

## Message from the Principal

One of the most effective communicators of this era must be US President Barack Obama. Campaign speeches aside, his rhetoric on healthcare reform, sustainable development and the need for strong fundamentals such as education is persuasive and thoughtfully conveyed. The author of a recent biography on him relayed how Obama's rich cultural background has enabled him to be an Everyman, someone who can relate to a wide cross section of the community and connect across cultures. He may speak the language of the elite from top US Colleges like Harvard, but he can strike a chord with those who come from the midwest, because of his mother and his modest upbringing.

Google "Video of Will Smith Interview with Barack Obama" and listen to Obama's argument on the need to expand our "moral imagination" and how nations should collaborate rather than compete in a world of limited resources. What Obama did – very effortlessly – was to use a number of cross-cultural references and weave in succinct narratives that foreground the plight of the villagers halfway round the world. To quote Obama, "One of the critical ingredients of any effort for peace is my ability to stand in your shoes and see through your eyes, and constantly imagine what it's like, being a mother in Bangladesh right now... if the waters are rising because of climate change..."

How do we write persuasive and convincing essays? Listen to some of Obama's speeches and writing and you will get useful tips on how the use of statistics and facts, interwoven with personal stories and conveyed with cross-cultural sensitivity, can strike a chord with listeners, viewers and readers.

Read this issue of KS Bull and weigh what it is that makes one argument more persuasive than another. Enjoy.

Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)  
Principal, Raffles Institution



## Message from the Principal

### GP Promotion Examination 2009

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## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 1

## Consider the value of play

Sarah Chong Xin | 10S030

For many people, the word 'play' brings to mind a group of children having fun at a playground or a child surrounded by his toys. Most would agree that play, long considered the antonym of work, is an activity that seems largely senseless even though the people engaging in it usually enjoy what they are doing. Its value has constantly been underestimated by the majority of society, who view it as little more than a childish activity meant for the younger members of the human race. We fail to realize that beyond the facade that we perceive play to be, play encompasses numerous values that allow it to be a form of therapy and learning. Play is not getting the credit it deserves as society by and large is undervaluing its importance.

Play has been criticised frequently as many feel that it serves no purpose other than to reinforce gender stereotypes. The toys that parents and relatives offer to toddlers depend largely on the gender of a child. A study done on five young mothers showed that when they were convinced that the child presented to them was a baby girl, they were likely to offer her dolls, but when they were presented with a baby boy, they offered him trains and cars instead. In fact, the 'baby girl' and the 'baby boy' were actually the same child dressed in different clothes. Research has also shown that children below the ages of three generally have no discernible differences in behavioural patterns. After this crucial age, however, which is when many boys are presented with 'warrior toys' while most girls are presented with 'girl toys' like toy cooking sets and dolls, the divergence in behavioural patterns of both genders begins. Girls are less aggressive than boys, and usually take on domestic roles in play like caring for children. Hence, the value of play (if any at all) here is largely debatable as it only reinforces gender stereotypes and ingrains in children these behavioural differences from a young age.

Also, play may involve teenagers spending large amounts of time on their video games. Playing online or video games excessively can lead to addiction and shirking of one's responsibilities. Video games have also been cited as the cause of the rising trend of violence observed among young people today. Hence, in this case, some are of the opinion that play is not only a worthless activity, but, also, its detrimental and debilitating consequences indicate that it should be discouraged.

However, play is a form of relaxation for many. Playing senseless video or online games is a welcome activity for many, used to provide them with an oasis of peace in their frenzied lives. Addiction, though it is a problem, only affects a minority of people who play these games. Also, it would be juvenile to attribute the rising trend of violence in society to the rising number of adolescents playing video and online games. The correlation does not in any way indicate causation, as there are many mitigating factors with regard to the rising trend of violence amongst teenagers. Play, when done in moderation, can be an effective form of relaxation for many a discerning person.

Play has also been considered a form of therapy. It is especially useful in the case of young children who have been abused. Often, due to their immaturity, they are unable to express in words their thoughts and emotions because they cannot make sense of the abuse which they have been subjected to. Through play, psychologists are able to help these children come to terms with their abuse and, more importantly, find out details to identify and prosecute the perpetrator. For example, by allowing young children to play with dolls with predefined roles like 'father', 'mother', or the child himself, psychologists can, through the child's manipulation of the dolls during play, obtain an accurate depiction of the child's family situation. This is especially useful in cases of domestic violence or sexual abuse. Play has also been used by hospitals like the National University of Singapore Hospital (NUH), which has a 'Play Unit' to prepare children for and allay their fears of new and 'scary' medical procedures, offering them a psychological resilience which is essential to their being able to cope with the medical treatment they will undergo. Hence, play can be an effective form of therapy and is



thus a valuable tool for aiding young children in their understanding of the world around them. The incorporation of play activities into medical treatment protocols serves as an acknowledgement of play's value to psychologists and doctors.

Play is also an important form of learning. Through play, young children can learn about society's preexisting rules and conventions. Society is made up of many people with diverse backgrounds, and for it to function cohesively, its members must behave in an orderly and acceptable manner. Through play, which is an interaction with other members of society, children will learn acceptable behaviour. These social skills will ensure that they can function effectively in society when they grow up.

Through play, children can also develop psychomotor skills that are vital to their survival. For example, playing with building blocks will allow children to learn to grasp small objects and improve their hand-eye coordination. Playing with balls will allow them to develop throwing and catching skills, contributing to their mastery of their bodies. Play can also be vital in improving the psychomotor skills of children with birth defects or those with traumatic injuries requiring physical therapy. It can also help adults who have suffered a stroke to relearn to master their bodies. It adds a new dimension to physical therapy instead of solely making patients perform repetitive actions. Play can facilitate physical therapy and is key to helping many gain mastery of their limbs and body.

Play can also help to build self-confidence. Through games suitably adjusted according to their physical abilities, the physically-handicapped will be able to build their self-esteem as they redefine their physical limits. Playing sport used to be a laughable utopian ideal for the handicapped, but today it has become a very real possibility for them. They are able to enjoy the same games as their physically-able counterparts, albeit with a few modifications to the game. In France today, thousands of physically-handicapped people play Handisport, a range of ball games which have been designed and modified specifically to suit their needs.

Lastly, play is also a form of exercise to improve the physical condition of people. Jogging or swimming alone may seem extremely boring and uninviting to many, but playing a game of tennis, basketball or softball might be a more attractive option. This is exactly the reason behind schools incorporating games into their Trim and Fit Programme targeting overweight students. Through games like catching and other ball games, overweight children are encouraged to lose weight through play, which is much healthier and safer than crash dieting.

In conclusion, I feel that the value of play has been grossly underestimated in society today. This is due to many people's preconceived notions that play is largely a useless though enjoyable activity meant for young children or those with too much time on their hands. Nevertheless, if we are willing to look deeper into what play really is and how it can benefit everyone, we will be able to see its therapeutic and teaching uses. Only then will we realise that it is definitely worth much more than what we reluctantly give it credit for today.

#### **Comments:**

***You have thoroughly overwhelmed your examiner with the value of play, most of which you have sufficiently explained and demonstrated. You should more seriously consider, and explicitly elaborate on the criticisms of play discussed in the first paragraph of your essay.***

***Fluent and organised, but passive.***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 2

## Consider the value of play

Li Yiling Eden | 10S03Q

An old saying goes: all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, and Jill a dull girl. Although it seems from this statement that play is only of value to children, play never really loses its relevance in all strata of society – from children to seniors, the value of play lies in its ability to bring people together over a shared activity, and its ability to help one relax, de-stress and recharge.

Children are the members of society with the most free time – without the pressures of the working life, and perhaps minimal stress from school. Yet children always seem to be busy rushing off to someplace or other to go play. Any parent would agree that his house turns into a hive of activity when two or more children descend upon it. This is because, for children, playing is largely a social activity. Aside from socializing within their families, children often learn about the outside world and are prepared for their role in it through interaction with other children. Through playing with their friends from school or other such groups, children first learn about the value of teamwork. They learn about the collaboration required to win a game of Police and Thief or the “alliances” they have to forge while playing Tag. Simple as these childhood games may seem, through constant exposure, such values will be instilled in the children. They will learn the value of sharing when a child lends another her building blocks so he can make a stronger fort; the importance of gratitude when he thanks her for doing so; and the importance of reciprocity when he lends her his teddy bear. Children also learn to care for each other. Because play is so powerful as a social activity, children learn lifelong lessons about the value of teamwork and sportsmanship while having fun at the same time.

Playing is also traditionally how parents engage their children, in order to foster better parent-child relationships. By agreeing to be engaged in games, for example, pretending to be a monster chasing his children all over the house, the parent shows his willingness to fully immerse himself in the children's world, a sacrifice that will not go unnoticed by the children in question. Parents who spend more time playing with their children will forge closer ties with their children and also maximize opportunities to play a bigger role in shaping the child's identity. In addition, some parents may choose to purchase intellectually-stimulating games for their children. Playing, in this sense, serves the dual purpose of being educational yet entertaining, and also allows the parents to find where their children's interests lie. Hence, play is integral to shaping parent-child relationships and is increasingly being used to engage children on an intellectual level.

For adults, play becomes less about learning and socialising, but more about having some “me-time” – time taken off from work to pursue interests and hobbies. As pressure to excel in the workplace builds, stress levels go up accordingly, and at the end of the day many working adults find themselves tearing their hair out thinking about how to manage workplace pressure, relationships, financial woes and a whole plethora of problems. At this point, they might find themselves taking leave from work just to have some time to clear their minds. Taking time off for play – that is, some time for them to relax and unwind – allows them to return to work feeling refreshed and even increases their productivity. Play provides a much-needed sanctuary for working adults. Ewan McGregor, for example, dealt with the stress of filming five movies in fifteen months by taking time to enjoy his pastimes such as jogging and motor biking. Play is essential in achieving work-life balance that will ultimately leave the individual feeling good while being able to improve his or her productivity.

Play allows individuals to get to know each other in informal settings. Icebreakers, for example, are often used to kick start events that bring together individuals from varied backgrounds, such as orientation programmes in schools. While, in some cases, playing these icebreakers may serve practical purposes such as getting to know each others' names, more often than not games are



designed so as to allow the players to open up and get to know each other; it is difficult to be intimidated by someone whom you have witnessed getting tangled up in a game of Twister. Playing allows people to bond in an informal, relaxed setting, establishing the basis of relationships that may become increasingly important in the future.

However, it must be noted that not all forms of “play” are in fact social activities, and hence a large number of the aforementioned benefits of play do not hold true. Increasingly, with the development of technology and increasing broadband speeds, a generation of youths has developed whose idea of play is woefully restricted to the virtual worlds of Warcraft and Runescape. Such games have grown exponentially in popularity, and there have even been cases of severe addiction to computer games in which the addict did not leave his seat at the computer for extended periods of time, eventually causing death. Computer game addiction is a growing problem in Asia, where countries like South Korea and China have even created “rehabilitation camps” to help young addicts kick the habit with varying degrees of success. Obsession with playing such virtual games leads to an increasing sense of detachment from the real world and failed relationships, and links have even been drawn to increasing violent tendencies. This form of play essentially brings no benefit to the user, perhaps with the exception of a warped sense of satisfaction.

It is undeniable that not all forms of play are social activities leading to benefits; as evidenced by the above example, obsession with playing may lead to the polar opposite. Playing has also been called a form of escapism, or merely a distraction from more important things. However, I feel that therein lies the importance of needing to strike a balance. As important as play is for helping an individual to relax and recharge, the individual must be wary not to be entirely taken by the comfortable life of play and become disillusioned with working life – the latter is essential for survival. Similarly, retreating into play as a social activity might result in it being more of an isolated activity as it turns into an obsession. Work and play should complement each other, allowing the individual to develop his relationships and personal hobbies, while at the same time not superseding the importance of work entirely. For most people, work and play are not the same thing (unless you happen to be a video games tester) and hence this delicate balance is hard to strike. Nevertheless, playing does not lose its significance. In one’s formative years, playing is an integral part of socialisation and learning which progresses into an avenue for relaxation and bonding for adults. Play is relevant to all individuals at all levels of society, boy or girl, man or woman.

#### **Comments:**

***How about the idea of play developing creativity? Coherent and articulate. Response shows a good grasp of the issues involved. Is the value of play in adult life underestimated?***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 3

**“There is no lack of policy in environmental conservation; it is the people who lack conscience and sensitivity.” How far is this true?**

Nigel Fong Jie Ming | 10S030

Undeniably, behind many efforts to conserve the environment is the people's conscience and sensitivity. Be these conservation efforts campaigns to stop deforestation, laws to control greenhouse gas emissions, or global carbon-trading agreements, the driving force behind these is often the people's genuine care for the environment, consideration for the low-lying lands that will cease to exist once sea levels rise, and responsibility in declaring that they do not wish to leave a wrecked planet behind for future generations. When the people have such passion, politicians cannot help but listen, and the requisite policies will follow.

It is sometimes true that policies to conserve the environment are undermined by the people's lack of consideration. Arguably, carbon restrictions and other environmental laws are anathema to capitalists, who would seek to squeeze the greatest profit out of the land at the lowest cost. Hence we see giant logging companies cleaning out the Amazon rainforest and chemical plants discharging toxic wastes into rivers—polluting the only source of drinking water for many downstream. Corrupt officials often expedite this environmental destruction. For these people, the calculus of dollars and cents outweighs any fragment of “conscience” or “sensitivity” they might have, such that policies to conserve the environment are rendered useless.

On the other hand, there are those who ignore environmental policies out of what seems to be sheer need. Take for instance the subsistence farmers in Indonesia. Every couple of years, their land is rendered barren due to a lack of proper irrigation, a lack of fertilizers (that modern high-yield crops cannot do without), and often, pollution from nearby factories. When their land no longer produces enough to feed their families, they, in desperation, proceed to slash and burn another section of forest. If it is genuinely desperation that has driven them to commit the environmental sin of slashing and burning forests, we cannot blame a lack of “conscience” or “sensitivity” for their actions.

Yet, it is often a lack of policy that allows these acts of environmental vandalism to take place. It is obvious that not all farmers who slash and burn do so out of desperation because they cannot feed their families; many are simply out to make a quick buck (newly-burnt land is the most fertile possible land). What is at fault here is the lack of policy enforcement. Despite the existence of those who slash and burn out of what seems to be “sheer need”, we cannot totally exonerate policymakers, because these policymakers have failed to provide access to fertilizers, irrigation, and all the other necessities that enable these subsistence farmers to maintain their land such that they need not turn to slashing and burning.

It is also a lack of policy that allows the most egregious acts to continue. The lack of strict emission laws in the USA is what allows US industries to continue pumping out carbon dioxide by the tonne, oblivious to the pressing urgency of environmental conservation. On a global level, the lack of globally binding treaties on emissions lets countries like China and the USA get away with an obscene level of carbon emissions. Even today, some countries still export toxic waste to third-world nations, destroying their environment. In this light, there is a lack of policy in environmental conservation.

However, a lack of policy on the government's part and a lack of conscience and sensitivity on the people's part are not mutually exclusive. Often, it is a lack of public conscience that translates into a lack of policy. The USA still lacks strict domestic emission standards only because lobby groups—representing the interests of big polluting industries—pressure politicians to block such legislation. Because these lobby groups fund their political campaigns, these politicians have to obey. It is therefore the lack of conscience on the part of industrialists, who scorn environmental legislation because it diminishes their profits, manifested in the actions of these lobby groups, which results in a lack of policy. The Waxman-Markey bill on emission standards is unlikely to pass the US Senate for this



selfish reason.

On a global scale, a lack of conscience also hampers the best efforts to establish policies to conserve the environment. In what is known as a collective action problem, no country on its own has the incentive to establish environmental policies, as the benefits from such policies are distributed among all other countries, while the costs-harming industry, having less competitive exports, and so on – are concentrated on itself. Hence, unless the world acts together to establish policies to cut emissions and conserve the environment, no country will first take the initiative to do so; no country will have the “sensitivity” to be selfless in this regard. This is why we still see countries like China, the US, and, until recently, Australia, refusing to ratify agreements like the Kyoto Protocol, and why existing incarnations of the Kyoto Protocol are so lax—because the signatory countries have to look after the competitiveness of their exports when juxtaposed against that of non-Kyoto signatories.

On the flipside, it would be a lie to say that everyone is equally lacking in environmental conscience. Many campaign passionately to conserve the environment. Local pressure groups have given George Bush flak for rejecting the Kyoto Protocol. Bush was forced, at the very least, to pass some semblance of an environmental law—the 2003 US Clean Skies Act. Al Gore and his team—who rightfully won the Nobel peace prize for their efforts—succeeded in jolting many governments worldwide to issue statements describing the pain they had gone through to protect the environment. All this happened within a fortnight after the release of Al Gore’s movie “An Inconvenient Truth”. The people’s lack of conscience and sensitivity is often the root cause of a lack of environmental policy; conversely, the people’s conscience and sensitivity is a major driving force for the institution of environmental policy. Politicians, after all, have the mandate to represent their people; if their people demand environmental consciousness, the threat of the ballot box means that they must deliver.

In fact, the people’s conscience and sensitivity can result in environmental conservation, even in the absence of top-down policies. Big businesses have joined in to conserve the environment and “corporate social responsibility” is the new buzzword in business. Even if businesses do not conserve the environment out of altruism, they do so to answer to their environmentally-conscious customers, who might boycott their products otherwise.

At the end of the day, policies are at best a compromise between conflicting interests: environmental conservation, economic development, and global competitiveness. While policies can be effective in mandating that everyone do their part to conserve the environment, the people’s absence of conscience and sensitivity can undermine policies. Because of this reality, as well as the fact that policies are at best compromised, there will always be a “lack” of policies—there can be more policies, and existing policies can go further. To drive environmental conservation, it is ultimately up to the people not to lie supine in the face of the environmental doom that awaits our planet.

#### **Comments:**

***Fluent, sophisticated use of English, well-constructed paragraphs, but essay organisation would have greatly benefited from a clearer thesis.***

***Thoughtful, critical analysis of the complexity and difficulty of the problem. Each point clearly follows from the previous one. A specific, declarative stance will leave a stronger impression on your examiner.***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 4

'There is no lack of policy in environmental conservation; it is the people who lack conscience and sensitivity.' How far is this true?

Kee Ae Ra | 10S03K

With the rapid depletion of the ozone layer, the extinction of many plant and animal species and the melting of ice caps which is caused by global warming, there has been an increasing concern all over the world about environmental conservation. Environmental conservation includes conserving natural habitats, using less of our natural resources, and employing other methods that can help save Mother Nature from further exploitation. In light of the severity and urgency of this environmental issue, I agree with the statement that many governments have made policies and decisions that contribute largely to environmental destruction. It is also of concern that despite such governmental efforts, there are still many individuals who lack conscience and sensitivity and feel no responsibility for environmental conservation. However, the claim that there is "no lack of policy in environmental conservation; it is the people who lack conscience and sensitivity" is sweeping and, thus, I disagree with the statement to a large extent as there are indeed many people who have taken individual actions to bring about environmental conservation.

Indeed, there are many governmental policies for environmental conservation. For instance, there have been international governmental efforts through the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol to reduce carbon emissions by 5% from 1990 carbon emission levels by 2012. In Singapore, there is conservation of natural habitats like Chek Jawa and mangrove forests to protect these habitats from exploitation. Furthermore, the National Environmental Agency (NEA) sets strict rules and monitors the possible negative impact firms' major activities have on the environment. Thus, it can be seen that there are quite a number of government policies in environmental conservation.

Of course, some might argue that despite the above government policies, people do not realise the seriousness of environmental destruction and still misuse our scarce natural resources. For instance, in Singapore, despite the launching of "Bring Your Own Bag" day, which encourages people to bring their own reusable bags to supermarkets, a survey carried out by the NEA showed that over 40% of shoppers did not bring their own bags when shopping. This is evident in many cases where shoppers use countless plastic bags when doing grocery shopping. Furthermore, despite the high price of oil, taxes on cars and subsidies for public transport fares, people still drive their cars whenever and wherever they can, as they deem the convenience provided by cars more important than saving the environment via reducing car usage to reduce carbon emissions. In addition, profit-maximising firms made up of "money-minded" businessmen and managers have little concern about the environment, allowing their factories to emit large volumes of greenhouse gases, such as sulphur dioxide and carbon monoxide, which give rise to ozone depletion and acid rain. Thus, it can be argued that people lack a sense of responsibility for environmental conservation and do not take individual actions to save the Earth. Indeed, as what James Lovelock, a renowned environmentalist, said, "through our own actions, we are mitigating our own demise" if people continue to have no or little concern for environmental conservation.

However, as I mentioned earlier, it is an over-generalisation to claim that all individuals "lack conscience" about saving the environment, as there have been many individual efforts to conserve the environment. For instance, many environmentalists, such as James Lovelock and Frank Furedi, who are concerned about the severity of environmental destruction, have written articles and books and have organised campaigns to raise awareness about environmental issues among the public. Many firms and industries that engage in technical and mechanical processes which emit greenhouse gases have switched to environmentally-friendly methods of production. For instance, DuPont, an international firm, has recently adopted biotechnology in its production methods to reduce carbon emissions by a large amount. Furthermore, there are a growing number of scientists who are exploring and experimenting with green technology, applying environmental science to bring about nature conservation and to curb the negative impact human



action has on the environment. In addition, schools and educational institutions have organised activities that create awareness about the importance of environmental conservation, allowing students to take up co-curricular activities such as One Earth and The Life Club to take action to save the Earth at a young age. Lastly, more individuals have taken small steps in conserving the environment by switching off the lights when not in use, and using less water, electricity and other resources in their everyday lives. As such, different sectors of the community have a growing concern about the environment, and, thus, it cannot be said that people “lack conscience and sensitivity”.

Furthermore, it is, after all, the people who influence the government to make policies regarding environmental conservation. Also, the ministers and policy-makers in the government are “people” who care enough about the environment to set policies to curb the effects of environmental destruction. For example, the Kyoto Protocol would not have been ratified by so many countries if not for protests by the international audience that pressured many countries like Russia to sign. Closer to home, policies set by the NEA and the government protect some of Singapore’s key natural habitats like mangroves and Check Jawa. However, such policies were made because of the general public’s concern over destruction of these habitats and the public’s appeal to the government to conserve these areas. As such, it can be seen that people do not necessarily “lack conscience and sensitivity” about environmental issues because many are certainly concerned about the environment, encouraging their own governments to set policies regarding environmental destruction.

However, although I have disagreed with the statement and pointed out that there are policies and individual actions to bring about environmental conservation, this does not mean that there is enough action taken by the government and individuals. There should be more government policies and more people taking action to save the environment.

Firstly, there should be further improvement in governmental efforts to conserve the environment. For instance, governments of each country can set more laws and regulations to minimise environmental destruction. This includes employing more efficient regulatory bodies to monitor factories’ emission of greenhouse gases and make sure that there is no illegal logging. Furthermore, the fact that many developed nations have increased their efforts to save the Earth does not mean that all countries have implemented enough policies in environmental conservation. For example, the United States, one of the countries with the highest carbon emissions, has yet to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. China and Hong Kong should also set stricter rules to prevent further pollution in the city areas of these countries. As such, there is certainly room for improvement for these governments to bring about successful environmental conservation.

Secondly, further educational measures should be adopted to educate the public about the importance of saving the Earth so that more people can play their part in environmental conservation. Small individual actions like reducing the consumption of water and electricity should be encouraged.

In conclusion, I disagree with the statement as it is not that there is no policy, or that there are too many people who lack conscience and sensitivity, but, rather, there is the need for more comprehensive policies to address environmental destruction. Certainly there is a need to increase the number of people taking action with regard to environmental conservation so as to ensure that it is not a case of “too little, too late”. As it was once said, “no single person operating can change the world, but all can, and most play a part”, so that successful environmental conservation can take place.

#### **Comments:**

***Ae Ra, this is a competent essay presenting a balanced approach to the question and tackling the central issues in the question. Examples are plenty but they can be more concise so that the focus is on the argumentation. Good job on the whole!***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 5

**“There is no lack of policy in environmental conservation; it is the people who lack conscience and sensitivity.” How far is this true?**

Jaclyn Chong Shu Yeen | 10S03L

December this year will see yet another world summit dedicated to the discussion of environmental conservation and climate change. To this day, world leaders are still struggling to strike a balance between the fragile environment and economic growth. With the Copenhagen summit drawing near, United States President Barack Obama has yet to provide any insight as to what exactly the US is planning to do about the environment, choosing instead to beat around the bush. Some argue that the people play a huge role in hindering environmental conservation. After all, there are only a small proportion of politicians when compared to the entire population of a nation. However, I beg to differ. There is a lack of policy in environmental conservation or at least the lack of enforcement of such policies.

Firstly, nations choose economic development over the environment. Although one may argue that they can go hand in hand, countries obviously place greater importance on the former. When the Kyoto Protocol was signed, the US—the greatest contributor of carbon emissions at that time—refused to take part for fear that the requirements of the Protocol would hinder its economic progress. Years down the road, the US is coming to realise the importance of environmental conservation but, still, not enough is being done. We can only wait and see if President Obama has a grand plan for the environment just waiting for the Copenhagen summit. A more recent example of a lack of environmental conservation policies as a result of favouring rapid economic development would be China, the ever-growing industrial giant. When China opened its economy to foreign investment and relaxed its labour laws, the manufacturing industries flourished and with this came detrimental effects on the environment. Poorly regulated factories produced toxic waste that was disposed into rivers or just released into the air, severely polluting the environment. With the government centered on building the country's economy, few if any environmental policies were implemented. People who were vocal about the environmental destruction caused by government policies were jailed without explanation. Even though statistics show that rapid industrialisation has benefited the people greatly, lifting 50.1% of the poor out of extreme poverty, the fact that 16 out of the 20 most polluted cities in the world are in China speaks for itself. In the case of China, there are clearly people who are sensitive to the fact that their country is growing at the great expense of the environment, but government policies are instead used to suppress these people. Hence, in some instances it is the lack of policy that has hindered environmental conservation, not the people's lack of conscience and sensitivity.

Other times, even if there are efforts to implement policies aimed at environmental conservation, the policies lack rigour and sometimes may seem skimpy in addressing such a colossal issue as the environment. In fact, some policies may even contradict the whole idea of environmental conservation in favour of other goals such as equity. Many are probably aware of the green tax, which is a tax levied on the usage or disposal of goods that generate adverse effects on the environment; fuel taxes are the most common of such taxes. In an effort to discourage the over-consumption of oil, countries such as England and many Scandinavian nations impose high fuel taxes. On the other hand, there are many countries that do the exact opposite: heavily subsidising fuel. Countries like Malaysia and Indonesia subsidise oil in order to protect consumers so that high oil prices will not cause inflation and also to promote equality so that high income taxes from the rich are redistributed to the poor. However, this policy clearly harms the environment. Cheaper oil prices encourage over-consumption and waste, generating huge amounts of greenhouse emissions that pollute the environment. Furthermore, green taxes are only effective if they are high enough to discourage consumption. As fuel may make up a rather small proportion of one's income, the effect of the tax may not be significant. However, politicians more often than not shy away from imposing high taxes as it is an unpopular move. As such, there is a lack of policy in environmental conservation. There are also times when, despite having policies in place, the environment still suffers as a result of the lack of enforcement of such

policies, rendering them pointless. The Indonesian government has grand plans to conserve the rich biodiversity of its lush tropical rainforests, declaring various areas protected nature reserves. However, a lack of manpower has resulted in various activities that harm the environment. With the lack of park rangers to patrol the grounds, illegal burning of forests to clear the trees has been an annual problem that continues to plague the country. Of course, one may argue that it is the profit-driven plantation owners' lack of conscience that has brought about the destruction in the first place; with severe punishments to deter those people, environmental conservation would have been more effective.

However, it is also an irrefutable fact that people's lack of conscience and sensitivity towards the needs of the environment has only aggravated the environmental problem. People are selfish and seek to maximise their own satisfaction first, oftentimes disregarding the impact they have on the environment. After all, ignorance is bliss. There are times, too, when the policies implemented to conserve the environment only serve to spur some people motivated by greed to sidestep the laws. For example, with strict laws against the disposal of waste products from industries in European countries, factory owners have chosen to instead illegally 'export' the waste in containers to poorer countries, such as India, China and Indonesia. This clearly exemplifies that people are the ones disregarding the policies implemented for environmental conservation and choosing to harm the environment to maximise their own profits. Thus, sometimes it is true that the effectiveness of policies implemented to protect the environment is adversely affected by the selfish nature of humans who lack conscience and sensitivity.

In conclusion, it is erroneous to say in the first place that there is no lack of policy in environmental conservation because obviously, not enough is being done and policies need to be bolder in their stance against environmental destruction. While it is true that some policies do not seem to be working, as people are not affected by them or choose to simply sidestep them, this only reflects the need for new policies that are able to bind people and increase awareness in order to overcome this lack of conscience and sensitivity. Ultimately, though, policies need the support of the people in order to work.

#### **Comments:**

***Strong explanation and illustration of how policy and people have both failed; however, some ideas are driven heavily by examples which are suggested rather than clearly stated (e.g. the desire of politicians to remain in power).***

***Fluent, direct language, but some paragraphs need to be broken up – each should explore one idea.***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 6

**“Science cannot stop while ethics catches up.” (Elvin Stackman)**  
**What is your view?**

Ashish Xiangyi Kumar | 10A01A

The progress of science has never been so rapid—or so intimidating—as it has been in the modern world. As new frontiers are being explored, an ethical dimension to science has opened which has never been seen before. Embryonic stem cell research, human and animal cloning, animal testing, genetically modified food—these are issues about which current moral debates have been held. Indeed, sometimes it seems that our ethical prerogatives have fallen behind our scientific endeavours. While I agree there are definite ethical limits to science, within this sphere the sciences should be allowed to develop.

What exactly are these definite ethical limits? The one moral value that all people can agree should be preserved is the value and dignity of life. Any science that actively seeks to harm sentient human life is therefore objectionable. The horrific experiments of Dr. Josef Mengele, the “Angel of Death”, who injected dyes into Jewish prisoners’ eyes, and who performed vivisections and “forcible conjoining” on Jewish children, while justified by the coldest scientific logic, are beyond all ethical possibility to endure. When the pursuit of science comes into direct conflict with the very value of life, it should stop. This fact is legally sustained in almost every country, where human testing of drugs is strictly disallowed unless these drugs have been tested chemically or on animals to ensure that they do not cause definite and lasting harm.

A more ambiguous area would be the use of science—as opposed to the pursuit of scientific knowledge itself—for seemingly violent purposes. Einstein’s  $E=mc^2$  formula was a momentous scientific breakthrough, but the harnessing of such vast power led to the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, where innocents were massacred. The pilot of the Enola Gay, upon witnessing the calamity he had just unleashed, said, “My god, what have we done?” a question that many will say characterizes the use of scientific knowledge today. Even the Nobel Prizes seem to be founded upon a legacy of regret at the misuse of science; Alfred Nobel expected his invention, dynamite, to be used for humanitarian purposes, but, upon witnessing the untold suffering that it caused in a World War, founded the Prizes to use his earnings from the sale of dynamite to remedy what he thought was the suffering he had caused.

Yet are these valid arguments for reining in science until we can determine beyond doubt that its uses will be ethical? No. Science is, at heart, the pursuit of truth about the world we live in, and to lay blame for the actions of humans who are subject to all the failings of human nature—such as cruelty and selfishness—on science is simply unjustified. Science is amoral, and humans have constantly sought to use it for moral purposes, too. The splitting of the atom yielded nuclear energy, and dynamite today is being used for industrial purposes exactly as Alfred Nobel envisioned. It is never the gun that kills a person, but the person who pulls the trigger. We can no more lay an unfair moral burden on science than we can convict a gun of murder. A *reductio ad absurdum* argument would show that all scientific knowledge can be used for either moral or immoral purposes, yet this seems to lead to the impossible claim that all science is immoral and should be stopped.

In areas such as embryonic stem cell research, people will argue that it is the pursuit of science itself that has become morally reprehensible. George Bush notoriously banned funding for such research in America on the grounds that “the ensuing controversy that allowing such research to continue can create can only be harmful for science”. But I will argue that such research does not contravene the one ethical criterion that science should be subject to—the preservation of the value and dignity of life. There is consensus among many scientists that a 7-day embryo displays little or none of the traits of a human being. It lacks sentience or any conscious life, and hence we must question why we should ascribe more moral value to it than a cell sample taken from anywhere else in the body.

This debate becomes truly complex when religious arguments are brought into the fray. Many on the American right believe that God bestows life upon an individual as a divine gift and that to take away that gift is fundamentally immoral. I will argue that it is not in the position of science to address such arguments, and that here science should proceed unhindered. Science and God occupy irreconcilably different paradigms—one occupies the realm of induction and fundamentally experiential knowledge, the other the realms of faith and a belief in transcendence beyond material knowledge. Richard Feynman famously stated that “Science is the disregard for authority,” and the history of the development of science has been a continuous chain of victories against conventional wisdom and traditional authority. Galileo, when he proved that the solar system was heliocentric and hence debunked both Ptolemy and the traditional beliefs of the Church, may have been doing something people at his time thought profoundly immoral. Certainly, Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species” was derided as unchristian and derogatory. Yet over time religion seems to have “caught up” with these truths—though perhaps not wholly, as the debate over whether evolution should be taught in American schools currently shows—but to a far greater degree than before. It is no longer uncommon to find a person such as the head of the Human Genome Project, who finds no contradiction between his Christian faith and the reality of evolution. Does this mean that when these scientific revelations first surfaced they should have “waited” for religion to accept them before they dared to proclaim themselves true? No.

Neither does this mean, however, that science should aim to disassociate itself wholly from ethics. While science should not be reined in by individual moral beliefs, it should aim to tackle these questions while it progresses. Richard Dawkins, for example, has tried to debunk these questions rather than ignore them, and the resultant furore over his works is only beneficial in developing society’s ethical compass by spurring discussion. Works such as “The Blind Watchmaker” arguably allow for society’s conventional ethical dimensions to “catch up” faster.

Another argument for why science should not be bound by the limitations of ethical beliefs is that science, in the course of its progression, often aims to solve the ethical risks it may create. An excellent case in point is that of genetically modified (GM) food. For decades worries persisted about the vast harm that crops modified to resist pests, drought, and poor soil might cause if, say, cross-pollination occurred with native species. These species’ unnatural evolutionary advantage would then lead to severe imbalances within the native ecosystem. Such environmental degradation would surely be a huge ethical problem, and people argued against GM food and further research into genetic modification, notably in Germany and Austria. Yet science has solved this problem of its own accord. Recently there have been GM crops created which are unable to cross-fertilize with native species and which have been tailored to grow well in certain conditions—with certain soils, for example—that are not readily available in the native ecosystem.

In fact, there are several notable areas in which science and ethics seem to be completely convergent, and where no “catching up” needs to be done at all. In environmental conservation, for instance, science has been employed for the development of technologies that aim to lessen the deleterious impact humans have on the environment, with the creation of geothermal, solar and recently wave energy as viable alternative sources of energy. Research into a vaccine for AIDS and the creation of drugs such as Tamiflu to contain epidemics are other notable areas in which science has been employed for ethical and humanitarian purposes. Perhaps the dichotomy drawn between ethics and science by Stackman is a little too severe.

My last argument, and the one with which I will conclude, is that science cannot stop while ethics catches up because the pursuit of science is, at a fundamental level, ethical. This may seem paradoxical, as science was mentioned earlier to be amoral, but we cannot forget that science is an area of intellectual study conducted by humans, and these are people with ordinary human concerns—sickness, pain, death, and suffering. No scientific research paper ever ends without any discussion of how that science can benefit humanity, and practically all controversial scientific developments are created for ethically justifiable purposes. Animal testing is cruel, but it saves the lives of millions in the creation of newer and safer cures for a panoply of diseases. Cloning may be playing God,

but it is playing God to save the lives of people with genetic diseases by examining the intricacies of the genome. Genetically modified food provides hope for the poorest farmers in the world as it did in the Green Revolution, and nuclear energy has re-emerged recently as one of the preeminent sources of alternative energy. While ethical philosophy may be caught in intractable moral battles, replete with conundrums and absolutes, science seems to have been able to make the hard decisions where ethics has failed. Science does not stop at the grey areas, as it is not obliged to solve them. Scientists acknowledge the grey areas' existence, and proceed with the course of action they believe will save or help the most lives in the future.

In conclusion, while science should never ignore the ethical realities of the world, and is in one crucial way necessarily limited by them, it should never be limited by vague philosophical concerns, and should aim instead to serve that one universal ethical argument that all people subscribe to—the value and dignity of human life. To that end, neither religion nor vacuous ideological concerns should be a barrier.

**Comments:**

***A cogent discussion with well-sustained arguments and relevant examples. Could be a little more concise especially in the last argument but nonetheless, the scope of the essay is well covered. Fluently written.***



## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 7

Are the Arts a luxury we should dispense with, especially in difficult economic conditions?

Xiao Yi Fei | 10A01B

The global financial crisis has taken the world by storm, with the overnight collapse of the most reputable banks and the myth of the seemingly all-powerful US economic giant shattered, resulting in the crippling of many national economies worldwide. In such a tumultuous climate, the recent sale of Damien Hirst's "The Core of God" – a diamond-encrusted skull, which fetched a hefty price of US\$100 million – seemed to be nothing short of the exuberant excess that many pundits blame for the root of the credit crisis. The man-on-the-street simply cannot understand the material value of a decorative piece of art reserved for the special province of the ultra-rich while he is struggling to feed his family. Hence, under difficult economic conditions, it is commonplace for a country to place its more immediate concerns for growth and recovery before the pursuit of the Arts. However, should the Arts be relegated to the sidelines because of their supposed lack of real economic worth? Are they merely a frivolous form of luxury that we can dispense with in the face of more pressing bread-and-butter issues?

Undoubtedly, the arts market in recent years has witnessed an exponential growth in profits, with major art auction houses like Christie's and Sotheby's churning out exorbitant revenues of more than billions each year – equivalent to or even greater than the GDP of many impoverished countries. The investment placed in developing the arts, such as constructing theatres and paying for formal artistic training in all fields – music, dance, literary arts, just to name a few – has spawned critics who question the extrinsic value of the arts when it comes to solving the numerous social problems plaguing our society. Technocrats would argue that under such circumstances, it is definitely more prudent to focus on developing the economy and putting more money into scientific research so as to increase our competitiveness in the global arena. Areas such as biotechnology and nanoscience have been pinpointed as the "next big thing" that will affirm Singapore's status on the world stage and generate substantial employment, eventually trickling down to improve the well-being of everyone. During the recent Oscars Awards ceremony, the pomp and pageantry was scaled down considerably in anticipation of the public backlash that would stem from the average Joe's economic woes. Clearly, economic prosperity is regarded as a country's highest priority and the Arts, which are assumed to be less capable of contributing to that end, should reasonably be reined back.

Nevertheless, the Arts cannot be merely seen through the tinted lenses of the obstinate pragmatist who views the Arts as nothing more than a preserve of the rich. The Arts have been a vital component of human culture throughout history and there are innumerable benefits we can reap from the "most eloquent expression of human creativity and expression," as humanist and philosopher Paul Kurtz so elegantly puts it.

To begin with, the stress and setbacks we have suffered from the ongoing meltdown inevitably spread a spirit of gloom and doom in all sectors. Amidst this general mood of depression, the Arts remain one of the few means by which we can escape from the emotional trauma and seek reprieve from the over-mechanised humdrum of modern city living. The hit movie of last year – *Slumdog Millionaire* – although portraying the devastating living standards of the ghettos of India, has at the same time conveyed a sense of hope and demonstrated the triumph of love. Many walked out of the cinema feeling refreshed, invigorated by the newfound belief that anyone can succeed and become a "millionaire" (in the spiritual, not just literal, sense) despite trying times. Similarly, the emotional catharsis we experience after reading a touching poem by, say, Carol Ann Duffy or Sylvia Plath may very well aid in relieving us of the nervous, overwrought state that appears to be a syndrome of the fast-paced, cut-throat boardroom culture. These literary artists connect us with our inner wellspring of strength and make our personal troubles seem trivial compared to their inner turmoil. Therefore, the Arts offer us an outlet to vent our frustrations and enable us to

find resonance in the wisdom of artists' work, fortifying our resistance against the practical concerns of life. We are thus able to emerge stronger from the crisis instead of succumbing to the spiral of "emotional poverty".

Moreover, the Arts provide us with an excellent method to construct or consolidate our national identity, which is surely a boon when the future of the social contract in many countries threatens to wreck their governments' political legitimacy. In Singapore, although we enjoy relative harmony among the races, our collective memory as a young nation-state requires much more building. The "mosaic model" the government adopted to serve the national interests of maintaining peace and stability after the 1960s racial riots rings hollow when theory is not backed up with concrete action. By this, I am referring to the efforts of the government in promoting the cultural interaction of the diverse races through the medium of the Arts. Perhaps through celebrating the richness of unique art forms, for example, Malay Dance and Indian folklore, citizens would gain a better understanding of each other and emerge more unified over time. "The Great Gatsby" was the defining book of America and managed to rally the melting pot of society under one common American Dream. As such, the power of the Arts to bring solidarity to people and pull them through the worst periods cannot be underestimated. Our social fabric can only be kept intact if we appreciate, and not just tolerate, the beauty of other cultures, through none other than the panoply of activities and products that best express the essence of our heritage – the Arts. While economic performance can temporarily quell civil dissent, material well-being does not match the spiritual and aesthetic colour that the Arts add to our otherwise dull lives. A nation, thus, needs the Arts to survive, for the key motifs of the state, embodied in its vibrant Arts scene, ultimately bind the people to a country and nurture a sense of belonging whether in difficult situations or during booming years.

The Arts have also proven to be a great stimulant of intellectual growth and innovation, with leading artists firing the imaginations of many with their pioneering, even radical ideas. When Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, the unrelenting gallop of scientific advancement was called into question and people began to doubt mankind's ability to effectively harness the "Promethean Flame" without crossing ethical boundaries. Evidently, our progress cannot be measured by material growth alone, and the Arts can endow us with perceptive insights into hidden social vices that linger beneath the veneer of prosperity. The Great Depression in America produced the "Grapes of Wrath" by John Steinbeck – a bitter novel that questioned the social policies of the US federal government and pointed out underlying problems that demanded immediate address. Therefore, the Arts seem particularly important during times of crisis, when society needs its best minds to lead the country in a new direction for the greater good. Charles Dickens and George Orwell managed to translate society's ills into moving prose which had repercussions for the ruling elite and provoked social consciousness that accelerated social progress.

Allow me, finally, to question the assumption that the Arts are a "luxury". In the distant past, the arts were the special province of the aristocrats and high society, opera and plays were very much exclusive to the upper echelons of society. However, in today's egalitarian world, the Arts have descended from their ivory tower to the masses. These days, many people can walk into the theatre or afford the classics or even spend the additional dollar on a recital. Therefore, the government should take advantage of the growing popularity of the Arts amidst our growing affluence by further democratising the Arts. This can be achieved in the form of subsidies to schools and the promotion of arts festivals that incorporate local as well as overseas groups. The Tote board grant allocated to each school has presented every student, regardless of family background, the opportunity to enjoy the Arts. This will allow students to broaden their horizons and develop their outlook to better serve the future needs of our country. The promotion of the humanities also sensitises our young minds to the social issues of the day, and allows us to learn from the strengths and weaknesses of our ancestors.

Last but not least, the Arts have economic weight, especially given the rising bourgeois class in Asia and the increasing demand for intellectual discourse. Singapore can seek to become an “artistic hub”, instead of a mere financial centre labelled by critics as a “cultural desert”. The building of the Esplanade has been a very sensible investment as the booming arts industry has given Singapore greater international recognition. The arts scene is thus predicted to be the “Holy Grail” of the richer market that Singapore is incessantly in search of, while the opening of art institutes has boosted our economy as well, with up-and-coming local fashion designers and singers such as J.J. Lin, and even film maker Royston Tan, enhancing our image and further adding to our value as an attractive tourist hotspot.

In sum, the Arts are not a luxury, but a necessity we cannot dispense with, as they bring out the best in us in the worst of times.

**Comments:**

***Yi Fei, this is a competent, adequate essay with a very strong focus on answering the question. A couple of examples can be improved in terms of relevance. Other than that, good job!***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 8

How far would you say that singlehood has been hugely underrated?

Eunice Teo Swee Lin | 10A01B

We live today in a modern age of great achievements not merely in science and technology, but also, arguably, in equality for all mankind – across differences in race, gender and even societal status. Yet as the world becomes increasingly globalised and modernised, and greater numbers of well-educated, career-minded people born into an age of independence and capitalist individualism enter the workplace, a certain category of individuals is rising in numbers, and, surprisingly, they still remain the subject of much condescension and even derision. These people are the singles.

To a great extent, singlehood has been underrated in today's society. It is often viewed either as a sad condition of social ineptness, a cause of loneliness, or even, as anyone who has ever heard the referencing of spinsterhood as that of spending life alone with one's many, many cats, the death knell of a pathetic and solitary life. Yet all these exaggerated and delusive perceptions of singlehood do not do justice to its merits: lifelong financial independence, the benefits of more free time to pursue personal interests, and reduced familial responsibilities. However, the very fact that singlehood is so perceived evinces how underrated it has become in society.

To be fair, singlehood has been given its fair share of good publicity, in the form of the swinging single's lifestyle extolled in numerous television programmes such as "Sex and the City", which has legions of fans worldwide who presumably celebrate certain aspects of such a lifestyle. Yet its depiction in the media, though seemingly positive on occasion, is often married to the notion of amorality, of purely sensuous pleasures or emotionless one-night-stands, a lack of virtue that can be remedied with a healthy serving of true love. This, ultimately undermines singlehood as a shallow and selfish state.

On the other hand, singlehood is often portrayed as a frontier of modernism, particularly for women. Vestiges of the ultra-feminist spirit from the decade of the bra-burning suffragettes still remain in popular culture, with staunchly single females clinging to ideals of financial independence and personal freedom. Many examples of vaunted singlehood spring to mind, such as Condoleezza Rice, former U.S. Secretary of State, Maya Angelou, accomplished poet and Elim Choo, successful entrepreneur of streetwear of Singapore's own chain, 77th Street. The prominence of such women – and even single men such as New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, George Clooney and Singapore's Dr. William Tan, inspirational wheelchair athlete – inevitably increases the cachet of singlehood, endearing people to a single life of dedicated and focused activism and passion.

However, these positive real-life examples of singlehood are often overshadowed by the power of the 'couple' and ensuing notions of family and children. Even though single women – much more so than men – have been known to adopt or bear children through in-vitro fertilisation, it is the care couples can provide children which is arguably the nucleus of society and which endears society to the notion of couplehood, rather than singlehood.

Singlehood is prominently underrated by the media. Romantic relationships are often used as the ideal and ultimate happy ending for all, and the singles who are cast by the wayside are actively encouraged to participate in the 'game' of love. Be it 'chick literature' such as Plum Sykes' "Bergdorf Blondes", about independent New York career women, "High Fidelity" the film, about a rock music-obsessed bachelor, or even the widely – and sometimes disastrously – hummed Jason Mraz ditty "I'm Yours", the main message is that: wait for it, wait for it – we all find love and, obviously all the good feelings in the world that spring from couplehood. This heavenly depiction of couplehood, with precious few examples of the joys of singlehood, is also embraced by society, as seen by the hordes of filmgoers conspiring to make "Titanic", a love story about how couplehood entranced a girl to remain single for the rest of her life, an all-time box office hit. The fact that these examples – of

the single individual finding love or of the desirability of a standard family nucleus with husband-wife-child in perfect harmony— are so pervasive in everything from Channel 8 family-themed blockbuster dramas such as “Holland V” to advertisements that often depict families or couples on fun vacations and the like, shows that singlehood is largely underrated.

Furthermore, these depictions in the media are largely reflective of what media bigwigs assume the audience – society – embraces, and hence are also reflective of underwhelming societal perceptions of singlehood.

The concept of family is also what drives the underrating of singlehood. Due to its high esteem in the eyes of society as the holy grail of a fulfilled and complete life, family is favoured before singlehood. Asian societies clearly extol couplehood due to the expected joys of raising children and, therefore, the singles at the dinner tables of Asian weddings are often mercilessly quizzed about their certain-to-be impending nuptials. The practice in Asian societies of couples no longer needing to receive red packets from their relatives, but rather giving them instead, is the unequivocal stamp of the superiority of couplehood over singlehood: the couples have transitioned from rootless youths to responsible, hardworking and financially stable people that have made a commitment to each other. Singlehood is also underrated in other Western societies. Despite the perception by many that America is the land of freedom and thus freedom of choice - in this case, to choose or not to choose marriage - its Presidents are married and often have children. Even in ultra-liberal France, Presidents are inevitably married, again with children. The ultimate message the President sends society is in his lifestyle and his life choices, and this prevalence of family in presidential palaces worldwide very visibly extols and encourages family and couplehood to society at large, therefore undermining singlehood. Again, this is reflective of societal standards as society often elects its leaders, particularly in democracies.

Thus it can be seen that singlehood is certainly underrated to a great extent. Though it might be underrated mostly due to the valuing of companionship and family in society, rather than on the basis of its demerits, it is still looked down upon as a way of life that evokes sympathy or even pity.

Furthermore, the ability of family to boost population growth, especially in developed countries which often suffer from aging and shrinking populations, causes governments to advertise it strongly as a preferred life choice. Thus, couplehood is further vaunted over singlehood, through the provision of dating services by the Singapore government and its advertisements to encourage marriage.

#### **Comments:**

***Eunice, this is an insightful essay written with much maturity and sensitivity to the issues. Original and cogent arguments. A delightful read! Essay could do with a proper conclusion though.***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 9

## Is political corruption an inevitable condition in any society?

Rachel Oon Siew Tjion | 10S03N

From the authoritarian dictatorship of Zimbabwe to partial democracies such as Thailand, the world has seen many political leaders face international condemnation or even exile by government forces due to political fraud. While the politics in itself is influenced by many factors—such as the government's vested interests as well as monetary funding that makes it susceptible to corruption—ultimately whether politics is corrupt is based on the ability of society to speak out against such influences before they escalate, corrupt the entire government, and harm society.

Politicians have huge authority and responsibility as the governing body of society. This bureaucracy with politicians at the highest rung of the social ladder leaves few checks and balances in place on politicians themselves. For example, the proliferation of ministerial expenses in the United Kingdom would have been kept under wraps if research had not been conducted by a tabloid company simply gathering material for an unrelated political article. As such, politicians' strong hold on power in society leaves little space for transparency. Thus, the need for privacy in terms of the management of public funds could easily be justified under the pretext of protecting national sovereignty, as seen by legislation that allows the nondisclosure of government investment companies such as Temasek Holdings in Singapore, which uses taxpayers' money to finance investment deals internationally. As such, politicians who have exclusive access to such funds are able to use them freely without the need for justification, perpetuating corruption.

Also, the concentration of power is a key cause of long-term political corruption in Third World countries, as well as in authoritarian regimes which simply work for their vested interests. With the governing body holding the legislative, executive and judiciary powers of the country, the government can exercise authority over monetary and welfare issues with little concern for its people. This is seen in Burma where, despite large amounts of international aid from nations such as the United States as well as neighbouring Asian countries, the Burmese junta restricted the access to such foreign aid on the grounds of national sovereignty. This left thousands of Burmese displaced and having to survive without food for weeks. Clearly, political bodies which serve solely their vested interests are aplenty in society. Despite international condemnation, political corruption is perpetuated whereby international bodies are unable to solve problems on the grounds of respecting national sovereignty. With despotic governments neglecting their people and international bodies unable to remedy the situation, political corruption is indeed an inevitable condition in authoritarian regimes.

While political corruption is exacerbated by systems of governance that do not respect the rights of the people in a free and fair election, corruption still exists in partial democracies such as Thailand. Such political fraud has a different cause: the pure greed of politicians. Despite the ideals of a government working solely for the interests of the people, politicians are ultimately human; their innate desires to satisfy individual private interests come before the larger community's needs. With the sudden onset of power, many new politicians are tempted by the availability of monetary resources to perpetuate private wealth. This is true from the money laundering scandal of Chen Shui Bian in Taiwan to the ousting of Thaksin Shinawatra in Thailand, who was alleged to have used public funds for private gain. As such, political corruption can be partly attributed to human nature, making it a largely inevitable affair.

Finally, one has to acknowledge that twenty-first century democratic politics has evolved from a simple ballot box to long, strung-out presidential campaigns that amass millions of dollars. With the American presidential campaigns of 2008 costing nearly US\$2 billion, politics has now been enshrouded by monetary influences. To handle the issue of funding, many politicians amass funding from large multinational corporations to which they are then bound should they be successfully voted into power. With close links to corporations, politicians are inclined to

make decisions favouring such companies and industries, even if such decisions are unfavourable for society as a whole. The Obama Administration's recent move to tax car tyres from China is a case in point; speculators have argued that the American tyre industry's close ties to the Administration were a factor in Obama's decision. Evidently, as politicians are tied to industries, politics is likely to be a tangle of connections between the governing body and related industries. This hints at corrupt practices swept under the carpet, away from the public eye, which may result in political corruption.

However, even as the nature of politics has tempted many governments into corruption, it must be noted that political transparency in democratic countries has helped negate the presence of political corruption. This is seen by the use of civil disobedience to protest political fraud and expose such fraud to the wider audience to ensure that justice is served should politics be found "dirty". Amidst increasing globalisation, even societies under despotic regimes are using alternative platforms to voice their opinions against dictators in their society, as seen by the civilian protest in Iran during the 2009 Presidential elections. These were uploaded onto social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook to encourage like-minded civilians to speak out against political corruption, hence allowing for the systemic potential to rid such regimes of corruption.

Also, despite the temptations of corruption, many governments have been able to keep away from such fraud, choosing instead to lead the country honestly and efficiently. A key example is the Singapore government, which is largely transparent in its economic policies and plans for the country, and, in so being, has successfully made the island into a developed nation and a viable economic hub lauded as an "economic miracle" by the international community. This despite the long rule of the People's Action Party (PAP), which is often criticised as an "authoritarian regime" by pro-democratic organisations. Thus, even with a stronghold of power in a country, politics can stay free of corruption.

In sum, the imbalance of powers issued to politicians gives a huge opportunity for abuse of authority, leading to corruption. While temptation is great, the levels of corruption in politics is largely influenced by the ability of society to speak out against such crimes as well as by the integrity of respective politicians in ensuring that their first duty is to serve the people. In essence, political corruption is present in society. It is possibly the most rampant form of crime, but with the right conditions to regulate such fraudulent activity, political corruption is preventable.

### **Comments:**

***Rachel, you have raised a few pertinent points backed by a good range of examples. Argument can be tighter in some paragraphs but this is a very competent essay on the whole. A very good job at answering a question that demands content knowledge and insight!***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 10

'Advertising has evolved over the years, but not for the better.'  
Do you agree?

Norman Maswari Aziz | 10A01B

Advertising is a key component of consumerism and has long been a tool utilised to attract public attention and publicise a whole range of goods, services and events. It has certainly evolved through the course of time from traditional print adverts in newspapers, magazines and flyers to innovative frontiers such as websites, mobile phones and email. At every turn there is bound to be an advertisement in some form or another. Advertising is an increasing trend that permeates our daily lives and a force that has a significant impact in the commercial world, and one often questions whether the change in advertising has been a desirable one.

Undoubtedly, the free market economies that make up the majority of the global market rely on consumerism. In all the forms of shopping, whether in the food and beverage industry or in the service industry, advertising plays a fundamental role in influencing a consumer's choices. With an increase in advertising, consumers are presented with a diverse variety of choices that represents a positive impact on the individual. The economy at large will also benefit to the extent that increased advertising will lead to increased consumption and thus a rise in economic growth. Many multi-national companies have thrived because of advertising, such as Nike, McDonalds and Microsoft. Internet pop-ups, videos on YouTube, and even advertising through text messages on mobile phones are but some of the ways advertising has evolved.

Convenience is another boon for the individual. With the advent of online shopping and advertising, people are now able to purchase goods and have them delivered to their doorstep. Despite the Dot-com bubble crash just a decade ago, several corporations have managed not only to survive but expand thanks to online advertising. Amazon and eBay are examples of how advertising has evolved to emphasise convenience rather than the quality of products.

Yet online consumption due to advertising is by no means a fully secure system that protects the interests of consumers. Many have fallen prey to advertisements that are mere gimmicks. Credit fraud has been on the rise in Singapore for the past two decades and the emergence of white-collar crimes can be, at least in part, attributed to the evolution of advertising into a persuasive rhetoric that seems barely grounded in truth.

Even without the severity of fraud and scams, the amount of truth that exists in advertisements in general is worth debating. It comes as no surprise that companies and businesses, being increasingly reliant on advertising to gain publicity and revenue, exaggerate aspects of their products and services. Slimming products, for instance, are portrayed as far more effective than they truly are. Complaints against untruthful and unreliable advertisements have only increased over the years and organisations like the Consumer's Association in Singapore have been set up to protect the individual's interests. Blacklisting companies for false claims in advertising that have resulted in damage to consumers was an unnecessary practice when advertising first began. While this certainly is not a change that is desirable and advertising in itself has not thus been improved, the public at large is now more perceptive with regard to advertisements. Many people recognise that advertising cannot be trusted at face value and make discerning judgements on the information received – an unexpected but positive impact of the evolution of advertising.

Health campaigns have also benefited greatly from the increase in advertising avenues. As Susan Lui, head of the Public Education department of the Singapore Cancer Society, has expressed, health campaigns such as those for the pap smear test have been more effective because of increased advertising. People can be reached not simply through traditional televised commercials or printed advertisements, but also through the new media of Internet advertising and websites.



The recent 'Z-spot' test for the eyes has also been well-received by the public because of advertising on public transportation.

Yet ultimately one has to recognise that advertising is merely a tool. Regardless of whether it has evolved for the better in terms of effectiveness and impact, the purpose of advertising plays a bigger role in determining the extent to which advertising as a whole has evolved for the better. What was previously an industry and tool utilised exclusively by companies with commercial interests is now used by social welfare groups, government organisations, youth activists and even conservation groups. Be it advertising for monetary donations and fund-raising drives or publicity for public events and campaigns, advertising in general is becoming a more accessible tool used by people seeking to benefit society. The recently held island-wide race for the 'Yellow Ribbon' campaign in support of rehabilitating ex-convicts back into society was a great success in terms of turnout. Through widespread advertisements that even included mass email to companies by the organisers, a certain segment of society has benefited.

Furthermore, the extent to which advertising has evolved varies from country to country. While commercialised and industrialised countries like the US, the UK and Singapore have seen an increase in volume and types of advertising and also a change in its purpose, the same cannot be said for less developed countries. Perhaps the lack of an 'evolutionary' process in such countries can be said to be a negative impact in itself, as those countries are unable to achieve increased consumerism and the aforementioned positive social welfare.

Tension seems to exist between the commercial use of advertising that is portrayed to be unscrupulous and self-serving, and its use for utilitarian ideals. Projecting current trends, advertising may evolve to an even greater balance between the two as opposed to profit-making that currently dominates the advertising scene. Yet one cannot expect the complete removal of either in the future. A country whose advertising industry is dominated by public campaigns or movements would surely suffer economically.

In conclusion, advertising has evolved for the better and I disagree with the given statement. However, a betterment of society would ultimately rest in a balance of advertising for commercial interests and for social welfare – which in my opinion is the direction for the evolution of advertising in the future. After all, "in medio stat virtus" – in moderation stands virtue.

### **Comments:**

***Norman, you have raised a number of pertinent points in this essay. A competent effort which has adopted a balanced approach to the question. Organisation and development of arguments can be improved. Thesis must be presented in the introduction. Good job nevertheless!***

## GP Promotion Examination 2009

## essay 11

**'With economic development comes greater equality in a country.'**  
**To what extent do you agree with this statement?**

Eugene Yap Ming Yap | 10S03C

As Johan Norberg proposes in his documentary "Globalisation is Good", economic development today is arguably the embracing of globalisation to increase the financial status of the country as a whole. In doing so people's standards of living improve and there is an increase in enterprise and perhaps even civic society. As much as economic development promises equality in terms of fair opportunities, equal rights and a new platform for engagement, some contend that it widens the gap between the rich and poor and also invites exploitation. Perhaps then it is the stage of economic development that determines the rise of equality in a country.

Detractors may argue, first and foremost, that economic development can result in the widening of the gap between the rich and the poor and, in doing so, disrupts social conditions further, such that social and economic equality is even harder to attain. The economic development we refer to here is perhaps the rise of global trade in developing countries. Development in India, for example, has been rapid, especially in its technological sector. However, only 2% of its population finds itself associated with this booming industry while the rest is "high-tech illiterate". In this case economic development clearly does not bring about equality in society but merely exacerbates inequality by allowing the technological "elites" to benefit on an even larger scale. The devaluation of the African currencies in 1994 further proves this, as the move to increase the price of a domestic product, cotton, only benefitted the middleman rather than the farmers themselves. In such developing countries, economic development in global trade probably leads to more inequality in income and social conditions.

Moreover, the issue of exploitation has been debated over for an extremely long time, since the rise of globalisation. Economic development in many places, like Africa, is essentially a move to be incorporated into the global sphere and this invites multinational corporations (MNCs). While extreme poverty has since been reduced from 1.5 billion to 1.1 billion, we have not seen the rise of a middle class in countries in Africa, which is 4.7% short of the annual GDP increase required for 55 years to sustain a middle class. The reason is that people are paid low wages by many MNCs. While some, like Nike in Vietnam, do pay eight times more than a usual job, a job with Nike does not provide sustainable development as most of the profits go to Nike. Thus, in the long term, people are not able to gain economic and social equality. In addition, presently 200 million children in developing countries are working instead of studying, 12 million of whom are forced to do so. Economic development hence deprives children of an opportunity for education. Is this, then, an equality of opportunities?

While the above examples are of developing countries which may not have gained more equality via economic development, it would be right to say that it is due to the stage of development they are in. In a nutshell, it is a transition stage, as there are cases when equality in a country is enhanced via economic development.

The first form of equality which can be achieved via economic development is the presence of equal opportunities. Thomas Friedman contends in his book, "The World is Flat", that what determines a country's prospects today is more talent than its geography. True enough, in many countries, like Malawi, we see the rise of education. In Taiwan we see how education is used to create opportunities by channeling knowledge into innovation and enterprise with companies such as Acer. Thus far, the move from labour-intensive work to intellectual jobs, which promise higher returns for economic development, has encouraged meritocracy where education is a step toward equality. With economic development, more funds can also be channeled to state education and movements such as "Equal Education" can gain momentum in impoverished nations and create equal opportunities for economic development.

Another product of economic development is equality in terms of rights. In the cross-border exchanges of economic trading, ideas spread and flourish in areas such as the media. Singapore, for example, has seen a move towards greater liberalism, as can be seen by challenges to laws such as section 377A. This can be attributed to the influence of global forces which Singapore is exposed to via cross-border exchanges enhanced by economic development. Here we see the rise of equality of rights in a nation. With economic development today, political economists like Francis Fukuyama also speak of the liberation of women as increasing economic development. The case of the tortured Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison is also evidence of how the media has evolved with economic development to speak of equal rights, especially human rights.

Economic development also brings about a new platform for engagement that stimulates equality. The economic development of nations like the US and Japan has allowed them to contribute to the UN in cases like the Monterrey Protocol to aid countries in diminishing the gap between rich and poor. Economic development can thus bring countries together to help other countries eradicate inequality by influencing resources and ideology.

Overall, it would be an over-generalisation to say that economic development comes with gender equality in a country. Yet if we were to look at the issue from a long-term view, we can ascertain that, essentially, the present drawbacks can be transition stages when the government is still not ready to evolve in tandem with economic progress, as there is sufficient evidence for other more developed countries where equality has certainly been enhanced.

**Comments:**

***Eugene, I like your thesis and approach to the question. A refreshing look at the issues presented in the question. Good job!***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

essay 1

**“City life is becoming increasingly unattractive today.”  
What is your opinion?**

Gan Guo Wei | 09A03B

It seems inconceivable that despite the multitude of global cities that boast a wide range of amenities, facilities and opportunities, more and more people are eschewing cities in favour of the countryside. The distribution of people within the city also highlights the fact that the more affluent social classes tend to cluster near the outskirts of the city. There seems to be an inherent desire to escape from urban areas. This subtle rejection of the urban lifestyle may well be an indication that city life is becoming increasingly unattractive today.

The traditional mindset is that cities, adorned with beautiful skyscrapers and modern technology, provide a wealth of economic opportunities. People living in rural areas were often entranced by the prospect of making it in the big city, which promised an increased standard of living. As time went by, rural-urban migration soon began growing at an increasingly unsustainable rate. The migrants became disillusioned, and more importantly, short of cash. Hence, they had no choice but to settle down in the inner city, doing work in the informal sector. It is remarkable that nowadays, the word “city” seems to carry so many negative connotations. For one thing, the inner city decay that plagues most developed cities is an unsightly phenomenon which discourages people from living in the city. Slums and squatter settlements have sprung up in these areas, sully the overall image of the city. These makeshift dwellings are often entrenched in a state of squalor and filth. There is a high level of congestion, and the lack of amenities and proper hygiene means diseases can be easily transmitted. For example, Skid Row in Los Angeles is an archetypal representation of inner city decay. To top it off, such areas face social problems and are hubs for criminal activity. Due to high levels of urbanisation, the attraction of the city has waned. There is a growing realisation of the demerits of city life.

Cities such as Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok are often characterised by urban sprawl, the uncontrolled horizontal expansion of the city via housing and transport routes. Poor urban planning has led to buildings being clustered together in a haphazard and crowded pattern. The aesthetic appeal of such cities is also questionable. For instance, the skyline of Kuala Lumpur is an array of monolithic architecture. High levels of congestion on the roads has led to an accordingly high level of pollution. Undoubtedly, no one likes to live in a place where smog and exhaust fumes are the norm as opposed to clean, fresh air. In some cities in China, the spread of smog has even led to near zero visibility. However, in today’s modern world, industries can scarcely afford to rest on their laurels. They require their employees to work hard every day. Employees in the big city must understand that they have no choice but to sink into the “hustle and bustle” lifestyle. Commuting to work is a daily chore, regardless of whether one is stuck in a traffic jam, or cramped within crowded train compartments. This scenario does indeed put off a lot of potential rural-urban migrants.

Besides the issues of congestion, pollution and inner-city decay, there is also the matter of cost to consider. It is notoriously expensive to stay in the big cities of the world. Hotels in New York and Tokyo charge exorbitant fees that can easily burn holes in the pockets of consumers. Merely renting an apartment in New York can be a severe strain on one’s finances. A basic meal in a diner could be grossly overpriced. In Singapore, certain hotels charge up to five dollars per hour for parking fees. In a bid to lower congestion on the roads, Singapore has also introduced electronic road pricing. Using the Pan-Island Expressway during the peak hour periods may incur small amounts of money such as one dollar per day, but it all adds up eventually. Kuala Lumpur makes use of toll booths scattered intermittently along its main roads, forcing people to fork out the money or to contemplate the unthinkable notion of utilising an inefficient public transport system.

The disadvantages of living in the big city are clear. However, the governments of various countries

have made a concerted effort to ensure city life remains a viable prospect, rather than an unattractive option. In the US, the inner city of New York has been cleaned up to some extent through the concept of urban renewal. In the 1990s, it was not uncommon to see adult shops that sold pornography lining the streets. However, these shops were destroyed to make way for the construction of theatres. In the United Kingdom, Hulme in Manchester has also undergone a radical makeover. The closure of manufacturing industries had initially spawned an area of disuse and decay. However, after the British government's efforts to gentrify the area, it has now turned into a series of quaint loft apartments, which are designed to attract yuppies (young middle-income professionals). This has not only helped to counter the decentralisation process, it has also helped to reurbanise the city. City life has also received an endorsement of approval by the Singapore government. The government has enacted plans to turn the city into a twenty-four hour city, as can be seen by the redevelopment of Clarke Quay and the unique itinerant markets. These plans help to stem the loss of people from the city areas, and make city life more attractive in terms of leisure, entertainment as well as living conditions.

Certain places such as the UK and Singapore have also attempted to incorporate some aspects of Ebenezer Howard's concept of a "Green City" into their own urban planning. Singapore is renowned for its greenery and cleanliness, which can be attributed to the use of "green space", greenery which is planted harmoniously around buildings. In the UK, belts of greenery (Green Belts) are used to restrict urban sprawl, reduce pollution and beautify the surroundings. In doing so, the aesthetic appeal of the cities is heightened and pollution is countered, creating more reasons to live in the city. Slums have also been "cleaned up" through the use of New Town development. For instance, the UK introduced Milton Keynes, a spatially separate town that is characterised by a grid-like structure, to relocate squatters. It was a proven success and helped alleviate the problems of inner city living.

However, not all cities have enacted such policies in a bid to make themselves more attractive. Cities in China are still burdened by high rates of pollution, while the slums in India are certainly extensive. Also, even the implementation of such policies cannot eliminate the other problems that people have with city life. The city is, and always will be, a place of fast-paced living. It is characterised by noise and bright lights, and this may be undesirable for many. After all, living away from the city does have its own perks and benefits, such as tranquility.

In conclusion, in spite of the re-urbanisation policies utilised by so many governments, it is true to say that city life is becoming increasingly unattractive today due to its inherent negative connotations as well as the changing preferences of a modern society.

### **Comments:**

***This is a very competent piece with a good attempt at balance and a range of examples. To bring your analysis further, you could consider the problem of alienation and loneliness that many feel in cities despite being in close proximity with others.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 2

**“City life is becoming increasingly unattractive today.”  
What is your opinion?**

Wong Ying Xuan Kelly | 09S03L

The grass on the other side of the pasture always appears to be greener. For the past few decades, people in developed countries have moved from agrarian societies to the cities in search of better prospects, after which they proceeded to turn the cities into bustling congregations with a continuous influx of people and also a continuous advancement in standards of living. Yet this has led to discontentment once again, with many shunning city life to go back to rural or suburban areas. However, having lived in an island-city all my life, I do feel that, contrary to what some may say, city life is actually becoming more enticing and exciting, rather than increasingly unattractive.

If asked what displeases city-dwellers about their living conditions, many complaints are often brought up—the stress due to the increasingly fast pace of life, the over-crowding, the pollution, and the absence of interpersonal relationships. Of course, some of these complaints are justified. For example, greater pollution is to be expected in cities due to the greater number of vehicles and the consequent road congestion. However, many of the problems plaguing city-dwellers stem from the very fact that the attractiveness of city-life has encouraged hordes of people to flock to cities. The sheer number of people living in a limited area would result in over-crowding and pollution. The stress of living in the city is mostly due to the profile of jobs available in the cities—generally, people work in offices where they are expected to meet tight deadlines and respond to the dynamic economic, political and societal changes around them. However, it is also due to these jobs that many people earn much more in the cities and lead better lives, at least in terms of material well-being. It is usually a personal choice, and cannot be blamed on the increasing unattractiveness of city life. In addition, the claim about the absence of interpersonal relationships in cities is unjustified. The openness of people depends very much on their culture. For example, Americans seem to be more gregarious compared to Asians, who are perceived to be more reserved. This is not something that merely differs from city to rural living, and is therefore an unjustified complaint. Hence, the claim that city life is becoming increasingly unattractive today is not entirely true. Instead, as a country progresses and develops, living in the city provides even more benefits and attractions for the people living there.

City living is becoming increasingly attractive due to the security it provides its citizens. In the city, there are often police stations and police patrol groups which are constantly on alert for misbehaviour and are generally responsive to calls for help. In rural areas, families generally live far apart. Should a crisis occur, neighbours are located a few kilometers away, usually inaccessible by foot, and police stations are even farther away. This often makes it almost impossible to seek help in rural areas, compared to the high levels of security in city areas. Furthermore, cities are often brightly-lit, whether from street lighting or buildings, and this makes it comparatively safer to move around when it is dark. Critics may argue that the higher incidence of crime in cities negates the benefits of the aforementioned security. However, the higher incidence of crime is merely proportional to the larger population size in the city. It would be perhaps more fair to say that both the city and other suburban or rural areas have relatively the same crime rates, based on their population densities. Furthermore, as seen in Singapore, where the population density is high, it is possible, and perhaps easier, to keep crime rates low in city areas compared to rural regions where crime is less easy to track. Therefore, the increasing safety of living in many city areas has made city-living even more attractive in recent years.

Another attraction of city life is the closer proximity to medical institutions, which has been a major factor in attracting people to move to urban areas. Often, medical institutions are much better equipped and have a larger amount of trained personnel to deal with a wider variety of medical problems. The proximity to research institutes in the city allows hospitals to keep updated with the most recent medical technology and many patients benefit from the precise treatment administered to

them. Compared with hospitals in suburban and rural areas, which are often smaller and less well-equipped, city hospitals are better able to deal with emergencies which require specialised medical attention. This proximity to medical institutions has led to more timely treatment of illnesses and has contributed greatly to longer life expectancies and lower infant mortality rates in the city as compared to rural areas. Therefore, better healthcare facilities, and also higher levels of security, have allowed many city-dwellers to be more at ease knowing that help is around the corner when they require it. This enables them to focus on and better enjoy the other pleasures of living in the city and makes city living even more attractive today.

It is rather absurd, in my opinion, to say that city life is becoming increasingly unattractive today, due to the many improvements and changes that are making cities even more interesting to live in. There is a general consensus that cities have many more facilities and attractions than other areas in a country. In terms of entertainment, for instance, city dwellers usually have the options of sports facilities, movies, shopping centres, art exhibitions and so on. Due to the lack of infrastructure in many rural areas, all these forms of entertainment would be minimal, if not unavailable. The attractions in the city, on the other hand, are becoming more advanced and interesting. Take movies as an example: from black-and-white mime films which have evolved to colour, action-packed movies with digital animation and even the current three-dimensional movies! To compete with other cities, governments continuously come up with new innovations to make their cities even more attractive places for tourists. Singapore, for example, decided to build two Integrated Resorts to attract tourists looking for opportunities to gamble, while Malaysia recently started construction on a huge shopping belt in Johor. Opponents may say that such entertainment is superfluous and that people will eventually get bored of it. Yet it is precisely due to such “boredom” that avenues of entertainment are being constantly updated—it is nearly impossible to be bored while living in the city.

Finally, city life is made more attractive by increasing diversity. Due to globalisation, there is a freer movement of people between countries and cities are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan. The convergence of various cultures in many cities makes them more vibrant and colourful places to live. Whoever said that there was a lack of interpersonal relationships in the city probably never experienced the interactions between people of different backgrounds and cultures in the city. The different characteristics of various cultures rub off on each other in the interactions between people, and positive influences can be gained from interacting with people outside one’s typical social group. Although I must concede that bad influences are inevitable, the general evolution of a city due to the influx of foreigners is often seen as a positive one. Diversity in the city allows people to become more tolerant. This increases the cohesiveness of the city and makes it even more attractive to outsiders as well as city-dwellers, themselves.

In conclusion, to say that city life is becoming increasingly unattractive today would probably be a case of misunderstanding or lack of information. With globalisation and improvements in the standard of living of people in the city, the city is becoming an increasingly attractive place to live, play and work. Even now, in developing countries, there are extremely high levels of rural-urban migration, such as in Calcutta. This shows that life in the city is still perceived to have better opportunities and standards of living and to be very, very attractive.

### **Comments:**

***You could use more real-life examples beyond Singapore. Still, this is generally a very convincingly argued response.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 3

"Education heightens inequality." Discuss.

See Xin Ying | 09S03G

In today's world, education has taken on greater significance, particularly as our global economy continues in its metamorphosis into a knowledge-based one. All over the world, both politicians and the common man on the street have displayed their unrelenting enthusiasm in jumping on the bandwagon that is education. More often than not, education has also been lauded by world leaders as the single most important solution to the multitudes of problems we face as a global community. Yet this rousing message of education as a tool of empowerment and as the ultimate fix to problems that pervade our economic, political and social realms has been met with an increasingly loud chorus of dissenting voices in recent years. Critics have lambasted education for perpetuating inequality both within and between societies and asserted that it has been largely responsible for polarising the world. However, how far can this yawning chasm between the haves and the have-nots be attributed to the education that has been championed as the source of so much of our world's progress? It is my view that the heightened inequality that confronts us today is not the result of our fervent pursuit of education. Rather, it is ineffective educational policy measures that are most culpable. The potential that lies in education is vast and in order to harness this potential to its best use, these policies should be evaluated and reformed.

It is not difficult to see why detractors feel education heightens inequality. In our world, premium education appears to always be associated with hefty price tags. This is something that has entrenched itself in our system of education for as long as it has existed. Those who are wealthy are often the ones who end up acquiring the best education, which would then propel them further in the corporate rat race. This phenomenon is clearly evident in the American education system. For a country that prides itself on its values of equal opportunity for all, this may come as a surprise, but it is no less real. Wealthy parents in the United States often spare no expense in securing the best school placements for their adolescent children, and parents stop at virtually nothing to ensure that their children wind up with a placement in the elite Ivy League colleges where one's prospects upon graduation are nothing short of stellar. This has spawned the sprouting of dozens of elementary and middle schools promising to be the fast track to the Ivy League - super highways that would springboard their students into Ivy League institutions. There is, however, a catch, and the fact that these elite institutions of learning are notoriously expensive also serves as an effective deterrent to young and promising Ivy-League aspirants whose parents do not belong to the upper echelons of society. While one may dismiss this as an isolated example, the very same phenomenon is playing out, albeit to a lesser degree, in other societies as well. In South Korea, for instance, wealthy parents often spend a fortune sending their children to various tuition courses to help them cope with school. On the other side of the fence, those whose parents cannot afford this substantial additional expense are left to cope on their own or to languish in the dust. These examples clearly illuminate the idea that the very education we bank on to reduce inequality may actually reinforce a measure of inequality that we have inherited in the first place. Those who are fortunate enough to get a premium education or the help that they need by virtue of the fact that they were born into wealthy families are by and large more likely to succeed in life, armed with the good education that they have received, while those who are not as privileged are not as likely to succeed. In this respect, education can be seen as heightening inequality.

However, upon closer examination of this strand of argument, it is revealed that it is not education that has failed us, but, rather, the administration of education. What is present in many of our education systems worldwide is systematic discrimination from within, and it is this inherent bias towards those who already have more that has made our education system so strongly polarising. For education to truly bridge the gap between the different segments of society, equal opportunity needs to be a cornerstone of our education policy, and it is this fundamental tenet of a sound education system



that is missing from our policy measures. There is much evidence as to what breaking down such systematic discrimination can do. We see a figure of inspiration in Ruby Bridges, an African-American woman who rose up and became successful amidst racial discrimination policies that prevented her from attending better-equipped public schools that, in her era, were meant exclusively for white students. Her parents' outrage at the poor facilities made available to black students and subsequent insistence that she be educated in the all-white public schools may have earned her the ire of the white community of that era, but it has also shown how imperative it is that these existential barriers to equal opportunity be broken down completely for education to work. More help needs to be extended to those who need it.

Another strand of argument that critics of education subscribe to is that education and the meritocratic system that it embodies may actually promote and intensify inequality. The way the education system appears to reward only those who are gifted seems to reinforce this, as it is often only those who prove themselves to be the *crème de la crème* who are rewarded, while those who are less academically inclined are often relegated to the sidelines, both in terms of their education and career opportunities. A classic example to illustrate this argument is one that is close to home - the Singaporean education. Singapore's education system seems to be obsessed with the elite group, with numerous scholarship and training opportunities targeted exclusively at this group of people whom the government has identified as the next generation of leaders that will propel Singapore to greater heights. Yet even this is slowly but surely changing, and the Singapore government is increasingly cognizant of the need to promote a diversified education that rewards talent in other fields besides academia. This, I feel is a step in the right direction, for it is what education should fundamentally be about. Education that is slanted to provide outlets only for those who are academically inclined is destined to be one that propagates inequality. It is education as multi-faceted as the one Singapore is actively trying to promote that is truly definitive of an education that bridges society. If an education is one that allows individuals to shine in their respective fields of talent, that is the hallmark of a truly enlightened society and education system.

Thus, in conclusion, education is an inherently equal thing. It would be a pity for us to shun it for reinforcing inequality in our lives, for it is an engine of vast potential that can potentially bridge divides if it is administered with propriety, on the principles of equal opportunity and the rewarding of talents in diverse fields.

### **Comments:**

***There is maturity of thought and the discussion is thoroughly engaging. Good knowledge of the topic. Personal voice is clearly shown as well. Well done, Xin Ying!***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 4

"Education heightens inequality." Discuss.

Ho Jiayun | 09A01A

Education equips the individual with technical and cognitive skills; it enlarges the mind through knowledge. Many countries in the world today advocate widespread education as a significant tool for development. Yet does education breed greater inequality as opposed to a more equal share of the economic and social pie that development seeks? Indeed education, by accentuating differences in intellect and skill, can generate a higher degree of inequality in terms of outcomes. Nonetheless, if equal opportunities are to be regarded as desirable insofar as they respect the rights of every individual, education can be liberating and can prepare the individual and society to take hold of their rights and thereby grant greater access to equal opportunities.

From the outset, it appears that education increases inequality within a society because the highly educated tend to be an exclusive minority and are more likely to achieve financial success than those lower down the social ladder. Education thus runs contrary to what Nietzsche termed slave morality, which is an equality of outcomes as the weaker in society constrain the stronger, depriving them from exercising their abilities to full potential. With education, the relatively more intelligent are given the chance to break away from the mediocrity of the masses by moving into elite schools and mingling with more enlightened minds. Hence, education worsens inequality by creating a social stratum of its own among the educated alone. A glance at the upper middle class folk that comprise Singapore's parliament will reveal that it is an exclusive club. For all its claims about being able to empathise with the less well-off in society, the majority of its members hail from middle class backgrounds and have First-class Honours degrees to their names. Moreover, the educated will continue to ensure their offspring are likewise educated in similarly elite institutions; this cultivates a form of in-breeding, which perpetuates the exclusivity of the elite. Hence, by widening the gap in abilities between the highly educated and the rest of society, education seems to generate social stratification, with the more educated achieving greater economic and social success than their peers, thereby heightening the inequality in society.

Furthermore, education may inadvertently lock people from different backgrounds into social grids they are unable to break out of. In this sense, education may even perpetuate an inequality of opportunities because many opportunities for personal success in life tend to be contingent on one's education earlier in life. Here we may distinguish between different forms of education. In Singapore, for instance, different institutions specialise in a primarily academic, or else vocational and technical education. Those educated in academic institutions are bred to think of themselves as leaders of the next age, as people who can change the world with their skills, knowledge and voices. They are taught to think for themselves and be aware of the world around them. Almost naturally, these children and youth go on to head financial institutions, multi-national companies, and even nations. Conversely, those who may fail academically early on in life are channelled into vocational training institutions, education centres that had been originally set up not for teaching and inspiring of minds, but for the building of a skilled workforce that could bolster Singapore's economic growth. Catering to select industries, these students are taught technical skills they can put to practical use, a markedly different kind of education from that in more academic institutions. Then, almost naturally as well, many of them enter the industries as a gear in the production line. Educational stratification hence fosters social inequality later in life. A Yale University professor even noted a disparity within the higher education institutions in the US, whereby those in state universities tended to be treated and bred to think as though they were bureaucratic administrators, not leaders of the next generation. Thus, by limiting the opportunities faced by some, education may well lead to more inequality as people are trapped, leading the kind of lives they were taught to lead, whether this means reaching their full potential or not.

However, in spite of the flaws in its workings within a society, education remains more desirable than a lack of education as a tool for generating greater equality worldwide. As people learn technical and cognitive skills, they are better equipped to gain access to productive employment. For society as a whole, this elevates living standards, closing the gap between the rich and the poor. Japan, one of the most developed nations now, had its rapid economic transformation premised upon widespread access to education during the Meiji Restoration. Now on par with many Western nations, Japan had emphasised there was to be no illiterate person in any family. Likewise, since instituting compulsory primary education in the 1980s, China has seen millions of rural poor taking advantage of the employment opportunities opened by China's liberalisation, allowing the Chinese to acquire better

standards of living, and equalising China's living standards with the rest of the world's to a greater degree. Beyond economic equality, education can also allow the individual to seek equality where previously people were marginalised. In African nations, countless women remain oppressed by males in society partly because of their illiteracy; they are unable to even read the books that stipulate what rights they as women are entitled to, much less exercise their rights. The education of women can allow women greater equality with men in the household as they begin to advance their interests in decision making, which can in turn generate more economic equality by removing the pressures of overly large families that tend to result when women are unable to enact a limit on procreation. In Kerala in India, for instance, fertility rates are a fifth lower than in other states, to a significant extent due to female education. Thus, education can allow people to move into gainful employment and also exercise their rights, leading to greater equality in terms of economic standards and gender (or minority rights).

Moreover, education remains a vital prerequisite for meaningful participation in the political system, whereby the populace may enjoy equal opportunities in having a stake in the system that governs it. For instance, the uneducated rural poor in Burma throughout the 1920s and 1930s were treated merely as millenarian disturbances to political affairs, and, being uneducated, they themselves condemned their chances to equal political treatment by boycotting the Diarchy elections granted by the British colonists in the 1920s because they failed to see its constitutional significance. To take hold of equal political opportunities and vote for whomsoever best advances one's interests in the state, one needs to be sufficiently educated to understand both the value of the political system as well as the significance of the policies that political candidates are proposing. Furthermore, if totalitarian rule may be deemed the antithesis to equality because it concentrates power, opportunities and often wealth in the hands of one individual, then education may be said to heighten equality because of its links to increasing pressure for democratisation across the globe. Asian countries have in the past decades seen pro-democracy uprisings by students educated in Western ideals of liberty and democracy, pitting themselves against more authoritarian elements in incumbent governments, as in Thailand in the 1970s and even Burma in 1988. Therefore, education, far from heightening inequality, may lead to greater equality in political participation and rights by making the educated aware of desirable concepts such as freedom and decentralised rule.

Finally, the education of some – those more privileged, perhaps – can help to remove inequality to some degree for others, as the educated seek change in their societies or globally and try to improve the lives of those at the bottom of the social ladder. Being educated, or even being in an exclusive class of the Educated, need not mean the fruits of such fine education are lavished only upon individualistic pursuits. Social entrepreneurs like Muhammad Yunus can use their knowledge to develop new schemes such as microcredit to alleviate poverty, thereby enhancing equality. Others have used their financial privileges to good effect, such as the Pratichi Trust Fund set up by Amartya Sen, using his Nobel Prize money, to help the poor gain access to education and basic amenities. The developed world, well-informed of global issues due to its education, formulated the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, which aim to alleviate poverty through developmental measures. This has been accompanied by worldwide movements to Stand Up Take Action against Poverty and Inequality in many developed countries in recent years, fervently advocated by student groups – people who have access to better education. Hence, education can indirectly aid the pursuit of greater equality as the educated become the voice for the poor and uneducated – until they acquire a voice of their own.

In conclusion, the claim that education heightens inequality is, for the most part, an ignorant one. While this may appear to be the case when we compare the outcomes in life faced by the relatively more educated to the relatively less educated, that comparison overlooks the value of an equal access to the opportunities to achieve those outcomes in the first place. Moreover, it may be said that ignorance, illiteracy and innumeracy do more to heighten inequality than education might, because these are forms of insecurity on their own and make one vulnerable to unequal treatment and oppression by others, without any route to speak out against such treatment. Therefore, rather than heightening inequality, education can help to alleviate it, by giving people access to opportunities they might otherwise have been deprived of.

### **Comments:**

***Excellent work! Your essay is well-explained, intelligently written, and very analytical. Do consider how else education can lead to inequality (or rather, how the lack of access to it does).***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

essay 5

**“Science never solves a problem without creating ten more.”  
(George Bernard Shaw) Comment.**

Grace Tan Shiting | 09S03G

In recent decades, society has placed increasing emphasis on science and its potent ability to solve many of the world's most pressing global issues, such as global warming and health problems. Governments are devoting greater amounts of scarce resources to scientific research in the hopes of developing solutions to problems so as to benefit mankind and improve the quality of life for both present and future generations. However, it is precisely because of science's potency that allows it to be both beneficial as well as detrimental to society's welfare, sparking off remarks from critics that science can never solve a problem without creating more. In my opinion, I feel that it is grossly unfair to lay the blame on science for causing man's problems. After all, science is merely a tool and man the agent, thus the issues that arise from the use of science are largely due to mankind's inability to harness science's benefits.

One area in which science has attempted to solve problems and in turn created more is energy. Rapidly depleting world supplies of fossil fuels (estimated to run out by 2040) and the dangers of global warming have alerted countries to the need to develop alternative sources of cleaner energy so as to ease reliance on traditional energy sources as well as reverse the trend of climate change. Nuclear energy has been touted as the answer to our problem of dwindling energy supplies and global warming due to its high efficiency rate of about 80% as well as its non-polluting by-products. Sceptics, however, claim that nuclear energy poses its own set of problems, which include dangerous radioactive waste that can result in harmful mutations to people if they are exposed to radiation. Not only that, the research into and development of nuclear weaponry poses a threat to other nations and puts at risk the already fragile global peace and cooperation.

However, it is worthwhile to note that the arguments proposed by opponents of the use of nuclear technology arise due to society's inability to control and regulate the side-effects and thus are not problems created by science itself. Rather, rogue nations like North Korea have chosen to wield this technology for their own selfish interests, disregarding the wishes of other countries and international organisations like the UN to disable their nuclear facilities. The radioactive waste and radiation problems similarly raised by opponents of nuclear technology are also not problems created by science per se, as proper management of the radioactive waste in large steel-enforced containers and adherence to proper protocol for the handling of nuclear technology greatly minimises the exposure of workers to radiation and significantly reduces the risk of explosions, such as that of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island, from occurring once more. Thus, with strict guidelines and regulations in place to minimise the side effects, the use of science to solve the problem of energy can be possible without the creation of new ones.

Another field in which dissidents claim that science has caused more problems than benefits for society is in telecommunications. Critics claim that the huge advancements made in telecommunications, particularly with the advent of the World Wide Web, have opened up a host of problems that society has to grapple with. Their arguments include the increasing loss of an individual's right to privacy and the rise of new crimes such as cyber-bullying and identity theft. Nevertheless, one has to consider if these problems created are the work of science or man himself. Crime has been a fixture in society since the dawn of civilisation and to claim that the invention of the Internet is to blame for the rise in cyber crimes is grossly unfair since Man is the one who is misusing the Internet to advance his own agenda. Cyber crimes are thus a product of the evolution of crime, moving from the streets to the Internet and not the result of science. The issue of satellites and various other spying technologies used by governmental agencies for their clandestine spying operations may have led to a loss of one's privacy. However, when these operations are done in the name of national security and are carried out for the purpose of protecting civilian lives, which is particularly important due to the rise of terrorism in the twenty-first century, then maybe the sacrifice of several of the individual's rights is not

a problem since lives are being saved when governments are able to prevent terrorist attacks from taking place.

In conclusion, while it seems that science is unable to solve a problem without creating more for society, this has been proven untrue as the problems created due to the use of science are almost always the work of Man. Science is Man's tool, capable of being wielded for good or harm, therefore the onus is on man to be able to use science in a way that maximises its benefits and minimises the costs. Both governments and individuals have roles to play in order to ensure that science is harnessed for good and this can be achieved through the implementation of a system of checks and balances. Regulatory boards can be set up to monitor the use of science and spot flaws or problems that ensue so that these issues can be remedied before they escalate. Only when Man is able to utilise science's potential and ability effectively can our problems be solved without the creation of new ones.

**Comments:**

***A comprehensive and fluent essay. It is engaging with the right amount of discussion.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 6

**“Science never solves a problem without creating ten more.”  
(George Bernard Shaw) Comment.**

Lee Chuan Yaw | 09S03E

It is perhaps easy to understand why the modern man fears for his existence. We live in a world filled with nuclear giants and ethical infants where viruses know no international boundaries, where vulnerability is our new reality. Such treacherous times have caused critics and politicians alike to single out a convenient scapegoat – science. Claims that science never provides resolutions without creating even more problems are starting to sound like a broken gramophone record, and while conceivable science seems to be the much-maligned, unfairly blamed concept, it cannot be denied in the face of recent evidence that there is more than a kernel of truth in that statement. Science, though capable of solving a multitude of today's problems, forces us to examine ourselves morally, and its enigmatic nature coupled with its destructive potential leaves us no choice but to question its seeming nature as the solution to all our troubles.

Firstly, solutions borne from science are often ethically suspect, and are responsible for a variety of moral ramifications. Take for example the heavily-debated use of embryonic stem cells and parthenogenesis that has been hailed as the miracle treatment for a wide range of afflictions including cancer, dementia, and even organ failure. While seemingly solving the issue of our fragile existence, there has been a moral outcry due to the use of human eggs for such treatments. Doctors have been forced into a dilemma as to whether the sanctity of an unborn life should be valued above saving an existing one. Thus, one could bear witness to how the amoral nature of science and its relative appearance of conscience could pose more problems when solutions are derived without taking ethics into consideration.

Furthermore, even in our pursuit to master science and find resolutions, we are implicated in a host of moral issues. Science as a business has never been more lucrative, with pharmaceutical giants such as Pfizer being run more as enterprises rather than research institutions. With such ostentatious fame and fortune on offer for those capable of finding the next miracle drug (subject to patent of course), scientists are enticed by the allure of success to compromise their ethics and integrity. The now infamous Hwang Woo Suk is one example of how scientists may even doctor their experimental results to suit their findings. Such scandals carefully choreographed by researchers and tailored to suit their ambitions reinforce the fact that science hardly solves a problem without leaving a trail of shattered morals and blatant dishonesty behind. However, it would be hyperbolic to say that science is incapable of providing solutions without decimating our ethical code. Take the medicine for the common cold or the very ordinary cough drop, which are simple remedies and seemingly innocuous solutions for our everyday problems or ailments. Unfortunately, such solutions could have a darker side as well, with the black market for prescription drugs flourishing in modern society. Indeed, science and ethics, while definitely not antithetical, are somewhat opposing concepts.

Secondly, the solutions offered by science are susceptible to human manipulation, often creating a host of problems and dangers of an undeniable magnitude. It has to be conceded that hackneyed arguments over the use of cloning to produce a new Hitler, or the rise of robots to cause our apocalyptic demise are a gross exaggeration that is perhaps laughable. However, upon closer evaluation, the fear and insecurities behind these almost childish terrors cannot be simply dismissed. The abuse of the scientifically provided solutions is a concept manifested on a global level – the nuclear power once lauded as a solution to the world's dwindling energy supply has taken on a much more insidious appearance after its destructive potential was revealed. Clinically prescribed drugs such as morphine have been used as recreational drugs by pleasure seekers keen on a chemically induced high. Without a doubt, science, in its solving of our many problems, has created even more by providing the human race with the tools necessary to fuel our greed, aggression and hedonistic nature. Contrarians may put forth the viable argument that though science admittedly may perpetuate social destruction, it is but an originally pure concept that has been tainted by the inherent immorality of humans, forced

to suit our wants and desires. Science does not create more problems, it is Man who is at fault. Granted, one must accept that science is a progressive concept geared towards the betterment of society; however, its ability to be used as a weapon by Man is somewhat akin to providing an axe to a psychopath to wreak destruction. Human nature is certainly at fault, but this by no means absolves science from responsibility.

Also, science may provide solutions that appear conclusive, but its unpredictability and mysterious nature makes it impossible for scientists or society to prognosticate its future implications. To fully comprehend the cognitive processes of science is impossible due to its infinite depth. There is always more to be discovered, explored, and thus we are incapable of anticipating possible consequences and taking concrete steps to prevent it. Perhaps the embodiment of this idea is the perpetual enigma that is genetically modified food. The supposed solution to starvation on a global scale seems so idyllic that many struggle to believe that there is no trade-off. This worry is hardly quelled by science's ambiguity regarding whether GM food may have any internal effects on the human body. While visions of mutant frogs and three-armed infants are hardly rational, scientists have realised that genetically modifying crops to have greater resistance may result in the evolution of pests and pathogens of a more potent nature. This reveals that science offers so many areas for exploration that if scientists chose to offer a solution in an area steeped in uncertainty, they must be ready to face the problems it is likely to create.

On the other hand, despite the aforementioned arguments, science cannot be hastily labelled as a mere causative force for the flaws in our modern world. True, while solutions provided are only temporary due to science's dynamic nature, its power to identify and resolve problems eventually cannot be discounted. Science has a tendency to find the answers to its own questions, whether in a year or in a few decades. The world, mankind, and nature are always evolving, and new problems are certain to arise from old ones, while old solutions quickly become outdated. Indeed, science's provision of solutions is our only answer to such temporal problems, and though transient, we can always be assured that science will aid us in finding a viable resolution.

In all, George Bernard Shaw was astute in his prediction that science could never solve a problem without creating ten more. It is essential to understand that science is such an enormous, multi-faceted concept that is beyond our control, yet we should not fear it but instead embrace it and its unpredictable nature. To search for a single conclusion to the problem is foolish, and perhaps even destructive. Scientists in recent times have invented the Large Hadron Collider, a device supposedly capable of generating "The God Particle", a molecule responsible for all forms of light, life and matter on earth. This may seem that at long last humans have found the very science of our existence. However, scientists fear that to activate the Collider may result in an explosion and the destruction of the world as we know it. It is imperative that we are cautious in our use of science. Though its provision of a utopian fantasy is unlikely, we must beware of heading towards a Faustian nightmare.

#### **Comments:**

***Brilliant work on a question that is extremely hard to excel in! Arguments are comprehensive, clearly focused on the question and largely fluent.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 7

**“Women play a more important role than men in families today.”  
Do you agree?**

Elizabeth Marion Chua Zi Min | 09S03G

The tremendous role played by women in the creation of a family has largely been uncontested in today's modern society. As a result of differences in our biological makeup, women are the main reason behind the development and birth of children, and hence families. However, with the roles of men and women in a state of flux today, there is much heated debate over their relative importance in families presently. The advent of the twenty-first century has seen a number of complex social and economic changes, such as the greater emphasis on cooperative and interpersonal relations in the workplace and the increasing number of educational opportunities for women especially in developed countries. Such changes are significant contributory factors to the elevated status of women in society, leading to the frequent misconception that women play a more important role than men today. I, however, beg to differ. While the roles both men and women play in the creation and maintenance of a family are constantly evolving, I believe that both are equally essential for the development of a secure, happy family.

One may argue that a woman is primarily the contributing factor behind the formation of babies, since she is the only one capable of sheltering a baby in her womb and giving birth. But the truth is, both the inputs from men and women are required to create a family. There can be no children with only one factor (either one woman or one man) and as such, they are both of importance in forming a family. For example, family planning is something undertaken by both parents and not the sole role of a woman. The formation of children is equally as impossible without both parents contributing actively. In this sense, while women and men play different roles in the formation of a family, neither can be discarded and deemed less important.

The emancipation of women, especially in recent times, has largely seen an increasing volume of women streaming into the workplace. This is partly due to the evolving workplace requirements where the qualities of a woman make her more highly sought after and prized. It has given rise to larger numbers of dual income families, where women can now contribute actively to the economic standard of their families, which was once impossible. The overwhelming opportunities proffered to women allow them to perform in the role that was once seen as exclusive to men, that is, bringing home a stable income to maintain the economic welfare of a family. By being able to provide for the needs of her family, a woman seems to be encroaching on the traditional role of men, effectively reducing the necessity of their presence. However, the phenomenon of women bringing home a wage is not as extensive as one would expect. This situation is generally the case in some developed countries, admittedly, but the role of women in developing countries has seen fewer and less radical changes. They are still subjected to men's whims and fancies and their voices are often not considered in daily household matters, nor are their inputs any more important in familial decisions. While the situation is not as dire in developed countries, the extent to which such upheaval has wreaked an impact on families in traditional Asian societies is also questionable. In Singapore, where the Confucian school of thought is widely recognised and adhered to, there is great importance affixed to the traditional roles of women and men. The lack of social acceptance and tolerance for “career women”, especially by the older generation is still prevalent. Hence it may perhaps be untrue that women play a more important role in maintaining the economic integrity of a family.

Yet, I do concede that the economic role played by women is definitely increasing. However, I feel that the levelling of the playing field in the workplace which is mostly seen to be the domain of men has also led to the greater leveling of the field in homes, attributed to be the main concern of women. In the wake of the huge inflow of women into corporate circles, men have slowly been making their way into the territory of females – homes – in what is seen as the male revolution. It has opened important doors and created opportunities for men to make their stand on what was previously deemed as women's responsibilities. One example is the advent of house-husbands and stay-at-home dads



which is increasingly prevalent in Westernised societies and becoming more accepted (although to a limited extent) in Asian countries. Fathers seem to have undertaken the role of nurturing and disciplining their children, which was traditionally viewed as a mother's role. While the extent of this phenomenon is indeed arguable, it is an irrefutable fact, similar to that of the empowerment of women. It seems that while women are increasingly taking up a man's duties, men are also similarly replacing them in the home. Hence, while mothers now account for a higher proportion of income that contributes to a family's coffers, fathers are also playing a greater role – in taking on a hands-on approach in the upbringing of a child, perhaps because of the economic burden that is now borne by two, hence allowing for greater participation in household matters.

Whichever the case, it has undoubtedly given rise to a swapping of roles. While men contribute more actively in one area, women do so in another – both of which are equally important in the formation and maintenance of a family, for it is both the material and non-material aspects that contribute equally to a child's development and welfare. Therefore, in light of the different roles that men and women play in the creation and nurturing of a family, I firmly believe that each is no less important than the other.

**Comments:**

***Comprehensive evaluation of the topic. Content is insightful and relevant. Good use of examples to show prominence of both men and women in the family.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 8

Does the presence of a strong opposition in government help or hinder a country's progress?

Rachel Phoa Huiling | 09S03L

Witnesses to scenes of fistfights in Taiwan's Parliament or occasions of filibustering in the US Senate might be tempted to conclude that the presence of a strong opposition in government hampers progress. After all, how can a country progress if its politicians and lawmakers are embroiled in struggle, not with national problems, but with each other? However, these critics fail to recognise the true value of a strong opposition in government. Although a strong opposition would seem to put a damper on efficiency, the conflict and subsequent reevaluation of ideas it generates, as well as its role as a check on abuses of power by the ruling party, do far more to ensure a country's survival and long-term progress.

Firstly, it must be acknowledged that without a strong opposition in government, a country with a competent and upright government might be able to progress faster than one with a strong opposition. For example, with regard to the healthcare system, the Singapore government, which faces no strong opposition, was able to introduce means testing for subsidised healthcare. Although unpopular, the means testing was necessary to conserve limited state resources for the truly needy. Had a strong opposition been present, the ruling party might have been hesitant to introduce such an unpopular yet vital policy for fear of losing the popular vote. In contrast, in the US, President Obama has been facing stiff opposition from the rival Republican Party in introducing a universal healthcare plan. Despite much evidence that a universal healthcare plan is likely the best solution for America's healthcare woes (top-ranked countries in the world all have universal healthcare while the US is stuck with the highest healthcare costs but low efficiency), Obama has been severely hampered in his attempts by Republicans who engage in fear-mongering to score political points with the public. From the sharp contrast between the two systems, we can see that the absence of a strong opposition in government can be helpful in a country's progress.

In addition, the absence of a strong opposition can allow governments to push through legislation more quickly and efficiently. This is especially important during times of crisis when fast action is required. For example, during the recent financial crisis, despite a consensus among financial experts that fast action was needed to avert a second Great Depression, in the US there was still significant Republican opposition to the Democratic financial stimulus bill. This slowed its passage through Congress, possibly worsening the financial crisis by delaying the much-needed stimulus. In contrast, in Singapore, the government was able to swiftly put into place a billion-dollar "Resilience Package" and draw on past reserves to avert the crisis, as it did not have to face a strong opposition in government. Thus it seems that the presence of a strong opposition might even hinder a country's progress.

However, what proponents of this stand fail to consider is that, more often than not, the opposition is not a rabid entity ready to snap at the ruling party's every move, but is composed of rational, knowledgeable individuals who understand the challenges facing their country as well. For example, in the case of the US financial stimulus, opposition to the bill was in cases of frivolous spending, like on unneeded roads or infrastructure. In this case, the strong opposition actually helped the US progress by weeding out unnecessary spending and diverting it to more essential projects like those to reduce carbon emissions. Thus, it would be too sweeping to claim that the presence of a strong opposition slows down progress since, by questioning the ruling party's decisions, it often helps the country progress further instead.

To add to the previous point, the presence of a strong opposition helps a country to progress further by stimulating discourse on important national issues in the public arena. Due to the fallible nature of mankind, it is highly unlikely that any one party or politician would be able to come up with the best solution to a country's problems all the time. This is further exacerbated by the problem that

members of the same group, be it a ruling party or advisors to a dictator, often fall into the practice of group think, whereby they fail to question decisions made by the group leaders. Thus, a government without a strong opposition is liable to make errors in judgement, often with dire consequences for its people. For example, the unopposed rulers of Communist China and the former Soviet Union made a gross error in judgement when they assumed that a command economy would be more efficient in allocating resources to its people as compared to a free market economy. In a country with a strong opposition, such a serious misjudgement would probably have been swiftly rectified through Parliament debate and perhaps the voting in of a more competent opposition party at the next election. As things went, it required the deaths of millions before the governments realised their error. Thus, by igniting debates and careful examination of the complexity of national issues, a strong opposition can be very helpful to a country's progress.

Moreover, a strong opposition can help to act as a check and balance to prevent abuses of power by the ruling party. As was once famously said, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely". The dangers of absolute, or close to absolute, power have been illustrated vividly in fiction like George Orwell's *Animal Farm* or in the annals of history where "divinely-appointed" monarchs tended to rule the country for their own benefit rather than their subjects' welfare. In more recent times, the presence of a strong opposition in Taiwan allowed for the ousting of the former Premier Chen Shui Bian, who was found to have embezzled huge amounts of money. Without the presence of the opposition led by current Premier Ma Ying Jeou, Chen Shui Bian might have been able to cling to power despite the atrocities he committed. Thus, the presence of a strong opposition is often beneficial as it acts as a check on absolute power, discouraging abuses of power like corruption.

Overall, a strong opposition in government is more a help than a hindrance as it acts as a barrier against the excesses of those in power. Those who extol the benefits of a government without a strong opposition base their views on the assumption that the government is always competent and upright. Yet history has taught us time and time again that it is folly to assume so. For all his claims that he was working for the glory of Germany, Hitler turned out to be advancing his own genocidal agenda. It might seem that the military junta in Myanmar or the dictatorship in North Korea would be the most efficient forms of government. Yet, the people in these countries remain mired in poverty due to corruption and incompetence in the government. For example, it is said that the junta in Myanmar carved a new capitol out of forests at great expense based on the advice of fortune tellers. As the main assumption that governments are always competent and upright is untenable, a strong opposition would in fact be necessary for a country's continued progress and survival, since it averts the possibility of an oppressive or incompetent regime as it provides a mechanism whereby corrupt or incompetent regimes can be removed from power.

In conclusion, a strong opposition in government is largely helpful to a country's progress as it stimulates debate on ideas and acts as a vital check on government power. In addition, the main flaw of a strong opposition seems to be that it reduces the speed of progress. However, we must not forget the forest for the trees. If a strong opposition can ensure the long-term survival and progress of a country by discouraging malevolent or incompetent governments, should we begrudge a little loss of speed?

#### **Comments:**

***Overall, a very well structured and convincing response. Particularly good explanations here!***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 9

**Does the presence of a strong opposition in government help or hinder a country's progress?**

Lau Wei Yii Benjamin | 09S06W

Depending on whom one asks, the answer to the above question can be as different as night and day. On the one hand, there are democracies like the UK and the Republic of France, where the presence of an opposition party, such as the Conservatives or the French Socialists, is seen as integral to democracy. On the other hand, there exist countries like Singapore and Venezuela, which make it clear that they firmly believe in democracy, but also believe that the presence of a strong opposition is unnecessary or even detrimental to the running of the country. There are positive and negative examples of both systems at work: the US and Singapore, with their diametrically opposed views on democracy, seemed to have enjoyed much prosperity (barring recent events). France and Venezuela, however, have seen much better days, with a slipping of their economic growth and standard of living and an increase in income inequality. Thus, it is not immediately obvious which system is better, and this requires a more thorough consideration.

In some sense, the presence of a strong opposition can compromise the progress of a country. Opposition parties, especially strong ones, tend to have philosophical and ideological differences with the incumbent government, and very often the resultant views on issues are irreconcilable as well. For example, the Democrats lean to the left on issues and call for greater social welfare and reproductive rights like abortion, whereas the Republicans lean to the right and call for less government intervention in the affairs of private enterprise and would like to see abortion and euthanasia banned. As a result of the irreconcilable differences in views, legislation tends to be stalled in the legislative assemblies of such countries, resulting in a political stalemate, hindering a country's progress. For example, in the 1960s, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was forwarded by the Democratic Party in the US to both houses of Congress. It was a landmark legislation designed to solidify the equality of all Americans, regardless of race or gender. However, despite strong support from the majority of American society, it was not enough to convince the Republicans to support the bill, especially since their home states still had a strong undercurrent of gender bias. As a result, the Republicans, using their large numbers in both houses of Congress, filibustered the bill, postponing voting until the bill neared its expiration date, such that the bill would have automatically failed the acts in the Amendment and would never be implemented. Strong words from leading feminist icons such as Gloria Steinam helped to engender more support from the public, forcing the Republicans to relent and support the amendment. As can be seen, the presence of a strong opposition is able to stall legislation to the point of expiration, and even though this was averted at the last moment, we may not be so serendipitous again in the course of governmental affairs that this will happen in the future. Strong opposition could have meant the non-passage of bills like the ERA, and this would have hindered America's progress.

Another reason why the presence of a strong opposition is negative is a variation of the previous argument. Instead of stalling legislation, a strong opposition can also compromise it, such that the final bill passed is significantly neutered and rendered ineffectual. Sometimes opposition parties are unable to stall legislation, and so they make agreements with the ruling party that they will give the requisite number of votes needed to meet quorum in exchange for the bill being watered down significantly in order to suit their interests and ideology. This is especially likely when the opposition is funded by special interest groups, who may have a vested interest in seeing such legislation watered down for their own insidious reasons. As a result, the compromised legislation is very often insufficient to solve the problems it was designed to solve. For example, the Democrats recently forwarded a new environmental protection bill which, among other things, would ratify the Kyoto Protocol and implement a carbon trading scheme. In its initial stages, it was a patent piece of legislation and was touted by environmental scientists and public policy experts as "just the right thing that America needs to fight climate change". However, when it was realised that the Republicans would not agree to the bill, and, without their support, the bill would not achieve the two-thirds majority needed for passage, the Democrats started compromising on clauses in order to secure Republican support. The resultant bill makes a considerable number of concessions to oil companies and polluting manufacturers, the very industries that caused climate change in the first place. The resultant bill was considered so ineffectual that Politico, a leading political analyst community, declared it the "most useless bill in America's history". A strong opposition party like the Republicans in the USA can

significantly hinder a country's progress by forcing compromise on legislation such that legislation is rendered ineffectual.

However, the above two arguments against strong opposition in governments are philosophically untenable with the idea of democracy, and are not sufficiently systemic problems that we can denounce strong opposition parties in general. Max Weber in his lecture "Politics as Vocation" defined the state and its government as having a "monopoly on the use of violent force". This means that the government is the sole entity that can ever use force that could be potentially considered legitimate. Since the government has this monopoly, it is the most powerful entity in the country. As a result of such immense power, the existence of a strong opposition is necessary to prevent abuse by the ruling party. The opposition has an added incentive to do so in that, if it is successful, perhaps it will one day be rewarded with the seat of government. Thus, with strong opposition, abuse of power is less likely to happen. For example, after the election of Hugo Chavez in 1998, most major opposition parties in Venezuela disappeared in a matter of months, and this gave Hugo Chavez free reign to mobilise forces to quell opponents, nationalise the media and other industries, and indoctrinate the Venezuelan masses. This allowed him to implement radical reforms such as land redistribution and many free handouts, driving Venezuela's economy into the ground, widening its income gap and lowering its standard of living. Meanwhile, the people languished under the illusion that Hugo Chavez was their great saviour. If there had been a stronger opposition in the Venezuelan government, Hugo Chavez would have been much less likely to mobilise the army, forcefully crush dissidents and implement his disastrous economic policies, as this opposition would have voted against his executive decisions. The absence of a strong opposition may engender political instability or oppression, and such instability and oppression is a hindrance to a country's progress.

Furthermore, strong oppositions are not always destructive to government policies. Democracy is about the formation of new ideas between two groups with opposing ideas, a meeting of the minds to produce positive policy changes. The role of an opposition party is to provide the government with an alternative perspective and new ideas, and while it may stall legislation routines, the opposition also helps to contribute. Instances of contribution and cooperation can be found in the UK House of Commons, between Labour and Conservatives over the National Health Service (NHS). While the Conservatives were fundamentally opposed to the idea of the NHS in the 1990s, they knew that if they did not cooperate, the resultant NHS would be a complete "dud", to quote members of the Conservative Party at the time. Hence, instead of filibustering it or working under the table with Labour to produce legislation that everyone could agree on but would work for no one, the Conservatives decided to constructively and actively contribute to the debate on the NHS. As a result, the NHS was significantly refined and was prevented from becoming the wasteful health programme it was predicted to become, saving the British government billions of pounds. The Conservatives could have acted otherwise, but they chose to help the government for the betterment of all society. To this day, David Cameron and Gordon Brown debate fervently on the NHS, not to destroy it but to improve it. That is the role of a strong opposition, to provide bright ideas to governments to make government policy work better so that a country may enjoy progress.

In conclusion, a strong opposition has had a track record of both helping and hindering progress. While arguing from historical examples may not yield a decisive conclusion, it is also important to note the philosophical underpinning of this debate. The opposition exists in most democracies for a reason, because we trust that it will check our government and contribute to its ideas. Even though it may go out of its way to stall and stifle progress, we trust that there will come a day when progress can be made and it will rise to the fore and help the government to make change, change that we can believe in. That is what democracy is about. It is about trust in our people, in our government and in our opposition. In the UK, when a new government is sworn in, they "solemnly swear to serve Her Majesty and carry out Her will in the realms," but the opposition also takes their oath "to check Her Majesty's government to prevent the tyranny that spills the innocent blood of Her subjects". And I trust that any opposition party will fulfil this oath when given the chance, for while there is no guarantee that a strong opposition will help a country's progress, its absence is far more detrimental to said progress.

#### **Comments:**

***An excellent piece of work. Highly engaging with very good knowledge of the political situations mentioned in the examples listed. Personal voice clearly shown . Well done, Benjamin!***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 10

**“The world today needs more than one superpower.” Do you agree?**

Samuel Koh Boon Hao | 09S06W

“Yes we can!” proclaimed then-Presidential candidate Barack Obama on a cold, wintry night in the midst of an assiduous campaign to convince the entire United States of America (USA) that he was the judicious choice as replacement for the outgoing incumbent George W. Bush. Though it would not have been in his mind then, undoubtedly, Obama would have been aware that as the winds of change swirled and swept through the US, elsewhere around the world, the proverbial gusts of reform were being felt. It is incontrovertible that the US has been the sole, hegemonic influence in the world in the last century, with this fact augmented by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Hence, while I concede that the US has been a competent political and economic powerhouse, it has to be contended that it is irrefutable that the scope of global exchanges today dictate the increasing need to embrace other burgeoning superpowers on the global stage.

The presence of a mere, sole superpower on the global stage is not unique, and certainly not absurd. Before the emergence of the US as the defining nation of global issues, Great Britain was undoubtedly the sole naval colonial power. Her superlative naval and imperialistic conquests worldwide demanded respect and awe, till the advent of the 19th century, when the Monroe Doctrine spelled the conception of American hegemonic ambitions and correspondingly, the decline of the Great British navy. Hence, it is seemingly inconceivable that one would decry such a format of global operations, with the annals of history demonstrating otherwise. Furthermore, it is undeniable that the US has displayed admirable competence in juggling global affairs, even today. From the mercurial exhortations from the then-US President Ronald Reagan to the then-Soviet Union Leader Mikhail Gorbachev to “tear down this wall”, to current aspirations to embrace a novel form of “concert diplomacy” by the Obama Administration, as noted by Kishore Mahbubani, the US has done a laudable job in managing affairs of epic scales and impact, and hence the call for the sustenance of a unipolar world certainly cannot be whimsically cast aside.

Moreover, it can be asserted that existing institutions today do allow for the perpetuation of such a global framework. From the now-defunct League of Nations precipitated the current United Nations (UN). More notably, the concept of a UN Security Council was conceived, and arguably, this presents itself as an ideal and unique check against unwarranted actions from the political and economic juggernaut, which is none other than the US. Hence, with such initiatives entrenched in current global proceedings, surely it can be unequivocally asserted that the current format in global proceedings is here to stay?

However, it is borne out of a sense of concern and an urgent need to stay in tandem with revolutionary modifications in the global arena today that I contend that yes, the world does arguably need more than one superpower.

First and foremost, the very whiff of a mention of the name “Lehman Brothers” would be sufficient to convince one of the unequivocal fact that it is increasingly necessary to act to keep the US’ excessive profligacies in check. It was the US’ unfettered embracement of liberal capitalistic mechanisms that precipitated the current preponderant cataclysmic event that is the 2008 economic meltdown. Hence, pointedly, Alan Greenspan’s oft-quoted “era of irrational exuberance” is surely well and truly over. With the burgeoning confidence of the emerging superpower that is China in the efficacy of its frequently maligned socialist framework, and the growing uneasiness of the emerging BRIC bloc – consisting of Brazil, Russia, India and the previously mentioned China – it can thus be contended that the world arguably cries out for the emergence and heralding of more global superpowers, as the economic prowess and seeming infallibility of the US have already been emphatically disproven. The capitalistic frameworks rhapsodised by economists worldwide have been found wanting, and thus perhaps it is time for the emerging nations to take the spotlight.

In addition, more than ever, emerging problems and issues in the world today increasingly require the adoption of multilateral solutions. A lucid example to illustrate this case in point would be the disconcerting climate change issue, which is an insidious malady threatening to annihilate all of mankind's greatest achievements, due to Man's irresponsible actions. It is thus evident that unilateralism cannot be the way forward, as solutions increasingly have to be drawn up to involve as many nations as possible for their impact to be genuinely felt. For example, the European Union's carbon cap-and-trade system required the promulgation of an overarching, supranational body for it to come to fruition. In another illustration to demonstrate the US' increasingly irrational unilateralism, the Bush administration inconceivably, against the UN Security Council's will, launched into the 2003 Iraq war in a devastating attempt to dispose of dictator Saddam Hussein. All these were under the pretext of upholding democracy in the region, and preventing widespread nuclear proliferation, with the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) apparently in Iraq. The WMDs were, regrettably, never found even in the aftermath of the war, and the sectarian violence that ensued was nothing short of full-blown chaos. Hence, it is evident that US unilateralism is on the wane, and there is a need for the emergence of more than one global superpower.

Finally, it can be further expounded that the US has lost its way. With Dick Cheney in recent times frantically defending the nefarious and unthinkable torture techniques adopted by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) during Bush's tenure, and the concomitant attempts of President Obama to close the Guantanamo Bay Prison, having done so with the Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq following embarrassing human rights scandals with the prisoners, it is clear that the US has lost its moral authority. It no longer has the irrefutable right to portray itself as the leading light of freedom and liberal practices, as the large shadow of the abovementioned scandals cast a ghostly pall over its recent disappointing human rights records. While in the past the US could frequently chide states like China over involvement in sticky issues like Darfur in Sudan, or Russia and her staunch defence of global criminals like weapons merchant Victor Bout, it can now only retreat into its cloistered, domestic enclosure, bound and restrained from vocal interference by hypocrisy.

Hence, in conclusion, while we have been privileged to have experienced close to a century of US global dominance, it is increasingly clear that its era of global superiority is edging to a resounding close. With the burgeoning emergence of a growing number of multilateral initiatives, like the Group of 8 or Group of 20 conferences, in order to reconcile global proceedings and development, it is evident that the world needs a more healthy balance of global sources of influence. Imperceptibly, the world is, at the very least, drifting towards a bipolar make-up, as China finally takes up its belated place at the forefront of global affairs, although India and the other BRIC nations would undoubtedly have an opinion or two to raise vis-à-vis my above assertion as well.

#### **Comments:**

***Even the US is not changing its stance – it is looking for partnerships with other countries in global issues.***

***A very comprehensive essay. Knowledge of subject matter is clearly shown. Good language skills.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 11

**“The world today needs more than one superpower.”  
Do you agree?**

Daniel Chew Wen Chao | 09S03M

A superpower is recognised for its dominance in multiple areas: it needs to have a strong economic sphere of influence that extends past its immediate neighbourhood; a robust military that is capable of extending the umbrella of protection it provides to friendly allies; a strong cultural identity as well as a presence in the global trade of ideas and information. Today, as the global community emerges from the barrage of crises that it has been assailed by, including, but not limited to, the Iraq war and the financial meltdown of 2008, many are starting to question if they should continue to put their faith in the sole superpower that is the United States. In fact, some purport that a world with only one superpower is an unstable one, and thus they seek to nurture the emergence of another power that can hold its weight against the US. Personally, I feel that, although a world with more than one superpower does offer several advantages over a unipolar one, I am inclined to stick with the status quo as there have been many world institutions set up to act as checks and balances on its power, and a unipolar world will avoid the destabilising effects of a struggle between titans.

It comes as no surprise that the call for another superpower to emerge would come at a time like this, as the global community is far from impressed by American conduct over a host of issues, especially its role in catalysing the financial downturn that ravaged many economies across the globe. The presence of more than one superpower, some argue, would thus be able to act as a proper counter-balance to the excesses of another. Many credit China's move to buy American debt and its massive stimulus for its own economy as critical measures that helped to prop up the international financial system. China, seen by many to be the next emerging superpower, was heralded as the antidote to the unrestrained greed of American enterprises and lax government control that precipitated a collapse. Furthermore, aside from the financial sphere, the presence of another superpower would prevent unilateral action such as that which was seen when America embarked on the Iraq war. Due to Washington's extensive influences and military dominance, though there was global opposition to the war, no credible resistance was offered since there was no other power which could match up to America and defend the cause of peace. A second superpower would prevent this re-enactment since obdurate American insistence would see it lose support to the second superpower. Hence, all these illustrate the inherent dangers present in a world with only one superpower, as it can discharge itself with considerable impunity.

Another argument of critics is that the presence of an additional superpower allows a myriad of ideas to flourish and the establishment of regional identities. Due to American dominance in the trade of ideas and information, there is an American slant placed on much of the information that the world receives, and this forms a partial subjugation of local cultures. The presence of another superpower would at least, as voiced by some, incorporate a second perspective in the trade of ideas. In fact, it might be wise to allow for regional superpowers to inculcate regional identities. Examples are abundant, such as an Arab power that can strengthen Middle Eastern identity and protect its cultures, partially fulfilled by Saudi Arabia now; and an Asian power to strengthen the Asian community and safeguard its heritage, partially fulfilled by China and Japan now.

It is indeed timely that we re-examine the global order, but as we speculate about the potential benefits of having more than one superpower, we should also draw from past precedents to get a glimpse into what this particular future contains - and past precedents tell us to be chary of naively believing that the mere presence of more superpowers adds balance to the system. Indeed, these are many pitfalls to navigate.

The presence of another superpower does not immediately allow us to lay claim that there are sufficient checks on their excesses, as each of these superpowers would have its own agenda, its own motives, and its own pursuits. In fact, there might be a greater stranglehold on world affairs or



a greater exploitation of the global system to serve their own needs. Hence, the global community would have to contend with even more problems and aims of the superpowers that are far from benign to the collective needs of the other countries. A leaf can be taken from Iran's insistence on developing a nuclear programme that experts say is a front for acquiring nuclear arms. The interplay of different motives is already apparent for all to see, as Iran is itself aspiring to be a regional power that has heavy influence on its Middle Eastern neighbours. Similar aims, if pursued by a new superpower, would have grave consequences for all other nations and probably spark an arms race.

It is even more destabilising to the global community when a power struggle occurs between two superpowers. As Niccolo Machiavelli once said "power is like a centaur - half human, half horse." A re-interpretation of it would be to say that power can be an equal mix of coercion and consent, and where the latter fails, the former takes over. In order to enlarge each other's sphere of influence and prevent encroachment by the other superpower, the ensuing wrangle and tussle would turn the global community into a battleground and nations into mere pawns of a power game. Precedents such as the Cold War have illustrated that, in the event of such a happening, the world would be held on tenterhooks due to the possibility of escalation with consequences that cannot be mitigated. Surely no one would want a re-run of the threat of a nuclear holocaust?

In contrast, the globalised world order has bequeathed global institutions to take over the role of ensuring proper checks-and-balances, such as the International Monetary Fund or the United Nations Assembly. Such institutions enable representation of all nations and give the assurance of acting in the best interests of all as many diverse opinions are aired and acted upon. The need for another superpower to play this role is thus farcical and superfluous. The setting up of numerous forums and consultative bodies also serves as a vehicle with which to strengthen regional identities and to protect the diversity of cultures. The African Union plays a critical role in safeguarding African heritage, while ASEAN protects Southeast Asian cultures from cultural erosion, and at the global level, UNESCO oversees the protection of global cultures. Hence these can effectively mitigate the purported cultural imperialism of the superpower. In fact, individual countries are capable of making independent decisions, and when they do not concur with the actions of America, the sole superpower today, they can voice their disagreement and withdraw from the partnership. This was seen in the realignment of Japan's foreign policy under the charge of the new Premier Yukio Hatoyama, as he voiced the need to look towards East Asia as a "critical region of Japan's being".

There is no doubt that there are many countries on the ascent today, growing in economic power and international stature, with some widely tipped to be future superpowers, joining the US. Although I feel that the emergence of another superpower is more destabilising than beneficial, there is no discrediting their rise. However, with cognisance that a superpower has global responsibilities, there is hope yet that the world's cause will continue to be furthered. As of the present, though, I firmly believe that a sole superpower will be adequate for the global community.

#### **Comments:**

***Significant credit to mature global awareness and concise language. Such outlay under timed conditions is impeccable indeed.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 12

## “Style without substance.” How far is this true of television programmes today?

Joy Chua Zijun | 09S06W

The ubiquitous presence of the mass media in our everyday lives makes it an undeniable and ineluctable influence on our values. Ranging from the billboards at seemingly every bus stop across the island, the advertisements on newspapers to the commercials played on television, the mass media ostensibly has infiltrated every nook and cranny of our lives, subtly exerting its power and moulding our values. The mass media panders to our hedonistic cravings for self-gratification, the epitome of the much-desired beauty and style manifested in the likes of Brad Pitt, Matt Damon and Jennifer Lopez. This new pantheon of gods, akin to those that reside on the temple of Olympus, exhibit the qualities that all and sundry deeply desire: to be bronzed, voluptuous, and, most importantly, desired. These new deities have been hailed as the gods of the new millennium, and it is through the media, more specifically television programmes, that these celebrities flaunt their style and appeal. Marshall McLuhan once said, “the medium is the message”. At this critical juncture, it is imperative to take a step back and examine the message that these television programmes are sending to the impressionable youth and throngs of goggle box addicted adults. Critics have purported that television programmes today are superficial, materialistic, and ultimately void of substance. However, I am of the opinion that while some television programmes are indubitably so, there are worthy and meaningful television programmes that educate and inform the masses as well, and it would be unjust to hastily declare the demise of quality television programmes merely because of those which have “style without substance”.

Reality television programmes (RTV) are shows commonly cited by opponents of television programmes to be shows devoid of all substance. The birth of Mark Burnett’s wildly successful “Survivor” series (which has to date spanned an admirable 20 seasons) heralded the entry of numerous other RTVs with many television networks eagerly jumping onto this bandwagon and trying to out-do one another with the production of more and more outrageous programmes. Shows like “Big Brother” and “The Bachelor” bear testament to the media’s shibboleth “sex sells”. Millions of viewers tune in to such broadcasts weekly, keen not to miss a single minute of the dramas, catfights, and at times simply outrageous behaviour of their favourite reality TV stars, just so they can self-righteously gossip about it around the water cooler the following day. While the underlying style of such RTVs are dubious, the unquestionable message they send is that the magical formula of sex, drama and catfights sells, and that substance is secondary. It does seem that television programmes, fuelled by the interests of profit-maximising corporations, are indeed pondering style over substance.

However, this seemingly impregnable argument can easily be broken down by alluding to other examples of worthy, more meaningful RTVs. Shows like “American Idol” and “So You Think You Can Dance” exemplify RTV’s ability to identify and unearth true talent, providing a platform for these buried talents to grow and shine. The success of “American Idol” winners Jordin Sparks, Kelly Clarkson and even runner-up Clay Aiken bear testament to the power and benefits of RTV. Were it not for the existence of this programme, these singing sensations might have forever remained unknown and undiscovered, a great loss to the vibrancy of the music industry. Kelly Clarkson went on to win numerous awards in the Pop arena, including “Best Female Pop Artist” and “Best Pop Album” several years back. RTVs, evidently, are not just about style. They cobble together a demanding mix of both style and substance, both of which are crucial for a show to succeed in the cut-throat entertainment industry.

Others point to the rising influence of pop culture, citing the increasing popularity of Korean, Japanese and Taiwan dramas as evidence of the degeneration of the quality of television programmes. One of the mediums through which popular culture worms its way into the hearts and minds of impressionable youth is undeniably television programmes. Television programmes and drama series provide the perfect opportunity and platform for these celebrities to flaunt their brawn and display their “style”. Hit Korean drama “Boys Over Flowers”, an adaptation of the Taiwanese “Meteor Garden” series saw throngs of adoring fans swarm to the filming sites of the series, making it near impossible for filming to continue. The undeniably charismatic and handsome lead characters of “Boys Over Flowers” were propelled to instant fame, with merchandise bearing their pictures mushrooming in shops all

over Korea and slowly infiltrating the rest of Asia as well. The storylines of such serials, of a rich, young, handsome Prince Charming rescuing an unknown girl from obscurity, and of going from rags to riches overnight, appeal to the dreams of numerous enamoured fans. The fashionable clothing of these young men decked head-to-toe in the latest designer brands only serves to further dazzle the star- and style-crazy youths of today.

The roaring success of such programmes can be attributed fundamentally to the style, simplicity and happy lifestyle portrayed by the shows' characters, a representation of how our rudimentary idealistic view of life: simple, predictable and most importantly, stylish. The hard realities, that life will be complex, romance will not always be forever, villains do not always lose, and pain does not always absolve, lead many to turn to their television fantasies. While providing a haven from the harsh realities of life, this stylish sanctuary is ultimately void of the essence of life, empty of substance and free from the complexities that make life meaningful and worthwhile. One can arguably claim the demise of television programmes of today since they propagate the message of style without substance.

On the other hand, such blanket generalisations about the degradation of television programmes today would not be entirely fair, failing to take into account the presence of other broadcasts of which substance is far from extinct. Networks like Discovery Channel and National Geographic are examples of television programmes at their finest, informing and educating the masses through enthralling broadcasts. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)'s show "Hardtalk" presents round-table debates and interviews with eminent leaders, political figures and other distinguished personnel. Such shows provide viewers with insights into current affairs, and a deeper understanding of other key issues plaguing the world today. Not only that, the exploratory style of this programme also presents the views and opinions of different parties, allowing viewers to gain a holistic picture of the issue at hand before eventually arriving at their own informed conclusion. The wisdom and substance of such programmes are undeniable. John Pilger's film about East Timor is another example of a worthy and meaningful programme. Watched by more than three million people worldwide, a record half a million viewers called the switchboard afterwards to register their shock and horror at the destitution and corruption that they viewed from their goggle-box. Television programmes are capable of collapsing geographical distances, bringing home and showing to the world the problems and poverty plaguing many of the Third World countries of today, inspiring people to step up, speak out, and make a change. These television programmes definitely value substance, informing, educating and empowering the masses with the knowledge required to bring about change and make the world a better place.

Moreover, style and substance are by no means mutually exclusive. Many media-savvy celebrities today capitalise on their fame and stardom to send a worthy message to the masses through television programmes. The "Oprah Winfrey Show" and The "Tyra Banks Show" are just two examples of the self-help shows in which celebrities use their status and star appeal to help bring across meaningful messages about issues like women's rights, racial discrimination and self-empowerment. Oprah gives advice on everything, from how to cook the tastiest pizza to more serious issues like how to handle discrimination in society. Oprah's style endears her to viewers, making them more receptive to her words while the substance behind her messages exerts a positive influence. A slick mix of the style of the celebrity host and the substance behind her message, these television programmes successfully incorporate style into substance to send an even more poignant and powerful message.

In conclusion, while critics may point out the numerous "trashy" television programmes lined up on our goggle boxes and pronounce the demise of the quality of television programmes, I believe that many programmes still retain their substance and quality. Style and substance are by no means mutually exclusive. By fusing the two and capitalising on enhanced connectivity brought about by the rising tide of globalisation, television programmes nowadays are better equipped than ever to inform, educate and empower individuals to ultimately bring about positive change in the world.

### **Comments:**

***Interesting discussion with relevant supporting evidence. There is good awareness of subject matter.***

## essay 13

**“Style without substance.” How far is this true of television programmes today?**

Leong Jin Yin | 09S03L

Switch on the television now, and nine out of ten times one will be guaranteed to find beautiful, perfectly proportioned men and women on screen, promoting anything from clothing to medicine, and participating in all kinds of television programmes, from singing competitions like “American Idol” to dramas like “Desperate Housewives”. These glamorous beings have infiltrated almost every genre of television programming, even those that were previously under the purview of professionals. This has inevitably led critics to conclude that the state of television programming is declining, with an over-emphasis on the outer appearance over true knowledge or morals and character, or more simply put, “style without substance”. However, this may be too hasty a generalisation, as there still exist many genres of programmes where true talent prevails. Style, at the very best, can only be said to be complementing substance, as I believe that discerning viewers will still prioritise substance over style, thus maintaining the quality of television programmes.

Detractors bemoaning the declining state of television programmes today often cite the usage of beautifully attired and well-proportioned artistes to promote television programmes as a reflection of media honchos choosing style without substance. This phenomenon can most easily be identified in reality television, where cat-fighting, backstabbing and flaunting beauty is the norm. In shows like ‘Joe Millionaire’, for example, women spend hours preparing for their appearances and thinking of ever more silly ways to derail their rivals, all for the sake of winning the attention of the millionaire, who is also perfectly dressed. These trivial pursuits do indeed give weight to the idea of outer appearance taking precedence over moral character, or even the absence of character.

However, just as how one bad apple does not render the whole orchard rotten, a few superficial programmes should not allow one to paint the entire range of television programmes with the same brush. Even in singing contests like “American Idol” – which many have criticised as being frivolous and over-glamourised due to the hundreds of obviously talentless people taking part in the show – there exist true talents, who, surprisingly enough, have both style and substance. A good example is Jennifer Hudson, a previous contestant on ‘American Idol’. After her stint, she went on to produce immensely successful music albums and even starred in the critically-acclaimed ‘Dreamgirls’. Thus, not only is it unfair to conclude that television programmes have style but no substance, it is also ridiculous, in light of the many examples of true talents revealed to us in such television programmes.

Furthermore, one has to realise that television programmes are not restricted to merely reality television, ubiquitous as they may be today. There are many genres of programmes, including dramas, news programmes, talkshows and more. Take dramas for example. Though ‘Desperate Housewives’ may seem to promote negative moral values, such as adultery, and present an unrealistic image of housewives (after all, few housewives, busy as they are with child-rearing and housework, can take time to beautify themselves to the extent seen in the show), one cannot ignore the existence of other shows like ‘Crime Scene Investigation’, where we get a glimpse into the working lives of people in law enforcement and forensics. The latter serves not only as entertainment, but also as information. Despite small procedural errors, its producers take time and effort to research and design scenes such that people can get a more accurate idea of what forensic science is. Stating that television programmes only want style and not substance is a grave insult to these producers.

Moreover, there are genres of television programmes where substance is prized above style. News programmes are an accurate reflection of this. The news presenters’ role is to inform us of happenings around the world every day, and they do so with poise and confidence. Most were previously journalists, and thus are expected to have wonderful linguistic ability and depth and scope of knowledge. One certainly cannot fault them for not having knowledge, and even if most presenters

are aesthetically pleasing, this is a necessary part of the job, as it lends them more credibility. One would certainly not wish to see an unkempt man presenting the nine o' clock news, as it would be a reflection of his lack of professionalism. Furthermore, news programmes have also recognised the need for substance in the programmes and have frequently invited professionals in their field to comment on global issues such as the recession or terrorism, further strengthening their stance on valuing true knowledge over mere outer appearance.

At this point, it might also be useful to examine the purpose of television programmes, which is in turn dependent on the state of the media industry. The media industry in many developed countries is subject to free market forces as it is a commercial enterprise. Thus, due to the profit motive, the programmes they produce have to be catered to the wants of consumers. Interestingly, shows where style dominates mostly cater to young adults, while programmes for young children tend towards the educational. The latter can be attributed to parental control, as no parent would willingly expose his/her young child to sex, violence and gore, lest it harm his/her fragile young mind or worse, inculcate negative values. Thus, producers of programmes are usually merely responding to the wants of consumers, and the prevalence of reality shows, where style is prized over substance, is partially the fault of young adults who may find voyeuristic pleasure in such frivolous and tasteless activity. If these are just for entertainment, then there is little harm. However, as studies have shown, media can have an insidious influence on people, especially on impressionable young minds. Thus, perhaps some paternalistic government intervention is needed in the form of censorship. This policy is taken by many countries around the world, notably by more conservative countries. Singapore is a prime example, where programmes are carefully screened by the Media Authority of Singapore before being allowed on screen. Programmes' air times are even meticulously arranged, such that the more mature programmes are screened later at night, when most young people are asleep. There are also different channels dedicated to different groups of people. For example, 'Okto' is for children, screening mostly educational programmes and cartoons, while 'Channel 5' caters more to adults, screening more serious fare like 'Crime Watch'. In this way, the media industry in Singapore, which is subsidised and controlled by the government, can free itself from the shackles of the profit motive, and thus bring more wholesome programmes where substance is key to the general public, maintaining moral standards and improving intellectual capabilities. Thus, whether programmes portray style or substance is to an extent dependent on the requirements of their consumers and the level of media censorship in the country.

To conclude, with the introduction of satellite television programmes, there is such a plethora of shows to choose from, each with its own motive - to entertain, educate or inform. Of these, shows in which style predominates make up the minority and are mostly confined to reality series and dramas. Even then, there are signs of substance, that is, truly talented people in these shows, who show great moral character as they overcome personal obstacles to succeed in the media industry. Furthermore, there exist other genres of programmes, whose main role is to educate and inform, as reflected in the documentaries on 'National Geographic' and news programmes like 'Channel News Asia', where style is merely a complement to substance - that is, knowledge takes centre stage, while style only serves to enhance professionalism of the reporters and guides in news programmes and documentaries respectively. However, as the media's influence is an insidious force, there is a need to be vigilant and censorship is thus needed to keep style in check to maintain the standards of television programmes. Nonetheless, with globalisation and freer exchange of information, I am confident that we will evolve into more discerning viewers who value substance over style. Thus, I believe that style cannot survive without substance to back it up, and television programmes, which cater to the needs of the masses, would be foolish to prioritise style over substance, or disregard substance entirely, as they would not only lose their audience, but also their credibility.

#### **Comments:**

***One of the more refreshing essays! A very solid response.***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 14

**“Sports stars are paid too much money for their talent.”  
Do you agree?**

Teo Li Quan Bob | 09S06L

Approximately three months ago, a world record fee of £80 million was paid by Spanish football giants Real Madrid to the champions of England, Manchester United, for the services of World Player of the Year Cristiano Ronaldo. Prima facie, many would feel that this exorbitant sum of money was too extravagant for even a player of Ronaldo's calibre, especially in the aftermath of a global economic crisis. However, in spite of these criticisms, I still believe that sports stars are largely not paid too much for their rare talents.

But firstly, perhaps it might not be all too difficult to understand why some might take a conflicting view to mine. Admittedly, the sub-prime catastrophe has left many economies devastated – recent reports from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank state that Singapore is expected to suffer an approximate -7% growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In economies such as Zimbabwe, North Korea, and Mexico, poverty has only become more rampant, with North Korea having an increase in poverty rates from around 49% in 2007 to 70%. In such a bleak global situation, detractors claim that the obscene sums of money paid to sports superstars could be better used to alleviate poverty in these regions.

However, while I do not disagree that poverty still exists, I feel that sports stars are in fact doing their part to help solve this pertinent issue. For example, in the off-season of the English Premier League, many football superstars, including the likes of Rio Ferdinand, take time off to travel to these severely affected regions, which also include the African nations, to raise funds. In addition, many other superstars, not just from football, but also from tennis, golf, and basketball, are all setting aside a significant portion of their incomes for charity, albeit in a low profile manner. What better way to alleviate poverty than by the poor people's very own heroes coming to help them in person?

I feel that sports stars are not paid too much money for their talent on the basis of their intrinsic value to the entertainment industry – both to the consumers and the producers. With the proliferation of the Internet and the rapid increase in average televisions per household, the entertainment industry has slowly but steadily become one of the major sectors of most economies, garnering vast amounts of viewership in the process. Upon closer analysis, these entertainment providers depend a lot on sports for their revenues; Starhub cable TV has dedicated five channels solely to sports 24/7. Starhub, like all other profit-maximising firms, will only devote such a large component of their resources to sports if there is a demand for it from the consumers. Hence sports stars are extremely valued by consumers for their dazzling array of stepovers, hole-in-ones, home runs and touch downs.

If the sports stars are not paid these large amounts of money, it will serve as a discouragement for many potential superstars to enter the field of sports, as there would be better paying, and also safer professions out there – one just needs to flip open the newspapers to see the unfortunate plight of many sports stars who suffer broken legs, dislocated shoulders or torn ligaments all in the midst of doing sports. Thus, for the sake of the preservation of the growth and success of the entertainment industry, it is imperative that these sports stars who risk their lives everyday for the entertainment of a world-wide audience should deserve high salaries.

Next, as Thomas Friedman aptly puts it, “the world is now flat”. Globalisation, catalysed by the immense improvements in telecommunications and the developments in air, land and sea travel, has rocked the world. With countries being more interconnected and economic transactions on the rise, the talent of sports stars could be a pivotal factor in propping up a country's reputation, so as to attract greater amounts of foreign direct investment (FDI) and multi-national companies. The Singapore government dangled a \$1 million paycheck at the 2008 Beijing Olympic games as a motivation for its sports stars to obtain the coveted gold medal. Apart from that, other reasons could be to instil

national pride through the nation's talented sports stars such as table-tennis paddlers Feng Tian Wei and Li Jia Wei. The very fact that governments are willing to pay their country's own sports stars so much money – Michael Phelps earned more than US\$ 160,000 from the US government for his eight gold medals – means that governments also feel that sports stars, whose skills are so rare, are worth huge sums of money.

Lastly, sports stars are not paid too much for their talents because they are the best of the best, and they deserve those huge amounts of money. Take for example the greatest athlete in each sport: Tiger Woods, Roger Federer, Michael Jordan, Usain Bolt. They are all record breakers, legends in their respective fields, the cream of the crop. Think of Federer's record 15 Grand Slam Titles in the tennis – does he not deserve the sponsorship, advertisement deals, or prize money?

In conclusion I feel that these stars are certainly worth the huge amounts that they are paid. Considering their contributions to the other sectors of the economy, the risks they take while playing sports, and also their contributions to the needy, they are indeed heroes in their own right.

**Comments:**

***Very comprehensive and well-presented arguments. Knowledge of stars and justification for the high salaries clearly shown. Well done, Bob!***

## GP Preliminary Examination 2009

## essay 15

**“Sports stars are paid too much money for their talent.”  
Do you agree?**

Koh Siew Hui Michelle | 09S03L

The news that got people on their feet this year was the much-anticipated transfer of soccer legend Cristiano Ronaldo to Real Madrid. However, the shocking news was not so much his decision to transfer but, instead, the amount of money that Real Madrid was willing to pay him – an exorbitant 94 million euros. Many can only dream of earning that amount of money in a lifetime, much less in a single transaction. It may seem, to the common man, that the amount given to a man who can simply kick a ball around a field is excessive. However, this essay shall seek to prove that these sports stars are only getting what they deserve and, besides, the total amount of money that they receive may not necessarily be just for their talent but could be for other reasons as well. Hence, it will be unfair and myopic to claim that, “sports stars are paid too much money for their talent”.

Before I plunge right into my argument justifying athletes’ salaries, there are certain points that I have to concede. For one, I have to acknowledge that it is not only sports stars who have talent but that there are many others who have talent in the arts, dance et cetera. Hence, one would then question whether it is fair that sports stars are receiving so much for their athletic talents, when others who are equally unique and impressive are simply struggling for recognition. The salaries of many talented people simply pale in comparison to those of athletes. It is hard to deny that athletes are indeed being paid a little too much.

The mass media have ventured into the area of sports and much of their focus is on the stars themselves. Due to the global exposure that some of these sports stars – such as Maria Sharapova and Tiger Woods – have, many advertising companies are scrambling to sponsor these athletes so that when the camera takes their photos the advertisers’ brand names appear. Since many of these sports stars are becoming spokespeople for various sports brands such as Nike and Puma, they definitely earn wads of cash from their endorsements. It may thus seem that they are being paid too much money for their talent.

However, I would like to point out that the money that they earn from advertisements is not always directly a result of their talent but more of their marketability and their “star” factor (hence their being called sports stars). It is not so much because Maria Sharapova can hit a tennis ball across the court that she is in such demand by advertisers. I agree that her talent does play a small part in helping her clinch the endorsement deal, but it is largely her well-proportioned features and slender body that have gained the nods of many advertisers. To make the argument more convincing, take David Beckham as an example. During the time when he was said to have lost his magic touch in his free kicks, advertisers did not withdraw their endorsement contracts with him. He could still be seen on glossy posters for ‘Gillette’. His sharp features and deep piercing eyes, and not merely his talent, earned him money from advertisements. Hence, the fact that the huge amounts of money that sports stars earn does not completely stem from their talent is enough for any discerning person to see that athletes’ talent only constitutes a small portion of the total sum they get (which people think is unfair) and, hence, it cannot always be said that they are paid too much money for their talent.

Now, to delve into my argument that sports stars are not paid too much money for their talent, I would like to point out that the reason why this is so is that they are only getting what they truly deserve. The talent that these sports stars have is akin to a newly discovered diamond. At first sight, a newly discovered diamond will not appeal to many. It is most probably hidden beneath layers of dust and particles. It is only through the tedious work of polishing and cleaning that we then realise its potential to glitter and stop the hearts of girls who fix their eyes on it. These sports stars’ talents, like the diamond, have to go through a lot of hard work in order to fully reach their potential. These sports stars usually have to go through daily training for their particular sport and hone their skills in that area. Not only that, they have to grit their teeth through endless physical training sessions and even go for mental training to allow themselves to always develop a right state of mind for competitions. They get up in the wee hours of the morning to jog and warm up, after which they head straight for the usual training. The immense dedication and hard work that goes into developing their talent can be unimaginable to a regular person who works in a nine-to-five office job. Hence, with all the hard work they go through, I feel that these sports stars are only getting what they deserve for their talent.



and, therefore, they are not being paid too much.

Furthermore, the amount of money that these sports stars can earn is only limited to a short span of a few years. As mentioned earlier, the intense training that these athletes go through wears out parts of their body very fast, such that they fall from their optimum condition in a few years. Hence, the money that they earn while they are actively recognised as stars has to last them for the rest of their lives, after they step down from the pedestal of a 'star'. Many sports stars have a short career shelf-life of approximately ten years, after which they start to under-perform and can no longer perform at optimum levels. To secure their retirement, one would then think that they should earn as much as they possibly can. Thus, since the amount that they earn in such a short span of time has to last them a lifetime and maybe even provide for their families, I strongly feel that they are not being paid too much money for their talent.

Besides, their talent also generates positive effects on others. Is it not justified that they are being paid that huge sum of money? Many fans know by heart the stories of their soccer idols. Ronaldino, the poor Brazilian boy who had a talent for playing soccer and who practised playing daily in the streets, is now known to be one of the best soccer players in the world. David Beckham, the English boy who grew up in the Manchester United Academy, diligently practised his free kicks every day and is now known to be a free kick specialist. Such sports stars teach many aspiring athletes that the ordinary can become extraordinary, that as long as one puts one's heart, soul and mind to it, talent will be recognised. These sports stars serve to inspire people with their talent. Many coaches often screen matches of professional athletes right before a game to inspire their small-town teams to believe in themselves and do their very best. Since the benefits of these sports stars' talents do not simply stop with themselves but, instead, extend to a wide audience, these sports stars are only getting what they deserve for the advantages they bring to others. Furthermore, these sports stars not only inspire others, they act as a social glue which bonds fans of different races, religions and nationalities, providing them with something common to celebrate. As such, I feel that the positive externalities these sports stars generate can justify the salary that they receive and thus, they are not being paid too much money.

Moreover, the question that "sports stars are being paid too much money for their talent" seems to have an underlying assumption that being paid too much is bad. However, I would like to say that being paid a too-high salary is not necessarily a bad thing. This is because with the salary that they receive, these sports stars then have the ability to engage in charitable work. Michael Jordan often donates to children's homes and even brings some of these disadvantaged children to watch basketball games, giving them an experience of a lifetime. After the Asian tsunami in Aceh, Maria Sharapova donated her winnings from a tournament to aid relief efforts there. Since the salary given to sports stars can be used for good (and, being stars, maybe they can influence their fans to do likewise), I see little reason for critics to say that it is bad.

Overall, I strongly disagree that "sports stars are being paid too much money for their talent", simply because many are simply getting what they deserve and the total sum that they get, which many people would envy, may not completely stem from their talent. Many are too quick to conclude that the money that athletes earn completely arises from their talent and, therefore, they are being paid too much. Critics do not stop to consider the components that constitute these stars' salaries. Moreover, the good that these stars can do also justifies their salaries. I believe that many critics of this notion are probably envious (and maybe a tad jealous) and it is understandable since it is human nature to always engage in self-comparisons. However, I would like to say that we should cast aside this desire and really look carefully into the careers of these sports stars. From there, we may just understand the reasons for their huge salaries and even come to appreciate the work that these stars do.

#### **Comments:**

***Written with evident personal engagement and with great enjoyment. One of the best essays for this question. A highly interesting read!***

## GP Class Assignments 2010

essay 1

**“Extensive research in genetic engineering is a huge waste of money.”  
Do you agree?**

Sarah Chong Xin | 10S030

The price of the Human Genome Project (HGP): ten years and \$3 billion. The HGP, which was ultimately completed in 2003, mapped out all the genes in the entire genome of the human being. Today, it is being used as a springboard for many other projects in the field of genetic engineering research. Gene therapy, cloning and the synthesis of genetically-modified foods are just some examples of the frontiers of science that scientists today are pursuing. Accompanied by the rapid advances made in terms of the scientific method and the availability of cutting-edge scientific technologies, scientists can now carry out extensive research in the field of genetic engineering. Although critics have lamented the high cost of research into genetic engineering, I feel that in the long run, extensive research in genetic engineering is not a definite waste of money.

Only less than a decade ago, scientists were tremendously excited by the prospect of genetic engineering because they believed that it would not only be the answer to many of the incurable genetic diseases in the world, but that genetically modified foods could also be the key to eradicating malnutrition and poverty in developing countries. However, after some years of research, they have been forced to face reality. As leading British geneticist Steve Jones admitted, “We thought [genetic research] was going to change our lives but that has turned out to be a false dawn.” The millions of dollars pumped into this field each year in the hope that cures and solutions to the world’s food problems will be found have not yielded any significant results. Scientists say that they have realised that many diseases are caused by multiple genes, and even if they managed to identify and somehow modify these genes, this would have less effect than modifying the other factors like diet, lifestyle and the living environment of the patient. The latter would undeniably cost exponentially less while being more effective. Also, scientists have found that many of the genetically modified foods developed actually caused adverse reactions in consumers, forcing their withdrawal from the market. Even in the rare cases where genetically modified foods are successfully developed, they still require extensive and extremely costly testing to determine their safety for consumers. For example, research to incorporate a gene from Brazil nuts into soybean had to be abandoned halfway when scientists realised that numerous consumers had violent allergic reactions to the modified soybean. Many genetically modified crops meant to increase crop yield to lift farmers out of poverty have also been recalled when they were found to threaten or destabilise the ecosystem in which they were cultivated. A study published in the established scientific journal *Nature* demonstrated that Bt corn, a genetically modified crop, actually killed multiple species of insect larvae indiscriminately, instead of only those of crop-damaging insects. Hence, extensive genetic research into genetic engineering can be said to be an enormous waste of money as the millions of dollars pumped into the field have yielded little conclusive or applicable results over the recent years.

While I concede that research into genetic engineering is definitely not cheap and that groundbreaking findings are less common than predicted, I feel that it cannot and should not thus be automatically considered a waste of money. Even though scientists have admitted that they might not have always found direct answers to their questions through their research, they are quick to point out that their research is usually never completely useless. Genetic engineering research has allowed scientists to understand more about the genome of different organisms, and the different methods that they may employ to manipulate and modify it. Scientists may have realised that the development of cures for genetic diseases are more complicated than originally predicted, but at least now they know this fact and can thus devise new methods and research protocols which may eventually lead them to finding the elusive cures. Admittedly, there have been setbacks in the research process, where scientists were stumped and mystified by their research findings that demonstrated that their previous conceptions about the genome were false.

Nevertheless, these findings are immensely useful and may someday be the key to finally unlocking the answers that scientists have been looking for. Research into the field may not have yielded the predicted set of answers, but this does not make the entire research process useless and a total waste of money as it has instead given scientists a different set of findings. These findings are invaluable and can be used to further genetic engineering research, ultimately bringing scientists the answers for which they have originally been searching, that are to cure and rid the world of diseases, malnutrition and poverty. Hence, research into genetic engineering cannot be said to be a waste of money even though it has not, as of today, yielded the specific set of answers for which the world has been hoping.

Moreover, we cannot overlook the numerous invaluable benefits which mankind has already reaped thanks to genetic engineering research. A well-known example is the Golden Rice Project aimed at eradicating Vitamin A deficiency in developing countries. Each year, 124 million people are affected by it, with an estimated 1 to 2 million deaths directly resulting from it. Scientists have developed, through genetic engineering, a type of rice infused with extremely high levels of Vitamin A which could eventually eradicate this easily preventable disease. Research is still being carried out on the rice crop, with new species of the crop being developed, each promising to be even more nutritious than the previous species. This genetically modified rice crop has been distributed to multiple Third World countries. Even though it may be too early to draw significant conclusions about the effectiveness of this crop, it definitely promises to be an extremely powerful tool for the eradication of Vitamin A deficiency globally. Furthermore, there have been notable successes in the treatment of genetic diseases. Even though genetic diseases are admittedly rare, there are over 6000 types of different diseases, and hence a substantial number of sufferers. Doctors used to be able to identify sufferers of phenylketonuria, (which is an inability of the body to metabolise a certain amino acid) only during their toddler years when they had already become mentally retarded or severely handicapped due to their prolonged exposure to the amino acids in their diets. Today, however, scientists have developed a genetic test to detect phenylketonuria in infants through research that will allow early identification of these children, preventing their exposure to the amino acid. Hence, these children, when treated with the appropriate gene therapy, grow up to be healthy individuals. Also, hemophilia, a genetic blood clotting disorder, used to cause sufferers to bleed to death at a very young age from extremely minor injuries and accidents. Recently, however, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and Stanford University have, through research into genetic engineering, derived gene therapies for these patients, potentially curing them of this debilitating and previously incurable genetic disease. Hence, I feel that research into genetic engineering cannot be considered a huge waste of money as numerous benefits have undeniably been reaped from it. Even though there have been many failures and obstacles in the field, the rare successes have saved and improved the lives of countless people. We can never place a price on a human life, and thus every single life saved makes every single cent poured into genetic engineering research completely worth it.

In conclusion, I feel that it is inappropriate to discount research into genetic engineering as a huge waste of money simply because it has not always yielded the answers that we have been looking for. This novel field has huge potential, and until the day when we can prove that research into it will only be useless and yield no usable results whatsoever, we cannot say that it is only a waste of money. If our impatience and greed for earth-shattering applications cause us to give up on this extremely promising field, in the future, we can only regret losing all the wonderful benefits which we would probably have gained.

#### **Comments:**

***Good discussion on the whole, well substantiated and points were made clearly and succinctly. Good work.***

## GP Class Assignments 2010

## essay 2

**Should a government concern itself only with pragmatic issues and not strive to be a moral compass?**

Nigel Fong Jie Ming | 10S030

When the Bush Jr. administration cut off federal funding for embryonic stem-cell research, it was accused of pandering to conservative right-wing interests, and of being paternalistic. While hardly anyone today dares to suggest that governments are superfluous (save the occasional anarchist or comedian) – lest the enduring conflicts between the rights of different individuals turn into a Hobbesian war of all against all – the prevailing sentiment of the twenty-first century seems to be that governments should not seek to impose their morality on society, that governments often get it wrong when they interfere in people's private lives, and that a "nanny state" is as much an insult to the intellectual sensibilities of the people as it is an erosion of individual freedoms. Hence, common wisdom suggests governments should concern themselves only with pragmatic issues and not strive to be moral compasses. Yet, "intellectual sensibility of the people" is often a scarce commodity; sensible people put together can sometimes turn into irrational crazed crowds. While I agree that people should have the freedom to decide on most issues of individual morality, I believe that a government has, in some instances, a duty to be a moral compass for its people.

It is easy to sympathise with prevailing sentiments that individual freedom and small government are the quintessence of civilised society. At first glance, the government's role (or lack thereof) seems clear-cut: as Hobbes put it, to de-conflict clashing individual rights through rule of law, to foster collective action and maximise its people's welfare, as Mill would suggest, and to represent the interests and aggregate morality of its people. All three statements seem to confine themselves to the realm of the pragmatic; if a government had anything to do with morality, this morality comes from the people (e.g. for the government to codify as law) and is not imposed from the top.

Furthermore, examining regimes that proudly purport to be the moral compasses of their people quickly reveals that such regimes are often unsavory. The Taliban was the most extreme in this respect – to uphold "Islamic values", it banned female education and enforced medieval cruelty in its ancient legal system, often cutting off limbs or stoning criminals to death. Clearly there is a fine line between being a moral compass and being a dictatorial regime with blatant disregard for any semblance of freedoms and dignity. The belief of governments that they should be moral compasses is also open to abuse: China's Communist Party pretended to be a champion of social morality by imposing its Green Dam web filter on all Internet users, ostensibly to censor pornography. Unfortunately (or fortunately) it put up a naïve and clumsy façade, and netizens soon rebelled against it, realising that what China wanted to censor was not only pornography, but also pro-democracy topics like Tibet that threatened its rule. The sentiment that 'nanny states' are often not as benevolent as the word 'nanny' suggests, and therefore that governments should not seem to be moral compasses, seems hard to refute – especially when some governments are on the payroll of lobby groups.

If only it were that simple. Obviously, "pragmatic issues" and issues of societal morality are far from being mutually exclusive. Should section 377A of Singapore's penal code, which makes homosexual sex punishable by imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years, be repealed? From a purely pragmatic perspective, condoning being homosexuality may, to some, somehow lower birth rates since some might take the cue to 'become homosexual' instead of maintaining a 'normal family unit'. This is obviously ridiculous and clearly not a key argument in the debate here. A government that concerns itself only with such pragmatic issues and ignores the moral questions at stake is a government to be laughed at – there is no escaping being a moral compass. Even a government that appeals to majority opinion is a government that, consciously or otherwise, makes a moral decision. The pragmatic thing to do would be to represent aggregate morality by finding a mutually acceptable middle ground that maximises societal welfare. But in so doing, governments have become moral compasses. "Should governments be moral compasses" is thus a null question; governments often have no choice.

Yet, there are times when the government might have a choice. When Swiss voters voted in a recent referendum to ban the construction of new minarets, the government could have vetoed the ban by invoking constitutional protection of minority rights, or submitted the matter to the European Commission for Human Rights. It chose not to sacrifice votes to do so, instead sanctioning racism and xenophobia, while robbing Muslims to some extent of the right to worship freely – and that too in a liberal first world democracy that claims to be principled. This is a case of when a government should step up as a moral compass.

Unfortunately, defending principles can mean alienating voters and, more significantly, rejecting opposing views. Obama's healthcare reform effort was borne out of (most likely genuine) sympathy for the plight of the uninsured – medical bills being the top cause of bankruptcy in the USA – as well as shame that the USA had turned its back on every notion of humane society by denying the poor and uninsured healthcare which is, to many, a right, whether or not one can afford it. Even China did better at providing affordable healthcare. Obama's plans were, of course, anathema to those who had their selfish interests at stake – for instance, the healthcare lobby, which was concerned that government policy would compromise profits as well as the well-off, who would not benefit from universal healthcare but would have to foot the bill for it. In such a situation, should a government be purely pragmatic, represent only the majority, and ignore the pleas of those who suffer from the selfishness of social morality? I beg to differ. Some principles – like the right to have access to healthcare, even if you cannot pay – are so fundamental that I believe governments must uphold them, whatever their people think. If push comes to shove, I hold it to be the duty of governments to act as moral compasses and impose the upholding of such rights on its selfish people.

Of course, this stance opens up a can of worms. What rights are so fundamental that governments should turn their backs on the people they represent? Where do we draw the line? What checks and balances do we have against abuse? Will the next government simply appeal to populism and repeal such sensible policies? To these questions I have no answer, except for the humble suggestion that governments should engage the people in social discourse and hopefully, common sense will prevail – like it did when the West abolished slavery, and emancipated African-Americans.

On a global level, I believe that governments sometimes have the role to be moral compasses. When "Tutsi cockroaches" were being "crushed" by "Hutu Power", when Palestinians have no land, no water, and no medical supplies due to Israeli embargoes (not to mention no freedom, no dignity, and often, no life), or when African children literally shrivel and die for lack of food, I put forth that governments should do something, lest we deny the humanity we all share, or demolish the precious notions of righteousness for which many have perished. "Being a moral compass" and "doing something" often comes at the cost of pragmatic interests – military intervention, or simply refusing to buy blood may cost money – but it does not mean we should discard all notions of pragmatic calculus and, for instance, march troops into a dictatorship when doing so would only cause more harm.

In conclusion, I believe that the art of governance comes with an inevitable duty to be a moral compass for the people when circumstances call for it. Good governance entails not automatically being the slave of majority opinion, or staying out of contentious fields, but sometimes defending fundamental principles on both a national and international level. Abuse can be a problem, but just as we do not ban knives because knives can be used as murder weapons, the mere propensity for abuse is no reason to rob governments of this tool to maximise social welfare and protect the minority. To the anti-government activists: instead of promoting small government, why not promote good governance?

### **Comments:**

***Good essay on the whole, well thought out and substantial. Excellent command of structure and organisation and clear line of reasoning.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Preliminary Examination 2009

**paper 1**

**Is the attempt to ascertain an objective reality limiting our construction of knowledge?**

Yap E-Lynn | 09A01B

In the attempt to ascertain objective reality, we strengthen our existing methods of knowledge construction. This claim may be examined on two counts: firstly, the assumption that there even is an objective reality (a realm existing independently of ourselves) that is necessary for knowledge construction to take place. While sceptics and anti-realists may refute this, the objectivity-denying idea that “there are no facts, only interpretation” (as Nietzsche claims) is untenable and suspends epistemological progress. Such claims, however, are helpful to keep in mind. Secondly, the word “attempt” does not imply that this process of ascertaining objective reality is a particularly foolproof one, and even suggests the high propensity of failure. Yet while the constant striving towards such a concept may often yield particular crises of belief, these are often helpful in our advancement of knowledge construction. The attempt is only an inhibition when it invites closed-mindedness or a global suspension of belief.

In examining concepts of reality, theories of perception are key. The realist camp posits an independently existing realm while the anti-realists deny the presence (or the possibility) of such objectivity. The former may be further divided into two groups: naïve realists and representative realists. The naïve realist would argue for the commonsensical notion that “what you see is what you get”; in other words, we perceive the world as it is. Yet this is overly simplistic and relies on a circular argument. By arguing that we perceive things as they are, there is an assumption that we know what things are truly like, which then rests on the very first claim. Representative realism, on the other hand, admits the possibility of sense deception. By acknowledging our impressions as being separate from the physical objects themselves – which, nonetheless, continue existing independently of our experience – it denies the simplistic idea of perfect perception. This, then, relates back to the idea of “attempt”: ascertaining objective reality is always subject to sense deception and faulty inferences, but the basic, underlying assumption of objective reality remains.

Why then, is the anti-realist approach untenable? Like the realists, anti-realists may be viewed as two distinct camps: idealists and phenomenonists. The former is championed by figures such as Berkeley, who put forth the claim that “esse est percipi”; things exist only by being perceived. Yet this leads to the absurd idea that things put out of sight immediately disappear: for instance, when we leave the apple in the drawer and close it, the apple ceases to exist. Berkeley tries to counter this with the idea of God, who constantly perceives all things and thus keeps the world in existence, but such appeals to God invite much religious scepticism in turn. Phenomenonists try to rectify this with the concept of the “Permanent Possibility of Sensation”, argued for by figures like John Stuart Mill. This suggests that things exist insofar as they are possible to perceive. The aforementioned apple, therefore, does not disappear because perception of it may once more occur upon opening the drawer. Both theories, however, are fundamentally limiting in that they do not explain the regularity of our experiences. While the realists are able to do so by appealing to the objective laws of nature like chemistry and physics, anti-realists cannot persuasively account for the regular corroboration of everyone’s experiences. Attempts to do so, such as Berkeley’s, often rely on God or other such philosophical assumptions susceptible to attack, and are not generally considered successful.

This leads us to further dangers of denying objective reality. Arguably, these beliefs limit our construction of knowledge rather than our attempts to ascertain objectivity. The global sceptic, who either denies the existence of objective reality or the possibility of ascertaining it, arguably holds a rather incoherent worldview.

Thomas Ryle’s counterfeit coinage argument provides a strong refutation. Ryle demonstrates that, just as it is impossible to have counterfeit coins in a world where no real ones exist, the view that we will never be able to access objective reality because our senses will always fail us is incoherent: the awareness of sense deception presupposes that, at other times, our senses do not fail us. As such, the notion of a subjective reality is parasitic upon that of an objective one. This is comparable to the counter-arguments against sceptics who claim that it is never possible to know anything with certainty – the very claim presupposes what they are trying to deny.

All these arguments against anti-realists demonstrate that a belief in the impossibility of achieving objective knowledge is a deeply self-contradictory one. It also highlights one of the most important reasons for attempting to ascertain objective reality: the need to resist solipsism. If we were to argue that experiences are incurably subjective, we admit that it is impossible to ascertain that other minds besides our own – and subsequently, the whole of physical reality – exist, which is an extremely difficult philosophical position to sustain. Indeed, most thinkers do not submit to this; it is limiting for us to, like the Sophists, constantly suspend all our beliefs because we think that our minds are the only things we can ever know. Hume's mitigated scepticism aptly demonstrates that nature will always undermine extreme scepticism. We cannot help but believe in an objective reality because its denial is incompatible with daily life. The solipsist who cannot be sure if the lion attacking him is real and hence does not walk away will soon have his knowledge construction prematurely halted. A less extreme example is put forth by Descartes, who, despite opening himself up to extreme sceptical scenarios (such as the dreaming argument, which suggests that dreams are indistinguishable from experiences when we are awake, and therefore make objectivity difficult to ascertain), admitted that a fundamental belief in the existence of objective reality was needed for him to carry out his sceptical meditations.

We may then further argue for the importance of attempting to achieve certain, objective knowledge with reference to rationalist and empiricist thoughts. The former argues that all knowledge derives from reason, and the latter posits experience as the true source. A harmonious coupling of both, complemented with the assumption of objective reality, advances knowledge construction. Rationalist concepts like Descartes's clear and distinct ideas – self-justifying, intuited ideas – provide us with temporally and spatially independent knowledge like mathematics, logic and transcendental arguments. More clearly than empiricism, rationalism is compatible with the idea of certain and objective knowledge.

Empiricism, on the other hand, admits less certainty. While our sensations are incorrigible – we can never deny that we are having experiences, as they confer a self-justifying necessity upon themselves – inferences beyond them, about a supposedly 'objective' realm, are very difficult to substantiate conclusively. Yet the difficulty of accessing an objective realm should not lead us to the avoidance of any attempts to do so. It is necessary to construct a more expansive knowledge system than that which rationalism permits. While the latter allows us to know "objective" and "certain" truths like math and logic, they remain limited if not complemented by empiricist attempts to achieve more of such truths. Take math for example – its deductive method exists independently of us, and can be known with certainty, but only with the addition of experience can it be used for the natural sciences. We do not live purely in the noumenal (objective) world, but also in the phenomenal. What this shows is that we can attempt to ascertain objective reality (in the case of the natural sciences, by researching the objective laws of nature) while at the same time remaining aware of the very high possibility of sense deception. Such an idea is similar to that of the representative realist, as mentioned.

The attempt therefore only limits our knowledge construction when it refuses to admit knowledge claims with as high a level of certainty as those of the rationalists. Furthermore, it can even be strengthened by claims of the sceptic. While the sceptic reminds us that much of what we claim to know is tainted by subjectivity, we may use his arguments to refine our attempts to ascertain the objective, for by submitting entirely to postmodern ideas of never being able to know with certainty anything beyond our subjective selves, there can be no real purpose in the rather social, solipsism-denying activity of knowledge construction. Doubt of our attempts can help us identify fallacies and prejudices in our worldview, constantly questioning if the attempts are philosophically substantiated. As Bertrand Russell opines, the value of philosophy lies in its "very uncertainty", which frees us from the "tyranny of custom". Only by taking for granted the existence of objective reality can we explain our attempts to reach it, and even though these are rarely proven without a shadow of a doubt, certainty is simply a standard to strive towards, not a condition that knowledge must always have.

### **Comments:**

***Reads like a research paper, rather than a timed exam script. Very dense in terms of content packed in, yet employed judiciously at exactly the right place to support exactly the right point you're making. Argument is expressed elegantly. A real pleasure to read this script.***

***You've busted the scale with this one but I can't give you 31 or higher.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Preliminary Examination 2009

**paper 1**

**How far do you agree that most of what we consider to be knowledge is merely belief?**

Loh Ping Shun | 09A01D

Knowledge shall be taken to be justified as true belief. This paper argues that such a skeptical position, while seemingly undefeatable, is ultimately based on the flawed assumption that the justification and truth conditions must be fulfilled beyond doubt. I shall first consider how it could be argued that most of what we consider knowledge is merely belief.

Firstly, sceptics employ the infinite regress of justification argument. All knowledge needs to be justified, yet the beliefs used to justify them must themselves be justified by other beliefs, which in turn must be justified too. Hence sceptics argue we will be quickly trapped in an infinite regress of justification. In other words, we will ultimately come to a point where we can no longer justify our beliefs.

For example, suppose I hold the knowledge that “my teacher is wearing a blue shirt”. The skeptic will ask me for justification and I would reply that I can justify this belief by appealing to my belief that I perceive my teacher wearing a blue shirt. The sceptic could then press on and ask how I justify that my senses are reliable. I may then justify my claim again by saying that they have generally been reliable in the past but the sceptic would then question the reliability of my memory and ultimately it seems there is no way to conclusively justify our beliefs. The sceptic would then claim that my so called knowledge is thus unjustified and merely a belief.

Secondly, sceptics may employ the evil demon argument. They argue that there may well be an evil demon powerful enough to entrap us in an imaginary world in which we seemingly live, rendering all knowledge of the external world false and thus a mere belief. It has even been suggested that this demon distorts our reasoning ability, rendering our knowledge (which is independent of the external world), such as mathematics and logic, invalid as well. For example, I may believe that the square root of 4 is equal to 2 but that is based on the assumption that my reasoning is sound. Perhaps the square root of 4 is 4 but the cunning demon has deceived me into thinking the former is true.

Faced with these arguments, it seems that virtually all our knowledge is rendered invalid since it ultimately lacks justification and may well be untrue due to the possibility of an evil demon.

Prima facie, we can still save some knowledge in the form of propositions, in which we contradict ourselves by denying them. These propositions are known as transcendental arguments. One of them is the cogito, I think therefore I am. Even if an evil demon exists, at the very least I exist as a “thinking being”, as Descartes called it, if nothing else. Other such arguments are “Language exists” and “I have the ability to doubt”. Without language, I cannot even express my doubts, while it makes no sense to doubt that I have the ability to doubt. Hence these arguments resist the sceptical attacks presented above, because to deny them is simply impossible.

Nevertheless, transcendental arguments do not refute the assumption in question, since it questions if ‘most of what we consider to be knowledge is merely belief’ and if all we know are transcendental arguments, which would mean that the assumption still holds true.

I shall now consider attempts by foundationalists to defeat the sceptic attempts, which are ultimately flawed. Firstly, rationalists hold that reason can defeat the sceptics if we rebuild all that we know on the foundation of reason. I shall consider Descartes’ attempt here.

Descartes meets the problem of the infinite regress of justification by arguing that knowledge can be reasoned and built on ‘clear and distinct ideas’ that need no further justification. In other words, they are self-evident and self-justifying and provide a foundation on which to rebuild our knowledge in general. Some of these clear and distinct ideas include laws of logic, mathematical knowledge and the existence of God. In fact, he uses reason to justify the existence of God in place of an evil demon, thus ruling out the possibility that we have virtually no knowledge, since a benevolent God would not allow that. Hence, he goes on to argue that even knowledge of the external world is largely valid, given that God exists and he would not allow us to be deceived extensively with regard



to the external world. He also argues that 'clear and distinct ideas' being self-evident is guaranteed because God would not deceive us into believing what we cannot help but believe in.

However, his proof of God has been subject to the criticism that it is circular, thus bringing down much of his project. This is because he uses the idea that self-evident ideas are true to prove the existence of God before using the existence of God to prove that self-evident ideas are necessarily true and that we live in a real world. Without God, it is doubtful that self-evident truths such as the laws of logic are really true, since an evil demon may be deceiving us and distorting our reasoning.

Moving on, I shall consider the empiricists' attempts to build knowledge on sense data. The empiricists generally argue that we cannot doubt our awareness of our perceptions, even if we doubt the existence of the real world. For example, I cannot doubt that I perceive a patch of blue or that I am currently having a headache even if there is no external world and I have no head! Hence empiricists present sense data as an alternative foundation on which to build our knowledge.

However, while knowledge of our sense data is impossible to deny, it is hard to justify much knowledge securely on its basis. The biggest problem is that such sense data may still be generated by the evil demon and we simply cannot securely justify our knowledge of the external world, even if we justify our beliefs about our own perceptions.

In sum, both rationalists and empiricists fail in their search for a secure foundation on which to rebuild knowledge. Perhaps we should then give up our quest for absolute certainty and consider a coherentist's account of knowledge.

Coherentists argue that ultimately all our beliefs mutually justify each other or lend credence to each other. Since much of our current knowledge cannot be built on a particular foundation, perhaps there is no foundation on which to build, and knowledge is simply a web of beliefs with no foundation. In such a case, knowledge is that which coheres with such a web of beliefs. Coherence refers not just to consistency but also the act of adding coherence to other beliefs, as well as the ability of other beliefs to add justification to them. For example, my belief that my teacher is wearing blue coheres well with my belief that my senses are reliable in general, which in turn also justifies my belief that my sense data is reliable. Such coherence provides an alternative way to secure our knowledge, by accepting knowledge as that which fits well with our other beliefs, and is thus more likely to be true.

The sceptic may then argue that such an account fails because there is no guarantee that our entire web of beliefs is not all wrong, in which case coherence provides no justification! After all, if we lived in the make-believe world of Harry Potter, we would have beliefs that cohere, such as those concerning witches flying and the secret world of magic unknown to Muggles. However such a belief system is wrong, is it not? In other words, contradictory coherent systems of belief can exist, and thus coherentism is no guarantee of truth since contradictory systems of beliefs cannot be both true.

Nevertheless, the sceptic reaches such a conclusion because he assumes that knowledge is attained only if the conditions for truth and justification are fulfilled beyond doubt. Such an assumption is flawed because the ordinary linguistic use of knowledge does not imply or necessitate absolute certainty. When I say that my teacher is wearing blue, I do not mean I know that he is wearing blue beyond a doubt, and that there is no way an evil demon is deceiving me. If we accept the sceptics assumption, we would have moved away from our ordinary use of the word, and it is therefore questionable if we analyse knowledge under a definition that is not used.

Hence, we can know much of what we do know, as it coheres well with our general system of beliefs. We may not know it with certainty but that should not bother us since that is not a necessity of knowledge (in the usual sense of the word). Finally, it bears mentioning that even if certainty of truth and of justification is required for knowledge, it does not mean that the failure to attain both renders any claim to knowledge mere belief. A mere belief is one that can lack complete justification, such as claiming Santa exists, while any attempt to justify a belief sets a higher requirement. I may not know for certain that the sun will rise tomorrow, but such a belief is justified and probably true, and can be contrasted with mere beliefs, which are often unjustified and very likely false.

#### **Comments:**

***Excellent. Systematic development of argument which addresses all the issues that need to be addressed.'***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Preliminary Examination 2009

**paper 2**

**'Beauty is in the eye of the beholder but taste is a matter of certainty.'**  
**Discuss with reference to the nature of knowledge in aesthetics.**

Yap E-Lynn | 09A01B

The nature of knowledge in aesthetics is such that most of it is often viewed as being subjective, hence the age-old adage that "beauty is in the eye of the beholder". However, this does not involve the concept of taste, which is distinct from beauty in that it relates to objective aesthetic judgement as opposed to personal feelings of pleasure. It is true that beauty is subjective, because such perceptions do not involve judging the value of a piece of art. Taste, on the other hand, is less subjective – though one would hesitate to say that it is a matter of certainty. It relies on the inter-subjectivity of opinions, which elevates it above the purely personal realm of beauty, but not to that of certainty. This has an important implication for aesthetics – it is not propositional knowledge, but something that involves the role of imagination, which while guided by inter-subjective ideas of taste, is not static enough to be deemed certain. This, however, adds to the value of aesthetic knowledge, as it will later be shown.

Let us first examine the distinction between "beauty" and "taste". Beauty in art is a personal perception of pleasure, taking aesthetic delight in a piece of art. Taste, however, tempers this subjectivity by rendering some perceptions of beauty more valid than others. Something commonly judged to be beautiful may not be universally acclaimed by critics – for instance, one may view pop art by Roy Lichtenstein or Andy Warhol to be more beautiful than, say, a more minimal piece of work like Caspar David Friedrich's "Monk by the Sea", but the latter will be more commonly lauded by art critics for matters relating to style and technique. This brings up ideas of formalism, and relates to the institutional view of aesthetic judgment – an artwork is conferred status by the established world of art critics, due to the idea of "taste" being less subjective than that of beauty. These concepts are best illustrated by Hume and Kant's ideas of aesthetic judgment.

Hume and Kant shared ideas about aesthetic judgment, in that they both believed it to be guided by certain universal principles. Hume gives the example of Sancho's kinsmen, who are able to come to agreement about their drink and thus share ideas on taste. He argues that our reactions to art are guided by similar principles, and therefore there can be universal agreements on taste: his example is that it simply is not possible for one to intellectually regard Ogilby as being better than Milton. This, however, is distinct from beauty; because the perception of beauty is fundamentally based on personal experiences of pleasure, one may find William McGonagall's "Descriptive Jottings of London" to be more beautiful than "London" by William Blake, but the universal principles still hold each poet's status to be drastically different. The former is renowned for being one of the world's worst poets, the latter among the best. One cannot help it if one finds the former's poem more beautiful – in that one takes more pleasure in reading it, because it is comically bad – but the concept of taste renders such a person quite a philistine; on the other hand, the person may prefer the former but intellectually regard the latter as being worth of more artistic merit, which shows us that exhibiting good taste does not necessarily involve common perceptions of beauty.

Kant, a key figure of formalism, further adds to such ideas with the concept of 'disinterestedness'. This means that one's perception of an artwork must not be bound by any overlying concepts; instead, our impulses must be in free, harmonious play. One has to attempt to elevate oneself above subjective ideas to achieve pure, disinterested aesthetic judgement. Such an idea supports the concept of beauty as being more subjective than taste: he states that one should not judge an artwork to be good because one takes pleasure in it, but rather the other way around. Both Hume and Kant admit the difficulty of doing so – again, it is difficult for one to free oneself from personal tendencies towards particular things such as entertainment value in poetry – but Hume argues that it is possible to become an ideal critic with practice and delicacy.

The formalist argument further supports the idea of taste being less subjective than beauty. Clive Bell states, "all art is significant form"; in other words, aesthetics is not simply some unconsolidated field, where an artwork's merit lies purely in the eyes of the beholder. Our engagement with an artwork must be guided meaningfully by the means with which it presents itself, such that our knowledge of the aesthetic object is complemented by the form. While one may be inclined to meditate on the idea

of love after reading Stephanie Meyer's "Twilight", wondering about the illusory nature of it and finding its portrayal of an ill-fated affair quite beautiful, this does not indicate good taste as such reflections are merely occasioned by the artwork, and not guided by form. An insight should not be extraneous to the artwork; for instance, Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" is more clearly worthy of aesthetic approval, with its employment of technique such as iambic pentameter and metaphorical imagery. "The Scream" instils in us a sense of existential anguish and isolation because various properties of it support such a perception; the diagonal of the jetty causes the figure to jut out towards us, while horizontal stratification of the landscape behind emphasises the sense of depth. While philosophers disagree as to how much knowledge of form is needed for aesthetic judgment – Kant, for one, argues that one may still meaningfully exhibit good taste in reading Milton without prior knowledge of poetical construction – the overarching idea remains that, in aesthetics, there are more reliable indicators of aesthetic merit than "beauty" which warrant good "taste".

With this being said, there are undoubtedly several shortcomings to the idea of universal taste. The first is that formalists may veer into excessive emphasis on technical knowledge, such that aesthetic knowledge becomes exceedingly exclusive. Indeed, a common accusation levelled at Hume is that his standard of an ideal critic is restricted to the cultured and wealthy, who are privileged enough to pursue aesthetic knowledge for leisure. The second is that aesthetic knowledge clearly is not a science, and this is why taste might be guided (more clearly than beauty) by inter-subjective agreements of critics as posited by Hume and Kant, but it cannot be a matter of certainty because the methodologies are not consolidated enough. Plato denied artists the label of "techne"; such expert knowledge he restricted to those such as scientists and mathematicians, whose methods were clearly more systematic. He further argued against the value of art, claiming that since it is not guided on the part of the artists by common methods, it appeals to an inferior part of the soul. The third is that aesthetic knowledge can never be propositional knowledge. Granted, taste may be commonly agreed upon, but it is never conclusive because art does not offer us claims in the Justified True Belief Framework. Thus it is rarely entirely clear what exactly is being assessed, and because critics may consider different parts of an artwork when displaying taste, it does not have a systematic enough basis to claim certainty. Finally, the occurrence of "revolutions" throughout artistic history shows that the concept of taste is rooted in social environments. As much as Kant would advance disinterestedness, it is questionable whether it is truly possible for one to disengage oneself completely from the notions of one's society. For instance, Impressionists like Renoir and Monet increasingly found the laboured strokes of French neo-classicism oppressive, as they found themselves in more exuberant times which called for a change in style. Correspondingly, critics found the latter outdated and thus the artistic world embraced a different style altogether. Such examples show that within 'paradigms' taste may be certain, but it does not remain independent of time.

Having established that while taste is less subjective than beauty, but not systematic enough to claim certainty, what are some implications for aesthetics? One may argue that while aesthetics depart from our conventional Justified True Belief accounts of knowledge, the role it offers to the imagination might undermine certainty, but replaces this quality with another that is difficult to find elsewhere. This is neither beauty nor taste, but another component of aesthetics worthy of examination. Take Aristotle's claims for one – he argues that art offers us a cathartic experience, providing us with training in feeling and judgment to attain higher levels of moral insight. When we look at Masaccio's "Expulsion of Adam and Eve", we may disagree with its condemnation of fleshly temptation but still appreciate it for its form and empathetic presentation of emotional weakness. This, therefore, shows us that aesthetics is intrinsically of value, even if the field of knowledge does not admit very much certainty.

### Comments:

**Excellent reading of the question. The essay is clear, sharply analytical and brimming with a host of interesting examples. Given time, you could, perhaps, have examined other standards for beauty and art (e.g. mimesis, etc) but this is a minor criticism. Overall, this is first rate.**

## Knowledge and Inquiry Preliminary Examination 2009

paper 2

**'Much of what is known today is justified by false appeals to authority.'  
Discuss.**

Loh Ping Shun | 09A01D

This paper argues that the quote is true only to the extent that much of what is known today is justified by an appeal to authority, but not a false appeal. In addition, it has to be qualified that authority in itself is seldom a sufficient justification for knowledge.

I shall first examine how it may be argued that much of what we know is justified by an appeal to authority. Firstly, knowledge is constructed and justified by previous researchers and is often taken as valid until proven otherwise; such knowledge often forms the bulk of what we know today. This is because of the presence of paradigms in most fields of knowledge which provide the focus and assumptions for contemporary research to build on. Often these assumptions are based on the findings of previous research and are taken as valid on the basis that the research community has proven it in the past. In other words, the authority appealed to is the findings of previous research.

For example, Newtonian laws of physics were the dominant paradigm in physics before Einstein and despite the presence of anomalies, they continued to be accepted. For example, when Uranus deviated from its orbits according to Newtonian laws, scientists postulated that it must be due to the gravitational influence of an undiscovered planet which they named Vulcan. Some astronomers have even claimed to have observed it until Einstein's theory of relativity provided an alternative explanation and proved that Vulcan never existed. Hence, we see how knowledge previously validated is generally held on to unless clearly proven otherwise.

A separate case in point can be seen in mathematics. Euclid's Elements was once the paradigm of certain knowledge and was hardly questioned by mathematicians and rationalists, who often used it as an example of infallible knowledge produced by reason. It was not till Hilbert that mathematicians realised that Euclid's Elements contained numerous incomplete proofs and contained too few axioms. The fact that these mistakes lay hidden for thousands of years and escaped the scrutiny of mathematicians such as Descartes and Pascal lend credence to the idea that few mathematicians truly questioned the work of Euclid given his authority as the first person to formalise it.

Secondly, due to the depth of current developments in knowledge, it is nearly impossible for one man to understand even a fraction of it. Even professors have expertise only in their area of study. For example, professors in electronics may know little about mechanics even though they may be related to each other under the field of physics. However, due to the usefulness of knowledge constructed by other experts, we make full use of them based on their authority, though we know nothing about the actual justification for it. For example, we all eat fruits and vegetables regularly though we have never researched and proven to ourselves the benefits of eating them (with the exception of students in biology). Similarly, in economics, we often take the advice of economists due to our own limited knowledge.

In addition, knowledge in certain fields may be extremely valuable to researchers in other fields of knowledge who may not fully understand them. For example, biologists make massive use of statistics in population studies and mechanics make full use of calculus though it is doubtful if the researchers fully understand the math behind calculus and statistics.

However, while clearly much of what we know is based on an appeal to authority, it is hard to see why it is a false appeal.

Firstly, in the case of paradigms influencing our acceptance of past work, we have to note that for current paradigms to be entrenched, they must have first withstood the scrutiny of researchers. While such knowledge is certainly fallible, it is likely to be well justified and accepting it is not a false appeal to authority. For example, Newtonian physics only became the dominant paradigm in physics after a long tussle with Aristotelean physics. In contrast, knowledge that fails to stand up to the scrutiny of researchers of a particular time often flounders. For example, Andrew Wiles' first proof of the Fermat conjecture was flawed and unanimously rejected by the mathematical community. Similarly, the theory of the Ricardian equivalence in economics failed to gain acceptance due to lack of empirical evidence, as was the claim by two scientists of having discovered 'cold fusion' - a method of producing nuclear energy 'too cheap to meter'.

Similarly, when we make use of knowledge generated by researchers in other fields, we are not making a false appeal to authority since such knowledge is likely to be credible, having withstood the scrutiny of fellow researchers. For example, we accept what nutritionists say about fruits and vegetables and what economists say about the need for an expansionary fiscal policy in a recession because there is broad agreement in their community that such knowledge is true, thus making such appeals to their authority inductively strong.

Thirdly, an appeal to authority is seldom sufficient justification for most of the knowledge we hold on to. In the case of researchers accepting the authority of past research, these past findings must continue to survive fresh evidence. For example, despite the authority Newton's theories held, the presence of too many anomalies led to Einstein's theory of relativity taking root in its place. Similarly our belief in the authority of those with regard to fields of knowledge we know little of is seldom absolute. The advice of nutritionists and economists must work for us to continue using them. For example, we do see that eating fruits and vegetables does help prevent constipation. In contrast when economists expound free trade but it leads to falling income due to foreign competition, workers in sunset industries become strongly opposed to free trade despite its claims of improving the economy in the long run, showing that the influence of authority even in fields of knowledge we know less of is not deterministic.

Finally, such appeals to authority are often desirable. An appeal to authority of previous research allows for progress to be made. For example, in science, if we had kept questioning Newton's laws when they were formulated, much of today's mechanics would not be developed. Similarly we accept various authorities in different fields of knowledge to allow our society to develop to this stage today. This is because we can now specialise in different fields and acquire greater depth of knowledge in the fields we specialise in, allowing for a more extensive development of knowledge that has clearly helped in the advancement of society.

In conclusion, this quote rightly captures our extensive use of authority to justify the knowledge we use. However, it is not true to say that these appeals are 'false' as they are in fact credible. It must also be qualified that such appeals to authority are in any case not taken as absolute and can be challenged in the face of new evidence.

### **Comments:**

***A very good essay that displays an impressive breadth of knowledge. You have answered the question with some aplomb. Some points are a little under-developed but that is a relatively minor fault.***

**Julia Coff**

**Grace Ong**

**Audrey Tan**

**Umarani**

### ***Erratum***

*In the second issue of the 2009 KS Bull, the line on page 4, paragraph 4 should read “A prime example can be found in our local context: **Tammy, a polytechnic student**, made a sex-tape involving herself and her boyfriend that was released on the Internet.”*





