any proposition. Consider the attempt to justify the proposition "Hydrochloric acid will corrode iron". If our whole life is a dream, then any experiment conducted to prove or justify the proposition is also a dream which can well be vastly different from reality. Hence, the sceptic concludes that we cannot conclusively justify a given proposition.

However the second argument has obvious flaws - Descartes rightly points out that while such an argument may tear down justification for propositions about the external world, it seems that analytic truths or truths of reason still hold. Proofs that the number 7 is a prime number or that $\sqrt{2}$ is an irrational number can still be held whether in dreams or in reality.

However the sceptic still has more arguments in favour of the quotation that effectively tears down the counter-argument. Descartes himself has argued that an infinitely powerful evil demon may be deceiving him about every proposition he thought he knew. His argument also effectively attacks any claim to justify any proposition, even mathematical ones. For all we know, our proof that $\sqrt{2}$ is an irrational number may not be conclusively justified. After all an evil demon could be deceiving us in to thinking our calculations are right when they are wrong!

Having presented some arguments that seem to support the quotation rather well, I shall now consider some

counter-arguments.

Firstly, Foundationalists would argue that the first argument presented is wrong because there exists a bedrock of indubitable beliefs on which we build our beliefs and which can be conclusively justified. This group of philosophers may be divided into two groups, the Rationalists and the Empiricists.

Rationalists would argue that there exists a bedrock of indubitable beliefs made up of truths of reason on which we justify our propositions. Truths of reason, Descartes argues, are the foundation for justification of all beliefs because the mind recognises its truth such that it knows that there is no room for error. Yet while this argument may be a counter-argument for the first argument I presented, it does not survive the evil demon argument, for how do we know that our reasoning is not manipulated by an all powerful demon? Truths of reason may seem certain but they do not rule out absolutely the possibility that we are mistaken.

We can now consider a counter-argument by Descartes. Descartes argues that he has a 'clear and distinct idea' of God and thus this means that it is true and that God, being all-powerful and good, will not allow evil demons to deceive us about other truths of reason which he also terms as 'clear and distinct ideas'. However this argument is circular for his justification for the existence of God is that it is a 'clear and distinct idea' and he then uses God to justify the truth of 'clear and distinct ideas' which is what he classifies truths of reasons as. Hence we see that the Rationalist enterprise ultimately still seems to fail to conclusively justify any proposition, even truths of reason.

Empiricists, however, argue that all our propositions may be ultimately justified by sense data. This is because knowledge of our sense data seems to be incorrigible as we seem unable to doubt them. For example, I may doubt that a flower is in front of me but I am unable to doubt that a patch of yellow in a certain shape is in front of me. At least, we seem to have found a bedrock of indubitable beliefs on which we base our beliefs and on which we may conclusively justify at least some propositions. It seems that even the evil demon argument cannot change the fact that I am having the experience of a headache even if I have no head. Thus it seems that I can conclusively justify the propositions of my sense data as there seems to be no room for doubt.

However here the sceptics may then argue that the only propositions you can conclusively justify are those about your sense data and nothing else. If you attempt not just to justify that you are not just experiencing a circular patch of yellow but you attempt to justify that it is a flower, the evil demon argument can come into play again. Sceptics can argue, for example, that you are deceived by the demon into thinking that it is a flower when it may not even exist outside your mind! Hence it seems like we can only conclusively justify propositions that are of our sense data.

However if we think a bit further, there seem to be other propositions that parallel those of our sense data in the sense that there just seems to be no doubt for error and thus it seems like they are conclusively justified. Such propositions have been termed 'transcendental arguments' and they refer to statements that seem like they must be true and no evil demon may deceive us about them. Such transcendental arguments include statements like "Language exists" and "I have the ability to doubt". We cannot doubt that the existence of language because just formulating arguments in favour of it requires the use of language. We also cannot doubt that we have the ability to doubt, for such a statement is a contradiction in itself. Perhaps we could consider yet another transcendental argument, "I think, therefore I am". While an evil demon may cause me to make errors while thinking there is no doubt that I think, therefore I am at least a thinking being.

However, such transcendental arguments (which includes beliefs of sense data too) seem to be a very limited set of propositions we can conclusively justify and it seems impossible to conclusively justify other beliefs based on them, for then we would have to make use of reasoning which opens us to the possibility of deception by the evil demon. Hence I would say I agree with the sceptic that we cannot conclusively justify most of our propositions.

However, let us now consider the implications of such a statement. Does it really matter that we know little for certain? My answer is that it does not. We can well make good use of propositions that are probably true even if not conclusively justified. We shall now consider the view of coherentists.

Coherentists argue that it does not matter whether we can conclusively justify a proposition or not. Instead we should just consider how well it is justified or how well it coheres with our other beliefs as long as a particular belief coheres well with my other beliefs and is consistent with them, then I can accept it and make use of it in my daily life. For example I may not know for certain or justify conclusively the proposition that the teacher is angry. However if it coheres well with my other beliefs such as his face is red and he is screaming like a mad man then I can make a safe guess that he is angry and that I should avoid irritating him today. Similarly, we may not be able to conclusively justify that Newton's laws of motion are true, but so long as they cohere well with our beliefs (such as we have seen experiments that have proven it and our senses are generally accurate) then we can reasonably conclude that Newton's laws of motion are true.

In conclusion, I would say that we can conclusively justify few propositions but that it does not matter for we can easily make use of propositions that are not conclusively justified.

Comments:

Insightful, relevant, organised, with good use of examples. There is a clear argument and the sense of direction in this essay is evident. Good discussion of the main issues in the essay question. Keep up the good work!

Question 1

KI

Sim Zhi Lui
09S05C

The biggest danger homosexual civil marriage presents is the enshrining into law the notion that sexual love, regardless of its potential for procreation, is the sole criterion for marriage. Until recently, the primary purpose of marriage, in every society around the world, has been procreation. In the 20th century, Western societies have downplayed the procreative aspect of marriage, much to our detriment. As a result, the happiness of the parties to the marriage, rather than the good of the children or the social order, has become its primary end, with disastrous consequences. When married persons care more about themselves than their responsibilities to their children and society, they become more willing to abandon these responsibilities, leading to broken homes, a plummeting birthrate, and countless other social pathologies that have become rampant over the last 40 years. Homosexual marriage is not the cause for any of these pathologies, but it will exacerbate them, as the granting of marital benefits to a category of sexual relationships that are necessarily sterile can only widen the separation between marriage and procreation.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

The author of the argument is basically arguing against the legislation of same-sex civil marriage, though this is not explicitly stated. His reasoning process is as follows: downplaying the role of procreation in marriage leads to married parties caring more about their own happiness than about their social / child-rearing responsibilities. This leads to or exacerbates various social problems. Thus, to avoid these social problems, we should avoid downplaying the role of procreation in marriage, since legalising same-sex marriage downplays this role (due to the fact that they are sterile), homosexual marriage should not be legalised (an implicit claim).

There are various problems with this argument, both in terms of the links in the reasoning process and in the truth of the premises.

Firstly, his argument against legislation of same-sex marriage based on the lack of a procreative aspect to the marriage, misses the point of the gay marriage debate entirely, which is a question of legal rights and equality between heterosexuals and homosexuals rather than of a sexual nature per se. Going by the author's argument, all 'necessarily sterile marriages' should not be lawful – by extension, what does that mean in the context of sterile heterosexual couples, or couples marrying in their older years (beyond child-bearing age)? Should they also be unable to marry? This is a question worth considering.

Also, the author quotes the statement that 'the primary purpose of marriage has been procreation' as support for his push for procreative potential to be a criterion in the legalising of marriages. However, just because something has been practised extensively in the past, it does not mean that it is right or ever practical, or relevant in today's society. Hence, this is a weak justification for his stand.

It is also unclear how downplaying the procreative aspect of marriage leads to married parties caring more about their happiness than social roles/responsibilities. Is this not more of a question of individual character or priorities of each married couple? Furthermore, it is not fully explained in the argument how Western societies have 'downplayed' the procreation aspect of marriage – through the mass media, whose influence is debatable due to the 'reflections-of-life-or-cause-of-social-problems' debate?

The main point of contention I have with this argument, however, is the dubious link between downplaying the procreative aspect of marriage and the social problems that the author claims result. The link is not proven conclusively: the reason for 'broken homes, a plummeting birthrate and countless other social pathologies' need not necessarily be due to downplay of procreation and an emphasis on sexual love – it could be due to an increasing focus on money, materialism, tension due to modern gender roles, etc. Just because both have increased at the same time it, does not mean one led to the other – he commits the fallacy of false cause.

Lastly, same-sex relationships are not necessarily sterile – there are other alternatives such as adoption, artificial insemination, surrogates, etc. Thus legalising same-sex marriage does not necessarily equate to a promotion of non-procreative marriages, especially if the government makes it clear to the public that it encourages same-sex couples to obtain children through these other means. The key in this case would be proper government-population communication.

Hence, I do not accept the argument's conclusions due to flawed reasoning and premises.

Comments:

Comprehensive evaluation, with perceptive points – keep it up!

Question 2

KI

Sim Zhi Lui
09S05C

If God interacts with our universe in any way, the effects of his interaction must have some physical manifestation. Hence, his interaction with our universe must be in principle detectable.

If God is essentially nondetectable, it must therefore be the case that he does not interact with our universe in any way. Many atheists would argue that if God does not interact with our universe at all, it is of no importance whether he exists or not. A thing which cannot even be detected in principle does not logically exist.

Note that I am not demanding that God interact in a scientifically verifiable, physical way. I might potentially receive some revelation, some direct experience of God. An experience like that would be incommunicable, and not subject to scientific verification, but it would nevertheless be as compelling as any evidence can be. But whether by direct revelation or by observation, it must surely be possible to perceive some effect caused by God's presence; otherwise, how can I distinguish him from all the other things that don't exist?

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

The argument laid out is as such: if God interacts with our universe, this interaction must be detectable. If this interaction is not detectable, He does not interact with our universe, which in turn means He does not really exist. This interaction is not detectable; therefore, God does not logically exist.

This argument's structure is valid. However, its premises should be questioned. Firstly, I take issue with the author's point that 'effects of [God's] interaction' must have some 'physical' manifestation. The author seems to define 'physical' as either 'scientifically verifiable' or taking the form of some sort of 'divine revelation'. What about the possibility of God choosing to manifest himself in other ways – e.g. emotional effects, healing, spiritual awakenings, social effects, etc? The author's definition of 'effects of [God's] interaction' includes being (a) 'physical' and (b) 'scientifically verifiable'.

Also, it might be possible that while God's effects are not 'detectable' now, they might be in the future, or it could be just a case of people being unable to see these effects. For example, we might be 'spiritually-unworthy' of detecting these effects, or we might currently lack the technology/know-how necessary to perceive these effects.

Furthermore, the author seems to dispute the existence of God based on personal experience (or lack thereof). He ignores the fact that there have been reports of divine revelations, near-death experiences, etc. without acknowledging the possibility that God may have chosen not to reveal himself to him personally, but through the experiences of other people. If the author writes these off as insufficient support for the existence of God, what is to stop him from thinking otherwise if he experiences such a thing?

Even the use of divine experience as a support for God's existence is unreliable – it might be a hoax, or

one might confuse emotion with spirituality. It is not clear what the author would deem to be 'scientifically verifiable' evidence. He does not fully explain this point – creationists, for example, would actually say that science proves God's existence through the complexities of scientific laws or even in the knowledge of the structure of a cell. If these constitute scientific evidence, then the interaction of God has been detected. However, I do concede the atheist's argument that 'if God does not affect us, He does not logically exist' to be true. If he does not affect us, He may still (technically) exist, but he makes no difference to us – and in that sense he does not logically exist.

However, based on the other questionable premises, I do not accept the argument's conclusion.

Comments:

A difficult passage to evaluate, but you have made a brave attempt!

KS BULL 2008
ISSUE TWO



'Social science knowledge is useless because it can only describe, not prescribe any action for improving society.' Do you agree?

Alexander Joseph Woon Wei-Ming
08A01B

Knowledge is only useless to those who do not know how to use it. Some aspects of social science are purely descriptive, but that does not mean that knowledge derived from them is useless. In some cases, description and understanding are just as useful as prescription because understanding is the nature of the subject in question – for example, in psychology. Furthermore, the claim is fallacious as many other aspects of social science contain strong prescriptive elements – Karl Marx, for example, could be enraged at the audacity of the above statement. Essentially I must disagree with the statement because firstly, descriptive social science is not always useless, and secondly, social science has strong prescriptive aspects which the statement conveniently fails to mention.

First, the issue of descriptive knowledge being useless. Interpretative social science (ISS) is an approach that emphasises understanding and qualitative analysis over generalisation and quantitative analysis. Interpretivists maintain that social realities are constructed by groups of individuals and as such, we construct our knowledge of society through painstakingly coming to understand individuals and the context in which they live. In essence, “knowledge” consists of an explanation or description of the social reality surrounding the individual, a unique case, as opposed to a general theory. Thus, by its very nature, ISS precludes the exercise of prescriptive power; firstly, because it cannot derive general rules, it thus cannot prescribe a way to change reality in general. Secondly, the introduction of a prescriptive element would imply an intention to manipulate individuals in certain ways, which would introduce a new factor in the current context, which would then need to be taken into account and the whole situation re-evaluated. So it would seem that ISS is essentially a barren approach.

However, one must question whether simple understanding is needed for improving society. It is true that ISS cannot prescribe a course for us: for example, Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* claims that a protestant work ethic is conducive to economic growth, but what can we do about it? Make everyone Protestant? Obviously not. Yet that does not mean that the knowledge is useless. The question asks whether description is useless for improving society; the answer must be no. Description is key to understanding, and understanding itself leads to the betterment of society. Understanding enriches society, in a very intangible way, we benefit from understanding – human beings derive satisfaction from simply understanding the world around them. More tangibly, sometimes people just need to be understood. Understanding is the bedrock of psychology and psychiatry; the runaway popularity of Freudian psychoanalysis can be attributed to people's natural desires to be heard and understood – not necessarily told how to change. Most importantly, understanding promotes social harmony. Cultural studies are important because they allow us to interact with other cultures politely and peacefully, even if they do not tell us how to improve our own society. One of my Indian teachers once told me that she finds it exasperating and hurtful when people are culturally insensitive: a man once mistook her husband for a Muslim even though from his turban he was most clearly a Sikh. In a multicultural society, ISS is very important indeed as the context must be understood and sensitivity shown by all in society. When it comes to something as diverse as culture, one cannot afford to make general assumptions and predictions, nor can one hope to prescribe a course of action. Indeed, a prescriptive approach to culture leads us back to the dark decades of European imperialism – the white man bringing civilisation and improvement to all the savages!

Therefore, descriptive ISS is not useless. In many cases, description is all that is appropriate to the nature of the subject. Furthermore, description is key to understanding, and understanding is vital in promoting harmony and enriching society.

That, however, is not the end of the story. There are two other main approaches to social sciences that do have prescriptive power.

Positivist Social Science (PSS) is an approach which advocates the supremacy of the scientific method in generating social knowledge. Positivists strive for objectivity, in contrast to the subjectivity of the interpretivists, because they believe in an objective social reality that is "out there" waiting to be discovered. Like natural scientists, positivists believe that the world is governed by general laws and that by discovering these laws we can affect outcomes and essentially harness social forces as tools in the same way that science harnesses forces of nature. Positivists use empirical observation, surveys, large scale experiments and statistical data to derive knowledge of aggregate behaviour and general rules, as opposed to the small scale, text-based analysis of interpretivists.

PSS has most definitely produced theories that contain strong prescriptive elements and that have contributed to the betterment of society in very tangible ways. Economics is mostly dominated by positivists and it is today a vital part of life. The state of the economy affects everyone and influential players in the world economy are themselves guided by the prescriptions of economists. For proof of the prescriptive power of economics, one need look no further than the great British economist John Maynard Keynes. Keynes' General Theory of Income and Unemployment which revolutionised the study of economics in the 1930s. Classical economics had failed to explain the Great Depression; the economy crumbled and unemployment persisted. Keynes argued that the economy was led by aggregate demand, and that government intervention (through fiscal policy) could stimulate demand and pull the economy out of recession. Sure enough, by 1936, the US economy was growing again, even as government fiscal deficits increased. The moral of the story is that PSS can be and is very useful. Its effects are felt every day, from economics to politics. Without Keynes' prescription, global society would undoubtedly been much worse off.

Similarly, Emile Durkheim, the father of sociology, studied trends in social behaviour. He concluded that suicide was caused by lack of cohesion and integration in society. While his impact has been nowhere near as dramatic as Keynes', one immediately realises how useful and applicable Durkheim's theory is. To reduce suicide rates, we need to increase the degree of social cohesion via community activities and making available counselling services. Indeed, with the move towards socialism and the welfare state, many European countries have implemented Durkheim's recommendations; though success rates vary across countries, with countries like Scandinavia still experiencing relatively high suicide rates.

In any case, PSS is useful, but economic and social theories may still be wrong or misapplied, with adverse effects, but the prescriptive power of PSS and its benefits to society cannot be denied.

Finally, there is Critical Social Science (CSS). Critical social scientists function in many ways like positivists, gathering data and looking for trends in aggregate behaviour. The difference is that CSS is all about prescription. Critical social scientists start out with a specific problem in mind and see our underlying hidden power structures that govern society. They may expose these structures and prescribe a course of action that allows people to break free of constraints in order to improve society. For CSS, knowledge truly is power. Karl Marx is, of course, the most famous example. His theory of economic determinism describes the eternal conflict between capitalists and workers, and prescribes communism as the solution. For the 45 years of the Cold War, nearly half the world's population rallied to Marx's call in an attempt to improve society. Marxism was a major force in politics, economics and philosophy. There is a real power.

How much did it improve society? That is still debatable. Advocates of Marx claim his ideas were misapplied; others claim it is a barren theory. Nonetheless, one sees the potential of the great prescriptive power of CSS,

and its usefulness for good or evil.

In conclusion, knowledge derived from social science is far from useless. In the first place, description and understanding are sometimes vital to society. In the second, social science has so much more to say than simple description. Since social science is indeed prescriptive, and even when it is not it can still be useful. I must strongly disagree with the statement.

Comments:

Well done! Do be careful of getting carried away though. You make hasty conclusions that are not very well supported and your rhetoric needs to be cut down. Keep to formal (albeit boring) writing.

'Social science knowledge is useless because it can only describe, not prescribe any action for improving society.' Do you agree?

KI

Cheah Suet Ping
08A01B

As Claude T. Bissell once said, "The social sciences are good at accounting for disasters once they have taken place." Indeed, if we take it that for something to be of use, it must be applicable in real life for the purpose of improving society, then it does appear that social science knowledge is limited in its usefulness. Besides lacking in predictive power as compared to science or mathematics, the social sciences may also appear, at times, to be very descriptive in nature, such as in Interpretive Social Science (ISS), where findings are rooted in context and interpretation. Hence, its capacity for being applied in real life in order to improve society seems very limited. However, to say that all social science knowledge is incapable of prescribing action for improving society, and thus, "useless" is perhaps too hasty a statement. After all, Critical Social Science (CSS), for example, is geared towards the improvement of society itself, often prescribing actions for steps to be taken towards helping the disadvantaged in society. In addition, even if social science knowledge were to be mostly descriptive in nature, one should not dismiss it as being useless because arguably, what we glean from the study of the social sciences is likely to be more than what we may understand based on 'common sense' alone. Thus, I disagree with the statement, in that social science knowledge is ultimately still useful for the understanding and applicability it holds.

When studying the social sciences, one concedes that they tend to lack predictive power and thus, the capacity for aiding the prescription of action for improving society. For example, in economics, we only learn of stock market crashes after they have occurred. Economic models such as the Keynesian model of income and employment determination are developed usually on hindsight, in order to explain real-life situations that have already occurred. The open system which the social sciences tackle means that there are numerous factors involved, and it is often difficult or impossible to identify, much less control such variables. If any variable changes, the outcome may differ drastically. As a result, it is often difficult to make predictions in the field of the social sciences, and thus, also difficult to prescribe decisive action in the name of improving society. Economists are reluctant to make predictions for China's inflation rate for the rest of 2008, for example, in part because despite actions taken by the government to stem inflation, the factors linked to the rate of inflation are numerous and often difficult to gauge, such as the level of optimism among consumers. As such, there is a difficulty in prescribing which course of action to take to most effectively address the situation. Social science researchers are, hence, more often seen to be preoccupied with the explanation and description of social phenomena.

This is, in particular, exemplified by ISS. Because ISS takes the stand that all social phenomena are rooted in context and interpretation, consequently, it appears that it does not make sense to prescribe action for one situation based on knowledge gleaned from another – simply because the two situations are likely to differ in context. A woman who raises her hand may be hailing a cab, but another woman who raises her hand may be waving across the road to a friend. There is no reason to believe that every woman who raises her hand is hailing a cab; hence, in that vein, there is no reason to believe that every social phenomenon may be explained and thus addressed as another. ISS researchers would thus place a much greater emphasis on describing and understanding the context of each phenomenon, as opposed to prescribing action.

That said, it should be noted that not all of social science knowledge is of such a stand. In CSS, for example,

where studies begin with a specific goal of improving society and helping the disadvantaged, knowledge attained often includes action for addressing such issues. The study of inequalities in Africa, for example, might take a look at the sources of inequalities, suggesting ways to address such sources such that it may aid in the elimination of inequalities. With regard to this, I disagree with the statement as some social science knowledge does prescribe action for improving society, and social knowledge does not "only describe".

With regard to the lack of predictive power and emphasis of description in social sciences, it should be noted that perhaps this is not surprising, seeing that the study of social sciences involves the study of complex social phenomena. Hence, it could be argued that to demand near-absolute certainty of the predictive power of social science knowledge, and by extension, the successful prescription of effective action for improving society might not be fair when one takes into consideration the nature of the subject itself.

In addition, just because the social sciences are unable to prescribe action to improve society with absolute certainty of its effectiveness, it does not mean that it is impossible to apply social science knowledge in our lives in any way at all. As Warren Buffett puts it, "it is better to be approximately right than precisely wrong", and the fact remains: people have put social science knowledge to use in our everyday lives, to good effect, e.g. in psychology, where knowledge serves not just to improve the mental health of others, but also in business management, where knowledge of psychology serves to improve team dynamics. Thus, I disagree with the statement in that social science knowledge can be applied effectively to improve society's welfare and thus holds value for mankind.

Lastly, even if one were to take the statement's assertion that social science knowledge "can only describe" to hold true, the statement may nonetheless be challenged. This is because with description, understanding is likely to follow, and thus, to dismiss social science knowledge as being "useless" and lacking in value would likely be a premature action. This is because in order to implement any action, an understanding of the situation is crucial, if not essential. Knowing what to do is unlikely to be helpful, especially in the long term, if you do not know how to do it. Admittedly, knowledge we glean from the social sciences is likely to be more than what we may ever construct individually based on each person's own 'common sense' and perception of the world. Thus, I disagree with the statement as social science knowledge is still useful to us even if 'it can only describe', because it is able to provide us with understanding, and understanding, if anything, should perhaps be the first step towards action for improvement.

In conclusion, I disagree with the statement on the grounds that though social science knowledge is often of a descriptive and explanatory nature, it does not mean that it is incapable of prescribing "any action" for the improvement of society, as the statement claims, nor that its value should be determined purely on its capacity for prescribing action for improvement due to the understanding of social phenomena it offers.

Comments:

Well-done! Generally well-argued. Could have looked more at how social science can prescribe actions that improve society. Consider how CSS need not necessarily improve society.

'Social science knowledge is useless because it can only describe, not prescribe any action for improving society.' Do you agree?

KI

Li Chen
08A01B

Social science is the study of human society and its interactions in an effort to explain social phenomena. From this point of view, one can see how some may believe that 'social science knowledge is useless because it can only describe, not prescribe any action for improving society'. As the study of a subject that is set in an open system as opposed to the closed system of science – if social science is set in any system at all – the future is exceedingly uncertain due to the multi-causal nature of social phenomena, and hence it seems to follow that it is near to impossible for a social scientist to use his knowledge to predict the future with certainty and even harder for him to prescribe any action for improving society from such knowledge, as these actions would naturally have to deal with society as it is in the future. However, I cannot agree with this statement. Firstly, these constraints do not stop social science from 'prescribing any action for improving society', and secondly, the statement mentioned above is wrong in its assumption that descriptive knowledge in social science is useless.

Firstly, social science is far from a homogeneous subject. There are many branches in social science, both in terms of the methods used in studying social science and in terms of the subjects studied. Hence, while some branches of social science knowledge such as psychology or, in terms of methodology, positive social science (PSS) and interpretative social science (ISS) can be said to be largely descriptive, there are other parts of social science – economics and critical social science (CSS) that deal largely with how to manage and improve society in the future. There is undoubtedly a descriptive element in the knowledge gained in these subjects as well – no study can function without some basic theories on which suggestions for improvement are based. Economics, for example, consists of microeconomics and macroeconomics, both of which are partly for understanding the nature of firms, the consumer and the market and how they operate. However the main purpose of economics is not merely descriptive – this knowledge consists of foundations for economists to build their suggestions of, for example, how to increase an economy's productivity. One example would be Adam Smith's theory of division of labour – by studying the way pin factories work, he realised that firms could increase their productivity through specialisation of labour and this helped in the growth of individual firms and hence the economy. Another example would be David Ricardo's theory of comparative advantage, which managed to increase global productivity while giving individual countries a niche market, hence dealing with the problem of an income gap between countries. Such subjects can all have prescribed actions for improving society, and can hardly be called merely descriptive or useless.

CSS has also done much in initiating movements for the improvement of society. In fact, improving society is the main aim of CSS – critical social scientists aim to uncover the hidden mechanism for workings of the current society in order to liberate the working class people and to help them find their potential to improve their lives. Critical social scientists such as Karl Marx have done exactly that – by studying the workings of the society of his time, his writings managed to rile up and motivate countries such as China and Russia to overthrow their ruling government and to establish a new communist system of government with the promise of equality for all. These activities do not always work on such a large scale – some critical social scientists perhaps deal with limited scopes, such as racism faced by those who wish to rent houses – but it is undeniable that these critical social scientists work with the aim of 'improving society' in mind, and hence one can hardly say that the social science knowledge constructed is useless.

Secondly, even if the more descriptive of social science knowledge cannot be said to be useless. ISS and PSS, and even individual subjects like psychology and history, would hardly have risen in the first place if they were 'useless' and did not serve any purpose. That is not to say that social science knowledge in these areas only has descriptive purposes – descriptive knowledge itself is sought for the purpose of better understanding oneself. Hence, almost all knowledge can be said to have the potential for prescribing action for improving society – be it as a whole or by targeting individuals. However, even the less action-oriented subjects like history (if one is a historian who studies history with the aim of merely piecing together a historical narrative) cannot be called useless. History can also help society understand the impact of situational forces on people by studying how people similar enough to you and me can be changed by the events of their time, or it could help nations construct their own national identity, as people are both historically created and creative. While these goals may seem trivial to what other subjects such as science are capable of (e.g. atomic bombs), they go a much longer way in promoting unity and a peaceful coexistence through understanding, which is hardly a useless cause.

PSS is by far the most descriptive of social sciences, but as mentioned above, economics (which is an extremely positive social science) is neither merely descriptive nor useless. By trying to find general laws that are present in society, PSS helps us predict, albeit not with total certainty, the probability of certain behaviours emerging in a group of people at a certain time, which can then help us in, for example, the formulation of government policies. Knowledge in ISS too, by giving us a better understanding of others, ourselves and our actions, is useful in our everyday lives and interactions.

In conclusion, social science knowledge is definitely not merely descriptive – if it is hard enough finding an example of a social science that does not help us in deciding our future actions – and even the more descriptive of social sciences can hardly be said to be useless. This is intuitively obvious – useless knowledge would most likely not arise in the first place, and even if it did due to the curiosity of the individual, such knowledge would never receive the funding and support social science does today when our resources could have been spent on more useful research. Hence I must disagree with the statement that social science knowledge is useless because it can only describe, not prescribe any action for improving society.

Comments:

Well done! Very well-argued! Examples were clear and illustrated your points well. You could have improved this by referring to examples from other branches of social science instead of just focusing on economics.

'History, unlike science, has no use because it cannot tell us anything about the future.' Discuss.

KI

**Foo Shi Hao
08A01B**

Through the study and understanding of natural laws, science has proved itself useful in predicting the future. For example, daily weather forecasts are the results and fruits of labour of scientific work. In contrast, history seems preoccupied with the past, and according to the statement, lacks the ability to predict the future. While this essay will agree to a certain extent that history cannot tell us as much about the future, it will also argue that such an attribute does not render history to be of "no use". It will also argue that usefulness ought to be defined as having a practical application and that even history's inability (conceded here merely for the sake of argument) to predict the future does not preclude its ability to have practical applications.

It is easy to see why science is lauded for its ability to predict the future. Besides weather forecasts that have helped people plan events such as going to the beach, warnings like the imminent arrival of hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes have saved thousands of lives. In comparison, the mere historical fact that Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans does not tell us when another hurricane will come again.

However, we must also be careful in our praise of science. Weather forecasts have been known not to be fully reliable and disaster warnings to not always prove true. For example, a tsunami alert two months ago in Aceh sparked fears, but proved to be a false alarm. Thus, we see that the predictive usefulness of science is constrained by the ability of scientists to make accurate predictions.

Next, we shall examine the topic's assertion that history does not "tell us anything about the future". The study of history has turned up several theories that could have predictive value. For example, the theory of economic determinism, such as the one proposed by Marx, suggests that we can predict the future based on the state of the economy now, especially based on the conditions working-class labourers live in. Additionally, a cyclical theory of history could have predictive abilities. For example, dynasties in China tend to start with good emperors whose descendants are weak rulers and have corrupt officials which lead to the dynasties' downfall. It will be replaced by a new dynasty with another virtuous emperor, only for history to repeat itself. Thus, if one were a historian living in ancient China, and one spotted this trend, one would be able to make such predictions.

Nevertheless, this paper concedes that such historical theories make poor forecasts of the future. Firstly, neither of the theories mentioned above can give a timeframe for their predictions to take place. This is apparent when compared to volcano eruption warnings; for example, historical theories may be difficult to falsify, since a Marxist could easily argue that communism has not triumphed yet only because the conditions are not right yet, and that this would take place in future. In contrast, a volcano warning would warn of an eruption in a specified time frame and would be easily falsified if it does not prove true as time passes. Additionally, the cyclical theory seems only to be describing a trend, rather than a law. It describes how dynasties tend to rise and fall, but there is less sense of certainty than an astronomer's prediction of an eclipse. Thus, it appears that history is inferior to science in predicting the future.

However, if one were to examine the definition of history, 'tell[ing] us' anything about the future to include information about what will happen if we choose a certain course of action, then history might prove to be a

rather competent forecaster of the future. For example, historical knowledge of Keynes' fiscal policy success has been used to justify European governments' huge spending in the 1940s to ward off unemployment. In this case, historical knowledge is used to predict the outcome of a course of action. Even if one were to disagree with this case study as an example of history telling us about the future, it still remains as an example of history's usefulness, this time in a policy-guiding, pragmatic sense.

Critics may point to the stagflation that Japan faced after applying Keynesian fiscal policy as a counter-argument to the above example. After all, in this case, historical knowledge of Keynesian policy did not allow one to achieve one's intended result, and failed to predict the results of one's course of action. However, this attack might not be 'fatal' to history as like predictions based on science, predictions based on historical knowledge can err as well. Furthermore, knowledge of this failure of Keynesian policy can be used to make predictions more nuanced. For example, instead of saying Keynesian fiscal policy is a solution for unemployment, we can now use the historical knowledge of what happened in Japan to extract certain conditions, and say that Keynes' policy could work only under certain conditions more similar to that of America in the 1930s, than Japan in the 1980s.

One may point out that the above example is more of an economic example than a historical one. However, history is closely tied to many disciplines. For example, the famous Chinese strategy book the "36 Stratagems" quotes many historical examples. Without this historical knowledge, such ideas of warfare would prove difficult to be passed on to future generations. Thus, we see that historical knowledge, though often linked with various disciplines, still does serve to provide guidance on multiple issues.

Furthermore, historical knowledge provides one with an ability to understand people. For example, it would be difficult to understand why the Buddhist monks of Myanmar led the protest marches against the junta if one did not understand the historical role of Buddhism in the country.

Finally, historical knowledge allows one to develop a sense of identity. Knowing one's ancestry gives one a sense of belonging to a certain culture and heritage, and that cannot be done without historical knowledge of what had happened in the past.

In conclusion, history has many uses, ranging from that of providing guidance, to understanding people and developing a sense of identity. Even if one regards history as incapable of telling us anything about the future, it is difficult to deny that history has other uses and certainly ought not to be labelled as having 'no use'.

Comments:

Well done! You can improve this by making a better link between the part on science and the one on history. There seemed little point to the talk about science without that link. You can also choose to go more in-depth with other issues/points instead of going for sheer breadth.

'History, unlike science, has no use because it cannot tell us anything about the future.' Discuss.

KI

Kwan Wei Yuan Brandon
08S06P

The study of history had once enjoyed a sterling reputation in upholding truth of our past, especially in the 19th century, but has come under severe attack in recent times. The works of Croce and Collingwood, among others, proved to be influential in the field, reducing the bastion of knowledge to a pale shadow of its former self. Further, as the statement put forth implies, some now question its utility to humanity and its demise seems imminent. In this essay, history will be defined as the contemporary account of the past, science will be regarded as the natural sciences, and the phrase "cannot tell us anything" will be deemed to state that history provides no knowledge regarding the future.

Firstly as a starting point to work with, we will briefly consider the hidden assumption that the natural sciences do provide knowledge of the future. The study of scientific knowledge is entrenched in empirical laws and is dependent on the concepts of causation, induction and invariance. For example, we shall consider Galileo's finding that two similar rocks dropped from the same height at the same time will reach the ground at the same time. Galileo's result is noticeably simple: it deals with only a fixed set of variables. This implies that the result is invariable, regardless of other variables, such as time or space; it remains true regardless of whether the experiment is conducted 2,000 years later or on Mars. Thus, it seems to give reliable results, which we can apply in our predictions of behaviour of objects, provided certain conditions are known or met, and can be used to give knowledge of the future.

History, however, does not seem to provide any information regarding the future, thus, *prima facie*, may not seem to be useful. Some hold that historicism, the generation of historical laws, is possible, and some historical theories, noticeably Marx and Engel's theory of economic determinism, have been influential. Economic determination is the basis on which communism rests. In the first paragraph of the Communist Manifesto, it is written, "The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles." Marx and Engel reasoned that one can derive the general historical law that all history is rooted in class conflict, which is defined in terms of economic modes of production. They confidently predicted that the world would continue its class struggles until the communist way of life is established, where no classes exist and all are equal. While it remains to be seen whether Marx and Engel are right, Karl Popper has put forth a counter-argument to historicism: if one can predict the future, one can predict technological advances as well as scientific knowledge. However, if future knowledge is known, then it would be considered contemporary knowledge, hence a contradiction is posed.

A final point to raise would be the randomness and unpredictability of human nature, which is necessarily present in history, and the uniqueness of any single person's circumstances. Thus, these two factors cannot be controlled in the study of history, unlike in science, where phenomena are invariant and consistent. This poses no small difficulty in finding general historical laws applicable across all cultures, societies and individuals. Thus, we can perhaps draw to a close by concluding that history fails to provide laws which accurately predict the future.

It is however debatable that history fails to provide any knowledge regarding the future. History provides us with knowledge regarding the past, including the choices that people make, how people have reacted,

and the consequences of their actions. Let us suppose that a country Rumeria is suffering from poverty, depressing, widespread dissatisfaction with the ruling party and the ruling elite is decadent and corrupted. History is unable to tell us that a revolution will take place sometime next month, but that surely is an unreasonable condition for us to claim we hold knowledge about the future. History, however, can point to the examples of Romania in contemporary history and perhaps draw parallels with the French Revolution, implying a high probability that an uprising may happen in the near future. History does not purport to provide accurate predictions, but it can hint at general trends. This is akin to economics, which attempts to give a broad prediction about events such as recessions based on pre-determined indicators, but does not predict exact statistics such as the exact percentage growth of an economy or industry. Thus, history can give us knowledge about the future.

Examining the statement further, we find that it assumes an implicit premise: the use/ value of a subject is solely dependent on its capacity to give knowledge of the future. This is dubious; a whole range of disciplines such as literature and philosophy would fail to be useful under this rigid criterion. It is perfectly plausible for a subject to be useful in some other sense, such as improving our understanding of human nature, or even as an end in itself. There are three particular points we will discuss regarding history.

Firstly, history is useful as it gives us an insight into human nature. Through the examination of historical figures' thoughts and actions, we can derive a greater understanding of human nature. For example, the atrocities committed at Auschwitz during the Holocaust pointed to a perceived lack of morality in humanity under extreme circumstances, as soldiers found themselves unwilling to resist the orders to commit mass murder of the Jews. However, we can also learn more from our study: Robert Antelme, survivor of the Buchenwald, spoke of a father and his son who offered each other bread with loving eyes, despite being ravenously hungry. In this alone, we can see both the depravity of morality as well as the strength of love in extreme circumstances. Thus, surely, shows how history is useful in aiding our understanding of ourselves.

The second point to raise is that history is a defence against misinformation and propaganda. Through our knowledge of the past, we can retain information about societies, peoples and civilisations, and guard against those who use history as a tool of power. In the Soviet Union, after Stalin's surprising victory over Trotsky, he sought to eradicate Trotsky and his allies from history through the doctoring of documents and photographs. This abuse of history can be defended against through the study of the past and ascertaining historical truth to the best of our ability. One is also reminded of Orwell's seminal novel '1984' which showed the abuse of history and its influence in society.

Lastly, history gives us a sense of identity. The history of a nation or society is analogous to the memories of an individual, and defines society in a pervasive manner. One can simply draw the example of the Middle East to show the influence of history. The Arab-Israeli conflict must be understood in its historical context and cannot simply be regarded as another minor quarrel on the world stage. Hence, history is also important for us to understand any society, as it defines the society, giving it its identity and character.

With these points in mind, it is clear that history has its utility in our society, providing general trends regarding the future, as well as other benefits not pertaining towards the future, but towards contemporary understanding. We find that history should be, and must be, a critical part of human endeavour, without which, we are crippled and amnesiac, unable to chart a course in our search for knowledge. But more importantly, we are lost without an identity or understanding of ourselves, and will remain so until we reap the benefits that only history can provide.

Comments:

Well done!! Well-argued and well-presented. Some parts need better argument and better clarity of examples.

'History, unlike science, has no use because it cannot tell us anything about the future.' Discuss.

KI

**Yeo Yi Nicole
08A01B**

To make the claim that history is of no use because it cannot tell us anything about the future is to make the assumption that to have value, a field of study must have a predictive function. In terms of the nature of a subject, to be able to "tell us about the future", we can look at firstly, the purpose of the field of study, and secondly, the accuracy and reliability of the information produced. Thus, on one level, the work of explaining the occurrences of the natural world must be contrasted with the explanations of the human past. More importantly, the value of making predictions in any field must be weighed against all other conditions for usefulness as a whole. This essay will attempt to show that both science and history make some form of effort to provide information about the future despite their limitations. However, even non-predictive information gained from these two areas is of use to our society at large.

It is only natural that when discussing a discipline that is able to tell us about the future, we look to science. The purpose of science, after all, is to provide explanations for the natural world. It is generally believed that these explanations not only explain the cause and effect of a past natural occurrence, but also to justify its future occurrences as well. For example, Newton's theory of gravity was developed as a result of the need to find out why it was that the apple fell from the tree. In showing that all matter is subject to the pull of gravity, Newton has also been able to show that this scientific theory necessitates that apples will always fall to the ground if released. Thus, it can be seen that it is in the nature of science to make general predictions with regard to the world around us.

Looking at the rationale behind why we readily accept these generalisations and predictions, it can be noted that the very nature of science justifies such statements. The type of experimentation conducted in this field has three characteristics: controllability, measurability, and repeatability. Hence, if a scientist, were to make a hypothesis based on the scientific method, it is possible for him to test his prediction accurately over and over again. By induction, the certainty of his claim is strengthened. Furthermore, the Hypothetico-Deductive method in science improves on this, by requiring scientists to make bold predictions that can be falsified. If a prediction is falsified, one can know with absolute deductive certainty that the theory is inaccurate. Hence, it is the use of tangible, reliable and accurate methods to achieve the aim of producing general theories that can be used to indicate future outcomes that provides justification for the use and value of science as a whole.

However, because the purpose and nature of the study of history differ from that of science, making such historical predictions non-existent or hard to justify, the use of this field has been called into question. The main intention of the study of history is to analyse the past, through determining what actually happened, and perhaps explaining the causal factors behind such an event. Naturally, then, with a subject that focuses exclusively on the study of past events, any form of predictive value is not immediately apparent. With no explicit objective of producing information to tell us about the future, it is tempting to look at history as merely a redundant discipline that attempts to study what already happened, thus making the subject seem useless.

Furthermore, the nature of the method of obtaining information and of the conclusions produced cannot

be said to have the same precision and accuracy as science. Historical sources are necessarily subjective, due to the human element in recording information. In addition, the act of selecting sources and making conclusions about causal factors is naturally dependent on the values and preferences of the historian. Also, historical conclusions are largely interpretive and context-based, since factors in the human past cannot be controlled and events cannot be repeated, and none of the history can be tangibly measured, conclusions are only of use for that very specific situation in history. Venturing into making broad generalisations is thus not common. Since the purpose of making predictions in history is lacking, and there are questions as to the level of objectivity of conclusions, the value of understanding historical information has limitations.

With all that said, science too has its limitations in terms of making valuable predictions. As shown earlier, there is firstly the problem of induction. Even with regard to the response to this problem, the Hypothetico-Deductive method, there is the Duhem-Quine problem. This expresses the notion that even the falsifying claim or piece of evidence is formulated based on other scientific theories and thus, even the accuracy of the falsifier can be called into question. Furthermore, as Kuhn suggested, it is possible that scientists are also restricted by the scientific paradigm they are in, and hence their methods and conclusions are limited to the framework of that particular paradigm. In acknowledging these problems, it can be seen that like in history, scientific methods are not free from subjectivity and are not error-proof. Even more alarming is the fact that science does indeed attempt to make fully accurate generalisations in spite of these problems, which history does not claim to do. As a result, it is unfair to make the claim that science is completely careful in making predictions about the future and history is not, when both fields have their fair share of problems with reliability and objectivity.

Also, it is rather short-sighted to argue that because the nature of historical study is interpretive and context-based, that generalisations are never made. Hegel made extensive studies regarding what he termed the Dialectic, which suggests that the course of history could tend towards a fixed destination. Both Marx and Fukuyama expanded on Hegel's theory, suggesting an eventual outcome to the state of history. Fukuyama, for one, argues that the end point of history is in a capitalist form, and once that ideology has penetrated the systems of the world, history as a form of evolution would end. Thus, philosophers and historians like Hegel, Marx and Fukuyama do make attempts to explain how events will pan out in the future. Hence, if making predictions is the main criterion by which the value of a field of study is judged on, history cannot be left out as a useful field.

Ultimately though, the problem of the lack of reliability and objectivity in both science and history has yet to be answered, even though it appears now that both areas seem to serve a predictive function. Perhaps the first step to the solution of this problem is that complete accuracy in prediction is not the right indicator. It is possible that relative accuracy and, as far as possible given human limitations, reliable methods are used to generate conclusions that can be pragmatic forms of knowledge for us.

Furthermore, when analysing the inherent usefulness of a field of study, it is perhaps unfair to look solely at the predictive function as an indicator. As shown in the Verstehen position, it is possible that while science fulfils the general role of explaining cause and effect, and thus accuracy is more greatly valued, more human-based studies like history could serve to serve the function of explaining meaning and purpose. These elements are not necessarily subject to the strict, tangible conditions of science, yet are still of value and use to us.

Overall then, both history and science have their respective value and uses to us in their predictive elements and otherwise. Where reliability is concerned, while both strive towards the goal of achieving some sense of overall accuracy, the relative lengths towards which the nature of each field require science and history to go are not applicable to both in the same way because both serve their own exclusive and differing functions.

Comments:

Well-done! The essay took a while to get there but it did, after the part in science. Get to the crux earlier in future so you have more time to focus on the really important stuff. For example, the second paragraph could have been further developed.

KI

**Explain the author's claims and conclusions about social science.
Evaluate his reasoning and challenge or support it with arguments
of your own. [30m]**

**Wang Longzhao
08S06P**

The author of this passage makes several claims about social science. Firstly, I feel that he tries to find a balance between free will and social forces so to speak. He argues that man is caught in between these extremes and claims that our study of social sciences is flawed because we fail to acknowledge the intermediate. Secondly, he claims that neither the deterministic nor 'Great Man' theory of history is totally true as man interacts with his environment to bring about changes in society and that social factors and man's responsibility intertwine to create history. Lastly, he feels that a government should listen to all divergent individual views that are intelligent, well informed and society-minded to make a good decision. I agree with his claims to a large extent and will now evaluate them.

The study of the social sciences can be split into three camps, the Positivist Social Sciences (PSS), Interpretive Social Sciences (ISS) and Critical Social Sciences (CSS). These schools of thought make different assumptions on the nature of man and this is seen clearly in their methodology. PSS tends to believe that we are mere straws drifting upon the stream of time. It believes that man is rational and will always make the most rational choice. Thus, it believes it can predict accurately man's behaviour, giving very little room for free will and choices. It has been said that a science of choices seems to be a sheer contradiction in terms but that is what PSS is driving towards. This, however, would not be justified as man has the ability to make individual choices and we cannot view man in a mechanistic way.

ISS on the other hand assumes that we are masters of our own fate and it aims to study individuals and small groups. However, it fails to really understand that man is also driven by social and market forces. While it may not be totally deterministic, it does play a considerable role.

As such, I agree with his evaluations as these two schools of social science do tend towards the extremes.

However, I feel that his conclusion that all of the study of social science tends towards these extremes is not justified. I believe that CSS does take an intermediate position between the two extremes, as clearly reflected in the nature of their methodology. For example, a Freudian psychologist would be interested in examining both statistics and interviews to understand human psychology. They study statistics to look at the aggregate behaviour of man, but also conduct individual interviews and studies on various social phenomena. Thus, we see that CSS does in fact understand and appreciate that man has to make choices out of his own free will, while at the same time taking the social factors into account. They believe that social science should aim to uncover underlying social structures and that this can only be done by acknowledging the intermediate value of man and society.

His second claim that neither the 'Great Man' nor economic deterministic theories are wholly true is justifiable. In fact, the thing that brings these theories together is luck. For history to have occurred, there must have been a combination of both factors and history might have turned out differently had something been absent. For example, Hitler was a great orator and extremely charismatic. However, he was able to take control because of the economic situation in Germany at that point in time. Luck and fate brought these two together and Hitler's rise to power might not have happened had these two factors not interacted in this manner. Thus,

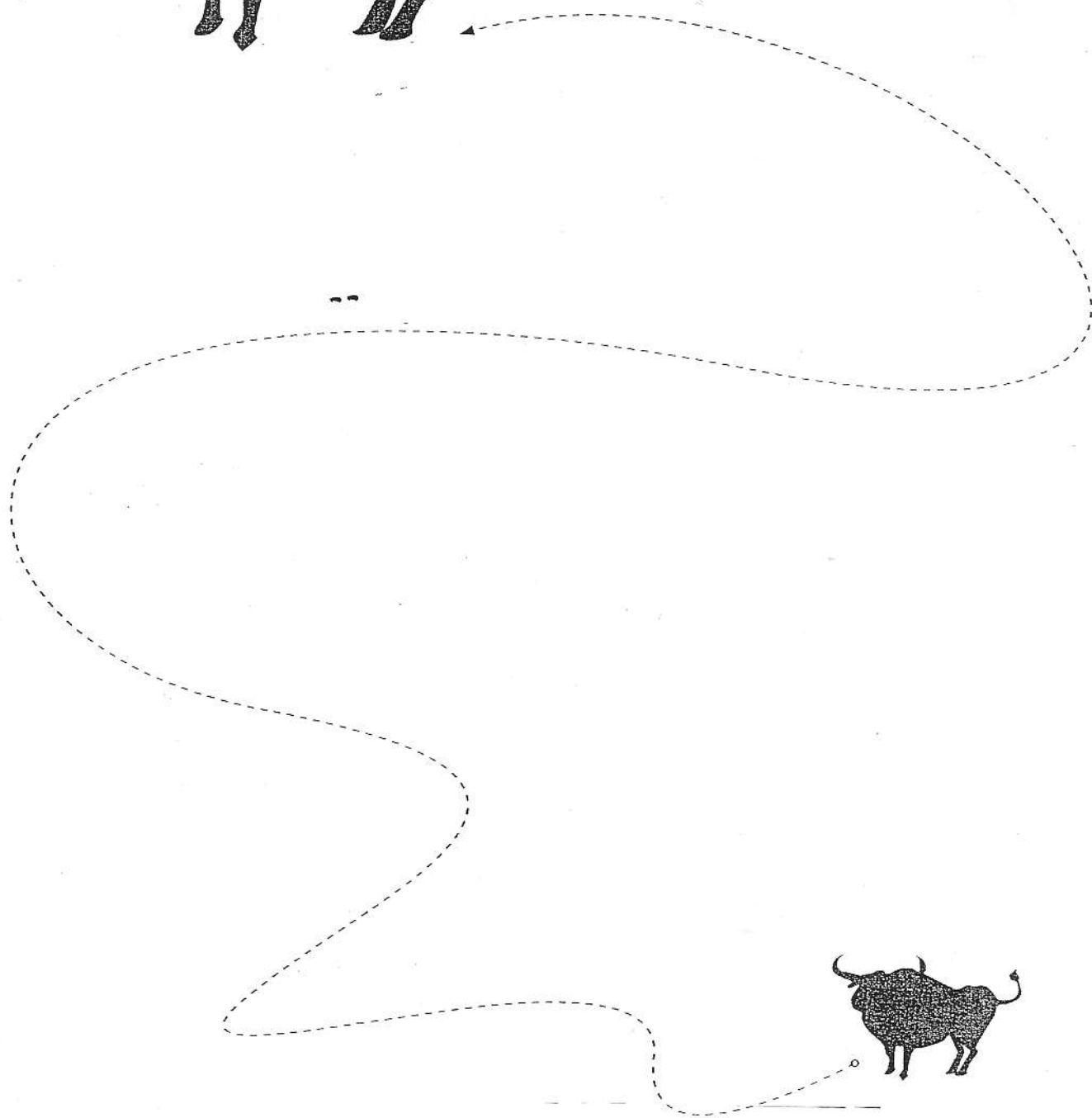
I would agree with his conclusion that neither the Great Man nor economic deterministic theory is wholly true and would add that they are dependent on one another, being brought together by chance.

Lastly, his claim in the first paragraph on decisions and the government seems slightly faulty. He starts by arguing that individuals have differing viewpoints. I agree with this and feel that this is characteristic of a society. It is an open system and everyone has differing viewpoints due to their different backgrounds. However, he then argues that social action should be based on utilitarian merits. He argues that when everyone pools their thoughts together, 'the resulting decision will almost certainly be correct as judged by the utilitarian standard'. Clearly, there are problems in making decisions for society based on a utilitarian concept of right and wrong. The minority in society can be oppressed and ill-treated if the utilitarian theory is adopted. Racial groups that are not represented in terms of numbers may be slighted. Although he argues previously that these decisions must be socially-minded, he fails to define what this means and he also acknowledges that the individual interests are important. Thus, a majority of unethical individual interests would be disastrous for those who are in the minority, when using the utilitarian principle. Furthermore, there is also a problem in measuring the total happiness felt when choosing the appropriate action.

Thus, his statement that a government should be as democratically controlled is only true to a slight extent. What is more important and useful is that it adopts a stance to protect the minority and reduce usage of the utilitarian principle. Perhaps a negative utilitarian view might be encouraged. Thus, I would not agree with his viewpoints in the first paragraph, but I am in agreement with the conclusions reached in the subsequent ones.

Comments:

Well done! Very good reconstruction of the author's arguments and a concerted effort to analyse it. Could do with more examples to boost your A01 score but still, great stuff!



'There is little difference between knowledge and opinion.' Discuss.

KI

Tan Chian Fern
08S06P

At first glance, it appears that knowledge and opinion are two very distinctly different things altogether: knowledge, if taken by conventional definition to be true, justified belief, appears to be a far cry from opinion, a term associated more with an individual's favourite foods than with justification of any sort. This essay will discuss the obvious differences between the two, then go on to show how the line between the two may actually be blurred and that they may be argued to be similar. I will then argue that ultimately, in spite of the similarities, there is far from little difference between them as there are distinct differences in the construction and application of knowledge and opinion.

Opinion is easily justified. Taking opinion to be one's personal view of or preference in an issue or object, opinion needs little justification because of its very nature. In having a specific opinion on something, one may be influenced by external factors, but ultimately the decision rests with oneself. In order to allow for comparison between opinion and knowledge, we shall use the framework of justified true belief (JTB) to discuss opinion. This essay will take opinions to be always true, meaning that a person cannot falsely hold an opinion; he genuinely believes whatever he opines. Here we see that for an opinion to be true, it merely takes the belief of the holder. For example, if a colour-blind person were to claim "this apple is blue", his opinion is true because he believes in it, regardless of whether the apple is actually red. The point is that an opinion is easily made valid as it is considered a matter of personal preference.

The same cannot be said of knowledge, which must hold up to more rigorous scrutiny. While opinion is easily justified, knowledge is something that we are required to strive towards. This is because the truth condition for knowledge means that when we want to make a knowledge claim, this claim must correspond with the external reality. There appears to be an external standard of correctness that a knowledge claim must meet in order for it to be valid. Compare this to the earlier example, where a person could make the opinion that an apple is blue! While he might be wrong, he certainly would not be challenged on it by people who understood that he was colour-blind. Thus, a key difference between knowledge and opinion is that knowledge must fulfil an external criterion of truth.

In order to fulfil the condition of justification for knowledge, we make arguments using supporting evidence, refer to authorities or corroborate our information with those from other sources. This may be seen as another difference between knowledge and opinion: we accept opinion readily, but always strive to justify any claim before accepting it as knowledge. However, one may argue that using human endeavour as a benchmark to differentiate knowledge and opinion is insufficient because it appears to be merely a case of human attitudes towards similar things.

How may these two things, knowledge and opinion, be similar? Sceptics would argue that just as we accept justifications of opinion very readily, we, too, accept knowledge readily. By posing problems such as the infinite regress of justification or the evil demon argument, sceptics use the concept of global scepticism to attack our criteria for accepting knowledge.

Since we use pieces of knowledge to justify a new claim, it is clear that these pieces must be justified as well.

They require further justification which in turn must be justified, resulting in an endless chain of justifications. All our knowledge cannot be said to be justified in this case. Alternatively, sceptics may present the scenario that an evil demon is using his powers to deceive us and that everything we appear to be experiencing is not real at all. As we have no access to reality, we cannot construct any knowledge as none of our claims about the deception we are caught in can possibly be true.

All this is relevant to the question of whether there is much difference between knowledge and opinion. If the sceptic remains unanswered, then it appears that our justifications for, and processes of constructing knowledge, are limp, fruitless attempts at obtaining knowledge. When our justifications are questionable to the extent that the claim in question is not well supported by any evidence, we might as well be making an opinion. Knowledge and opinion are then similar in the following ways: both are possibly untrue but accepted all the same, both are justified weakly at best but still considered 'valid', and we believe in both. At this point, the line between the two blurs and one might say that there is little difference between them. What we think is knowledge about the world, given that we have no access to the real world, could be merely our opinion of it.

Yet we should not be ready to accept that. I maintain that there exist key differences between knowledge and opinion, and the first redeeming step towards that would be to refute the sceptics.

If the sceptics' arguments may be defeated, then our justifications for knowledge may stand and knowledge would be set apart from opinion once more. To that end, philosophers have attempted to refute global scepticism arguments in many ways. For example, G.E. Moore appeals to common sense, proving the presence and existence of our hands by the simple fact that they are there. He argues that such claims are direct and are made using common sense and thus require no further justification. Foundationalists attempt to stop the infinite regress of justifications by presenting basic knowledge claims that are irrefutable, require no justification and thus can serve as justification for other knowledge claims. Examples include Descartes' cogito, which claims that "I think, therefore I am", and one's existence is proven by the action of pondering about it. These attempts to refute global scepticism, if successful, can reinstate knowledge to its original JTB status, elevating it above opinion, which is far less demanding.

Furthermore, the process of constructing knowledge goes part of the way towards its definition and its subsequent delineation from opinion. We use methods such as rationalism, coherentism and reliabilism to construct our knowledge. For an opinion, we only require a personal tendency or preference. The very human action of attempting to stop the infinite regress and to construct knowledge using the above means sets knowledge and opinion apart.

An example to prove my point would be that of a ship's captain and his assistant trying to navigate back to land. The assistant, in forming his opinion on what to do, may have arbitrarily decided that they should keep to the same course. On the other hand, the captain has the obligation to make the right decision and he requires something more than an arbitrary decision. He may be able to navigate using the stars and decide on a better course. This course is better because it was decided based on reliable knowledge, since he has used such knowledge before and it has often produced results reliably. On the other hand, an unjustified opinion is unable to get the ship anywhere near land reliably. Thus, knowledge has applications and is of use to human endeavours.

When we consider a claim to be knowledge, we expect others to agree and assume that those who disagree are wrong. We do this by virtue of the way we construct knowledge and expect it to be true and thus applicable to our lives. Opinion, on the other hand, is not imposed on others. Two parties may simply agree to disagree on whether a dish of chicken rice is delicious. The issue of application and acceptance of knowledge in our lives are thus important implications following from the argument that knowledge and opinion are radically different.

In conclusion, knowledge and opinion are clearly different because knowledge requires rigorous justification and must be true. Although sceptics may attempt to argue that knowledge is no different from opinion, they fail on two counts: if one is able to find an answer to global scepticism, and when it comes to the human understanding, then knowledge, by virtue of its construction, must necessarily have different applications from opinion.

Comments:

Chian Fern, well done! Good essay with rather good flow between points. Some points do need more argumentation though.

'Scepticism is best understood as a challenge, not as a claim that we do or can know nothing.' (A.C. Grayling) Discuss.

(KI)

Zhu Yu Tong
08S06P

Scepticism, or philosophical doubt, has been in existence for along as long as philosophy itself: as man first learnt how to think, so did he learn how to question. It has since occupied a central position in philosophy, and has been at the heart of numerous epistemological debates regarding the nature and limitations of our knowledge.

As a branch of philosophy characterised by arguments such as the "Infinite Regress of Justification", Russell's "five-minute Earth", Descartes' Dream and Evil Demon arguments as well as Putnam's "Brain-in-a-vat" scenario, it is not surprising that many view scepticism as a claim that we do not, and cannot know anything. After all, the aforementioned arguments do seek to nullify our justifications for our knowledge claims, be it through appealing to the fallibility of our senses or otherwise.

However, is this all there is to scepticism? Obviously not; I believe that to view it as a claim that "we do or can know nothing" is to be overly restrictive and limiting in one's perspective. Such a view renders scepticism as little more than a perpetual nuisance that needs to be overcome, and given that we cannot satisfactorily refute each and every sceptical argument in existence, we would be forced into the position of admitting that we can hold no knowledge claims at all. A.C. Grayling's statement that scepticism is best understood as a challenge instead offers us a whole new perspective into the nature, and more importantly, the value of scepticism. It is this position that I shall set out to establish and defend.

The first question we have to grapple with is the 'why': why is scepticism to be considered a challenge, rather than an attempt to undermine our knowledge claims? It is first of all prudent to note that, as mentioned earlier, such a (limited) view leads us to the conclusions that scepticism is an entirely unbeneficial and problematic branch of philosophy, and that we can never know anything at all. It is worth doubting if any discipline that has been in existence for centuries should be so rashly labelled as "useless" and "degenerative", and if we are doomed to languish in an abyss of ignorance for the rest of our lives. Consequently, we should seek a new understanding of scepticism, one which would provide us with the context in which scepticism would function as a driving force for progress and not as a retarding force to impede our movement towards a better age.

The next, and most important question we have to answer is the 'how': how can scepticism be, as Grayling has suggested, understood as a challenge instead? To achieve this, we would first have to recast the word "scepticism" in a slightly different context. Scepticism can actually be separated into global and mitigated scepticism; while the former, as its name suggests, seeks to question each and every knowledge claim that we make, right down to whether other people exist, its mitigated counterpart takes certain basic truths (such as those involved in our day-to-day functioning) for granted, and only seeks to question more complex fields of knowledge that man has established. Global scepticism can and indeed should be written off in the context of our discussion; as the philosopher John Locke has so succinctly and forcefully put it, "If we disbelieve everything because we cannot certainly know everything, ... we would do as well as he who would not use his legs and run, but sit still and perish, because he had no wings to fly". As such, we can readily identify four major areas in which scepticism can function as a challenge for us to overcome.

First of all, it challenges us to revise and refine our methods of inquiry and construction of knowledge. By demonstrating certain loopholes of inherent flaws within a system of justification or acquisition of knowledge, scepticism effectively spurs us to establish newer and better methods. For example, when the sceptic questioned the validity of scientific theories by pointing out the flaw in generalising from statements of the form "some X are Y" to "all X are Y", scientists and philosophers alike were challenged to come up with an alternative scientific method. This Sir Karl Popper did: he created his theory of falsification, where instead of focusing on what one can conclusively know, the attention is shifted to weeding out the "facts" that one has conclusively disproved. Thus, the form of scientific arguments has shifted from an inductive one to a deductive one, with the result of increased rigour in the natural sciences.

Secondly, scepticism challenges us to oppose dogmatism and to instinctively question anyone who claims to know the real, absolute truth (since it tells us that we can never attain the absolute truth, nor know it even if we did). That it is truly a challenge is evidenced when we look back at the history of science: the Italian scientist Galileo took up the challenge of questioning the Church's dogma then that the Sun and all other heavenly bodies revolved around the Earth; he argued, on the basis of scientific evidence gathered through years of hard work and research, that the Sun was the centre of the solar system instead. Unfortunately, few others took up his cause; most were content to accept the Church's dogma, to the effect that Galileo had to publicly renounce his ideas and undergo much humiliation. The result was a stagnation in the development of scientific knowledge in Europe, where key ideas were delayed by almost half a century!

Additionally, and on a similar note, by demonstrating that none of our theories are in fact infallible, scepticism challenges us to let go of our in-built self-assuredness and to cultivate intellectual humility. In the same sense as it opposes dogma, it helps destroy sentiments such as "My way is the (only) correct one", and thus teaches us to treat the ideas of others with a degree of diffidence and respect.

Last but certainly not least, scepticism can also be understood as a challenge for us to continuously strive towards the Truth. As mentioned earlier in this discussion, contrary to popular belief, scepticism does not hold that an absolute truth does not exist; it purports that instead, we can never reach it or know if we did. Yet this knowledge that a goal exists for us to strive for and work towards is what ignites man's passion and thirst for knowledge, prompting us to embark on the (perhaps everlasting) quest of refining what we know, thereby pushing back the boundaries of our knowledge.

To conclude, we have seen why it is advantageous, even necessary, to understand scepticism as a challenge; we have also examined how such an understanding would benefit us in few major aspects, as opposed to the degenerative influences of believing it to a claim that we do nor can know nothing. Thus, I hold that Grayling's position is an invaluable one that has much merit.

Comments:

Yu Tong, well done! An excellent attempt! The approach was very good (asking the 'why' and the 'how'). The essay would have done better though with a more in-depth explanation of the 'why'. You could have spent less time on examining the 'how', which kind of dried out towards the end.

Question 1

KI

Ding Tai Boon
08A13A

It is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of being guilty of animal cruelty (for instance, “plucking” killer whales from the ocean) and of creating experiences that are detached from context. However, take for example the shark exhibit at Seaworld, Orlando. If there was ever an animal for which detaching experience from context was prudent, it is the shark. Moreover, Seaworld has not collected a killer whale from the wild since the mid-1970s; instead, it exhibits killer whales that have been born in captivity. In addition to learning about sharks while in a safe environment, Seaworld visitors can see a beluga whale without sailing into Canada’s Resolute Bay. These educational opportunities attract 6 million people to Seaworld annually and have enabled children to appreciate wildlife and environmental conservation.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

In the given passage the author argues for two separate points, namely:

1. It is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of being guilty of animal cruelty
2. It is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of creating experiences that are detached from context.

It is important, first of all, to note the difference in these two conclusions that the author attempts to argue for. The first conclusion has a moral aspect to it, because it asserts that the actions taken by animal theme parks to procure their exhibits does not in fact constitute acts of animal cruelty. However, the second conclusion is purely a factual assertion – that the proposition “animal theme parks create experiences that are detached from context” is incorrect.

Therefore, to address the second conclusion first, it is very hard to accept the author’s conclusion based on what he has provided in his argument. The author attempts to justify why animal theme parks create exhibits that are detached from context by providing reasons of safety (“learning about sharks while in a safe environment”) and of convenience (“see a beluga whale without sailing into Canada’s Resolute Bay”). Even if we do accept these justifications, the author is really only arguing that animal theme parks are right in creating exhibits detached from context, and does not actually address the issue of whether exhibits created are detached from context or not. However, given that he has provided the above justifications along with his claim that it is prudent to exhibit the shark detached from context, it seems that the author has conceded that animal theme parks do create experiences detached from context, thus it is not wrong to accuse them of doing so! Therefore the author provides little support for the second conclusion, and in fact he contradicts himself in his argument.

As far as his first conclusion, the author appears to take a utilitarian stance in assessing whether animal theme parks can be considered guilty of animal cruelty. While conceding that capturing animals from the wild can be considered cruel, he suggests that setting up exhibits of these animals may provide educational opportunities for the masses in environmental conservation, and hence reduce future acts of animal cruelty

in the form of sports hunting etc. Such a utilitarian view of calculating all the merits against the demerits makes it tempting for us to accept his conclusion; however, it must be pointed out that the author has made an implicit assumption that exhibiting animals caught from the wild represent acts of cruelty, while exhibiting animals born in captivity does not. This assumption can be easily challenged, as experts have shown that animals born and raised in captivity have some of their natural instincts frustrated, and this may very well constitute an act of cruelty to these animals. Therefore the author should have considered how captivity affects animals negatively too.

Lastly, even if we finally decide that having taken everything previously raised into account, Seaworld is still not guilty of animal cruelty, the author's first conclusion is still quite an inductive leap, going from the use of one theme park to generalise about all theme parks. That which has been said for Seaworld may be true, but it is still weak to argue the same case inductively for all animal theme parks. Hence I find it difficult to accept the author's first argument too.

Question 1

KI

Teo Wan Joo
08A01B

It is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of being guilty of animal cruelty (for instance, “plucking” killer whales from the ocean) and of creating experiences that are detached from context. However, take for example the shark exhibit at Seaworld, Orlando. If there was ever an animal for which detaching experience from context was prudent, it is the shark. Moreover, Seaworld has not collected a killer whale from the wild since the mid-1970s; instead, it exhibits killer whales that have been born in captivity. In addition to learning about sharks while in a safe environment, Seaworld visitors can see a beluga whale without sailing into Canada’s Resolute Bay. These educational opportunities attract 6 million people to Seaworld annually and have enabled children to appreciate wildlife and environmental conservation.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

There are two conclusions in this short passage. The first is that it is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of animal cruelty, and the second is that it is wrong to accuse the parks of creating experiences that are “detached from context”. Let us look at the argument of the first conclusion first: that animal theme parks are not guilty of animal abuse.

When the writer talks about accusations of animal abuse, he mentions ‘plucking’ killer whales from the ocean as an example of it, in parenthesis. Obviously, this means accusers of animal parks have more than that one grouse on its list of complaints. However, only that isolated example is addressed in the writers’ defence of the animal parks. The writer states that Seaworld “has not collected a killer whale from the wild” since a few decades ago. The problems with this defence are that: (1). The abuse is still abuse even if it took place a long time ago – it is ridiculous to say we cannot accuse a rapist of raping a girl because the last time he did that was 50 years ago – and (2). Even if we accept that the cruelty of ‘plucking’ whales from the ocean is contained to include merely the act itself and not its repercussions, and that the accusation is limited to the present-day actions of the park, the defence only applies to killer whales. It does not apply to any other animal in Seaworld. The first conclusion is thus insufficiently supported.

The second conclusion is equally unsupported. The writer provides insufficient evidence to show that the parks do not create experiences that are detached from context. He says that the killer whale exhibits are all whales that have been born in captivity. However it does not logically follow that because they were born in captivity, the experience is not detached from context. The writer goes on to say that detachment from context is not necessarily bad, that it is “prudent” to detach the shark from its natural habitat. This statement does not help the writer’s case for the second conclusion, although it does add weight to the author’s overall defence of animal parks.

But the largest justification that the writer gives for his defence is also the most problematic. The writer describes the educational value of Seaworld and the tourism that it attracts. These might really be the

perks of having animal theme parks, but the problem is that these perks do not necessarily defeat the disadvantages. Everything has its perks, but the real issue is whether the perks sufficiently outweigh the disadvantages that form the accusations. Furthermore, it seems all the perks that are described are humans' to enjoy, while the disadvantages – which the author does not even attempt to defeat with the advantages, he merely lists the advantages – assuming they are true, fall to the animals. There is an implicit judgement here, that the good of mankind is more important than the good of animals. This assumption makes the argument unconvincing, especially to the accusers of the parks. How can one be persuaded that the existence of the parks is necessarily good if all the advantages favour one party involved and elude the other? Thus the writer's description of the advantages to mankind of animal parks is either unnecessary if his two conclusions as mentioned at the start were well-supported, or flawed if we take his claim that animal parks are not cruel to animals and do not create detached experiences to be false.

Thus, the author's two conclusions do not stand, and neither does his overall defence of animal parks, based on the premises he provides.

Question 1

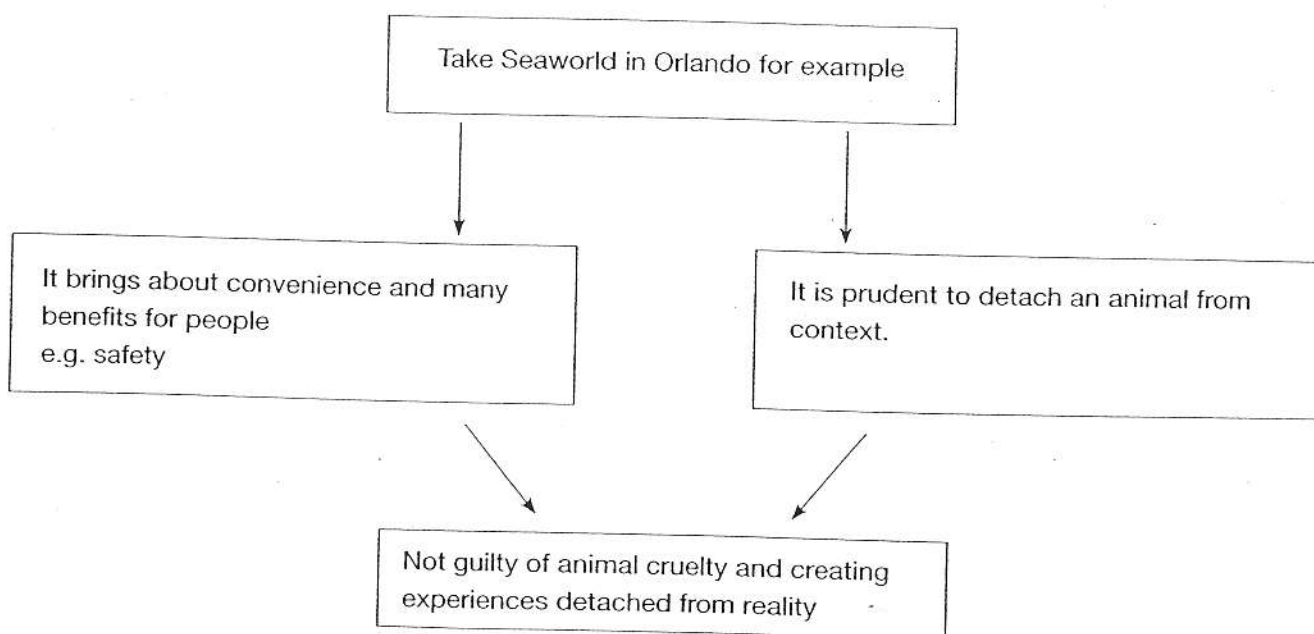
KI

Wang Longzhao
08S06P

It is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of being guilty of animal cruelty (for instance, "plucking" killer whales from the ocean) and of creating experiences that are detached from context. However, take for example the shark exhibit at Seaworld, Orlando. If there was ever an animal for which detaching experience from context was prudent, it is the shark. Moreover, Seaworld has not collected a killer whale from the wild since the mid-1970s; instead, it exhibits killer whales that have been born in captivity. In addition to learning about sharks while in a safe environment, Seaworld visitors can see a beluga whale without sailing into Canada's Resolute Bay. These educational opportunities attract 6 million people to Seaworld annually and have enabled children to appreciate wildlife and environmental conservation.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

The author makes two conclusions: namely, that it is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of being guilty of animal cruelty, and it is also wrong to say that they are creating experiences that are detached from context.



Given his argument, I would not accept his conclusion readily. Later, I will discuss the inconsistencies in his argument and also how the premises do not lead to the conclusion.

Firstly, his whole case and argument is built upon insufficient evidence. To back up his claim that animal theme parks are not guilty of animal cruelty and creating experiences detached from reality, he only looks at one animal theme park. He merely uses Seaworld in Orlando and only uses sharks to back up his claim. It could be that a majority of animals undergo abuse and cruelty in Seaworld or other animal theme parks. As such, simply based on the limited evidence that he has put forth thus far, I think he commits a generalisation fallacy and his conclusion is not supported sufficiently.

His argument also seems to contain some inconsistencies. For example, his conclusion states that it is wrong to accuse animal theme parks of creating experiences that are detached from context. However, in his next line, he writes about it being prudent to detach experience from context with reference to a shark. Clearly, he concedes that animal theme parks are actually creating experiences detached from the context. His argument then seems to follow that just because it allows people to learn about these animals in a safe environment, it is alright to do so. Clearly, this then commits the fallacy of appealing to consequences. Even if doing the action brings about good consequences, it does not mean that the action is definitely right. Furthermore, in the context of this question, the fact that more children can appreciate wildlife does not mean that animal theme parks are not guilty. His listed premises do not lead to the conclusion. Just because people do not need to travel to Canada's Resolute Bay does not mean that the actions taken by such theme parks are justifiable. In essence, the convenience and benefits brought about by their actions do not mean that the animal theme parks are not guilty.

Lastly, he seems to have a narrow definition of animal cruelty. He talks about plucking whales from the ocean but fails to address other forms of animal cruelty. For example, some environmentalists may define raising a killer whale in captivity as cruelty too. Thus, his argument that animal theme parks cannot be accused of cruelty just because the whales are not captured from the ocean is clearly weak.

Overall, after examining his arguments, I am not ready to accept his conclusions.

Question 2

KI

Teo Wan Joo
08A01B

What makes a beautiful face? How long or short should the perfect nose be; is there an optimal length to the face or ear lobe; what should the angle of the eyes be in respect to the bridge of the nose?

Recent research shows that beauty is simply a matter of being Mr or Ms Average. Three hundred psychology students were asked to rate pictures of faces using an attractiveness score of one to five. Some of the pictures were of a single individual, and some were composite faces, made up from the features of 2, 4, 8, 16 or up to 32 individual faces. The lowest scores for attractiveness were those for individual faces. The attractiveness ratings increased with increases in the number of faces which were used to make a composite face.

So, take heart! Beauty is only the sum total of our big and little noses, receding and protruding chins, high and low foreheads. In order to be beautiful, you do not have to be unusual – you only have to be average after all.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

The author concludes that a unique face is not required to be beautiful; “you only have to be average”. His conclusion should not be accepted.

The most obvious problem with the argument is that the author is not consistent in his usage of the word “average”. “Average” has varying meanings. When he talks about composite faces being the most attractive, he uses “average” to mean, mathematically, a wider range of faces. When he says that to be beautiful you only have to be “average”, the intended meaning is that one can be beautiful even when one is plain, or not outstanding.

Being beautiful is not simply a “matter of being Mr or Ms Average” - it is not merely a matter of being plain. What the author means by that statement is that we are more likely to find a composite face more beautiful than an individual face. The fact that the face is a composite of the faces of a group of people, as opposed to belonging to one unique individual, is what the author means by his label of “average”.

The study also yields results that do not mean much to the perception of beauty either. In a larger pool of features to choose from, it is naturally more likely that the features of the composite face will be more beautiful than that of the individual face. The author takes the composite faces to be on an equal playing field as the individual face, when in fact the individual face is severely handicapped by the laws of probability. In reality, all of us only have our own individual faces, and our genes did not have the luxury of choosing or permutating features from a large pool of candidates. Thus the composite faces could belong to nobody. Composite faces are merely that – composites, and any beliefs derived from looking at them should not be

applied to individual faces.

The author also commits an error by generalising from the results from the study. He takes the tastes of three hundred students to be a large enough and generally representative enough indicator of society's opinions, when three hundred is a number far too insignificant to be taken as representative. Also, he seems to have been careful to include the fact that they are psychology students, in an appeal to inappropriate authority. Psychology students are in no way more superior judges of beauty than say, chemistry students.

Lastly, there is a gap in what the author extracts from the study, and what the study really aims to prove. "Beauty" and "attractiveness" are not necessarily the same thing. It is possible to think that someone in a photograph is attractive, although you do not view him or her as beautiful.

All in all, the argument is greatly flawed, and its conclusion that to be beautiful you "just have to be average" should not be accepted.

Question 2

KI

Wang Longzhao
08S06P

What makes a beautiful face? How long or short should the perfect nose be; is there an optimal length to the face or ear lobe; what should the angle of the eyes be in respect to the bridge of the nose?

Recent research shows that beauty is simply a matter of being Mr or Ms Average. Three hundred psychology students were asked to rate pictures of faces using an attractiveness score of one to five. Some of the pictures were of a single individual, and some were composite faces, made up from the features of 2, 4, 8, 16 or up to 32 individual faces. The lowest scores for attractiveness were those for individual faces. The attractiveness ratings increased with increases in the number of faces which were used to make a composite face.

So, take heart! Beauty is only the sum total of our big and little noses, receding and protruding chins, high and low foreheads. In order to be beautiful, you do not have to be unusual – you only have to be average after all.

Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion (or conclusions). [15m]

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The most obvious problem with the argument is that the author is not consistent in his usage of the word “average”. “Average” has varying meanings. When he talks about composite faces being the most attractive, he uses “average” to mean, mathematically, a wider range of faces. When he says that to be beautiful you only have to be “average”, the intended meaning is that one can be beautiful even when one is plain, or not outstanding.

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