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knowledge skills department



# k s bull

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Issue two 2010

# Message from the Principal

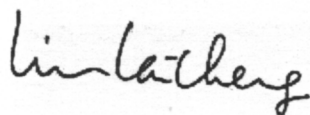
We, at Raffles, are strong promoters of place-based education. What has a sense of place to do with GP essays? Place connotes a sense of community, the environment, as well as an awareness of socio-political, economic and cultural perspectives. Place also connotes an understanding of context and macro-trends. While this volume of KS Bull is being published, flood waters are endangering lives and ruining the homes and livelihood of at least 3 million people in Pakistan; young athletes from all over the world are competing at the Youth Olympic Games held, for the first time, in Singapore; Hong Kong and the Philippines are still reeling from the death of seven Hong Kong tourists whose tour bus was hijacked by an ex-policeman in Manila.

Students must keep abreast daily of what is happening around the world. Read, read and read news reports online or otherwise. No matter what topic you choose to write an essay on, make sure you are able to include examples of what is happening in different parts of the world pertaining to the issue you are writing about. Anchor your arguments and points with reference to communities, countries and contexts. Build in data and statistics to back your observation or thesis. These are ways in which you can make your essays grounded and convincing.

As you read the essays of our able writers, look out for how arguments are substantiated and how an awareness of current affairs is reflected in their work. Challenge yourself to do the same.

Happy writing.

Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)  
Principal



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# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 2010

## essay 1

### Do the arts have a future in Singapore?

Victoria Ting Yue Xin | 10A13A

As a disclaimer before his appearance in a staging of the beloved classic, *Much Ado About Nothing*, well-known local thespian Adrian Pang once sheepishly implored his audience not to “judge” him for his “television work”. This dismissive, almost shame-faced, attitude lamentably seems to be the general consensus when it comes to Singapore’s fledgling arts scene and its future. However, I would argue that the tide of common perception is slowly but surely changing, with the government’s current active encouragement of the arts scene as well as local audiences’ growing receptiveness to it. The arts, I believe, do and must have a future in Singapore.

The increasing artistic influence locally is indeed undeniable. Especially over the previous couple of decades, the arts scene has determinedly striven to make its presence felt. From interviews with popular stage actresses like Emma Yong enjoying full page coverage in our newspapers, to the construction or renovation of iconic buildings like the Esplanade and the National Museum that have irrevocably altered the local landscape, the arts industry certainly seems a good deal healthier than a mere decade ago. Furthermore, the private sector and the government, under the substantially-funded auspices of the National Arts Council, have contributed in no small part to the luring of established international acts to our shores. These range from the British staging of *The Tempest* (2010), to the Indian reworking of *Hamlet: The Prince of Clowns*, demonstrating how diverse and indeed dynamic our city has become as an international stage and as an arts hub. As such, it would appear that with such governmental support and lively international offerings, the arts scene in Singapore is set to continue its upward flourish.

However, conventional wisdom and the prevailing majority mindset would cast a shadow on this lofty prospect. As Adrian Pang implied by his disclaimer, one could expect that the arts – be it theatre, paintings, or music – remain very much within the filtered-air domain of Singapore’s affluent and Western-educated, far removed from its heartlands. By contrast then, the stereotypical local heartlander is expected to relish his lower-rung local fare – Jack Neo movies or Channel 8 drama serials – instead. This would discouragingly suggest, then, that local artists have to pander to majority appetites, doing “television work” or its equivalent that is not necessarily challenging to their craft, to make ends meet, and thus stifling the potential development of home-grown arts.

Furthermore, conventional wisdom appears doggedly fixed against the arts as a viable career choice, advocating professions like law or engineering to put food on the table instead. Certainly, there is a distressing trend of locally-born artists moving overseas to further their passions, after finding making a living locally a near impossibility. Fashion designer Andrew Gn is perhaps the best example of a struggling artist and craftsman who shifted abroad to find the success and open-armed reception in the Parisian catwalks that was absent in Singapore. As such, the disheartening prospects for local artists are definitely a factor inhibiting the development of true-blue Singaporean arts, rather than imported offerings, by discouraging talented individuals from pursuing them as a legitimate profession.

Nevertheless, the Singaporean government seems to have recognised this problem and responded accordingly by widening its policies in arts promotion to the stimulating and supporting of local talents, especially budding ones. The prime example of this would perhaps be the newly-minted School of the Arts, proudly occupying eleven storeys of prime land in the heart of the business district. This, coupled with generous Arts Council loans and grants to young artists (e.g. piano virtuoso Abigail Tan, whose music school tuition fees are fully subsidised), demonstrates potently our government’s genuine commitment to the development of born-and-bred Singaporean artists, a commitment that bodes exceedingly favourably for the future of the arts.

Furthermore, it would be unfair and indeed hasty to generalise the arts in Singapore as catering merely to the taste buds of a select elite. The incidence of collectors of Asian art, whose price tags start from a reasonable few hundred dollars, has increased so dramatically that it has led to the construction of Tanjong Pagar Distripark as storage for their burgeoning collections. Also, even if Andrew Gn decided that he could not survive as a designer locally, his compatriot Ashley Isham decided instead to turn his back on European acclaim and re-establish his headquarters on native soil. These examples speak wonders about the growing receptiveness among local audiences and consumers to arts and artisanship of all kinds – certainly something the sold-out status of previous stagings of *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* would attest to. Hence, it seems that the government's promotion of the arts has been matched by a reciprocal interest on the part of citizens to consume them.

Lastly, historical testament has proven time and again the definite correlation between growing affluence in a society and a thriving arts scene. Indeed, the flight path (for it certainly appears to be soaring) of the local industry can be compared to those of its Asian neighbours, China or even Japan. This would suggest that as Singapore continues to develop economically, with increasingly widespread literacy and affluence, the number of audience members and artists alike can only be expected to increase. Emma Yong, for example, credited her freedom to pursue her dramatic passions to her parents' ability to support her financially. We can only hope then, that the future for the arts in Singapore contains many more Emmas, as well as Mr. and Mrs. Yongs, whose children are not as pressured to choose bread-and-butter professions to make ends meet should their calling lie elsewhere.

In conclusion, it would be important to recognise the presence of local artists and artworks that Singaporeans can be genuinely proud of – bands like Electrico, acts like the ever-charming Dimsum Dollies, and films like Glenn Goei's *The Blue Mansion* spring immediately to mind – and can admire as improvements on stereotypically substandard Mediacorp programming. More meaningfully, also, would be to hold these up as encouraging indicators of the progress not only in the Singapore arts scene but in society as well. Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong once declined labelling Singapore a First World nation because he felt that the artistic and cultural aspects of its development were lacking. We can only hope that the current coincidence of government action, growing audience receptiveness and economic prosperity will continue to propel the arts in Singapore to ever greater and more exciting heights.

#### **Comments:**

***You make good sense here. The argument is well sustained. However, you could have looked beyond governmental/official sanction and support. What about the corporate sector? You could have acknowledged a couple of problems too, like the small market for the arts in Singapore.***



# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 2010

## essay 2

“Fear is the root of war.” Discuss.

Conan Chui Qiao Han | 10S03M

In the recent epic war period film *300*, the Spartan King Leonidas famously declares, “Be afraid, and Sparta will burn to the ground!” Yet the fear he was referring to – the fear of death and destruction of one’s home – has a different face and application in the context of wars. Indeed, it is said by some that fear is the root of war, in the sense that it is intrinsic to the nature of war and also, paradoxically, it is the major driver behind the waging of wars. This essay will attempt to prove otherwise, that, although fear is a major component of war, it is not necessarily the most important, nor is it necessarily the key cause.

Proponents of the stand that fear is the root of war like to say that war is waged by people and countries because of their fear of oppression, fear stemming from insecurity, and fear of the unknown. And indeed there is some truth in this assertion. A prime example is the case of Israeli pre-emptive air strikes against Iran’s Osirisk nuclear enrichment facilities. Israel can indeed be seen as fearful of the concept of a nuclear-armed Iran and its increased threat to Israel, and thus chose to strike. In a similar manner, it can also be said that other Middle East armed conflicts, such as the Yom Kippur War and the Six Day War were also born of a deep-seated fear of an established Jewish state by its neighbours Egypt, Jordan and Syria. In those circumstances, the Arab League leaders had openly voiced their fears about Israel’s growing ability to cut off their trade routes and cause great social and economic disruption. Similarly for the defenders as well as the attackers, the fear of being overrun and having one’s homeland invaded indeed acts as a potent motivator for a spirited defence. Hence, it can be seen how fear can logically be argued to be the root from which all military conflicts arise.

Fear can also be said to be the root of war in the sense that it is the centrepiece or cornerstone upon which the entire military industry and military strategies are constructed. In the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the original idea had been to specifically “use coalition air superiority as a means by which shock-and-awe tactics are employed against the enemy forces”, as stated by the Americans’ military doctrine for that particular operation. In other words, the objective was not exactly to kill enemy combatants but rather to use weapons of such immense psychological value to browbeat the enemy into submission. In other words, the American forces were explicitly trying to use fear (of the coalition’s military superiority) to dispirit the enemy and thus win the war. Statistics show that that particular conflict had the highest instance of “weapons of psychological value” such as immense fuel-air bombs and carpet bombings being deployed in the entire history of the American armed forces since World War II. This concept stretched back to ancient China, when the famous military strategist Sun Tzu advised the tactics of “first surrounding an enemy, but allowing him a route of escape”. The purpose of this “cauldron tactic” was similarly not to kill the enemy but to frighten him and induce him to run away. This was promptly put to use by feudal lords, who used it with great effect against one another. Similarly, the interrogators at Guantanamo Bay who tortured their detainees were trying to use the fear of torture to extract information and induce cooperation. These are examples of how fear not only causes wars, but is also the fuel on which the whole concept of waging war runs.

However, despite the seemingly conclusive evidence, it can be argued that the whole concept of war is no longer hinging quite so entirely on fear, or the manipulation of it. War is a complex and messy issue and it would be unrealistic to distil it to such a simplistic argument, tempting though it may seem.

To begin with, war may stem from other causes, not just fear. For instance, Hitler led Nazi Germany to war not because of fear, but rather to seek revenge on the Allies for humiliation as well as to establish a world for the suitable expansion of the Aryan “master race”. A Union soldier also mentioned, in the throes of the American Civil War, that he fought not for “fear of losing all that I held dear, but for



the hope that justice will prevail” – he fought for ideology and out of a powerful sense of patriotic duty. Even the Americans admit that their military expeditions were not primarily based on their fear of Saddam Hussein’s purported possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), but on their intent to “remove...a dictator” and to institute a “democratic process...that would eventually benefit Iraqi citizens”. War can indeed be waged for noble purposes, although the process by which it does so may involve fear. Fear is not always the root of war, but in some cases may be the effect of it.

In fact, far from being the root cause of war, fear may sometimes be the very agent by which peace is created. From a civilian perspective, fear of dying or one’s soldiers dying is a powerful motivator to end war, as seen in the huge public outcry that ultimately ended in the USA retreating from Vietnam. As the former overall NATO commander General Stanley McChrystal observed, “war is about winning the hearts and minds” of the civilians and allaying their fears about the instability war creates in their lives. The deliberate removal of fear in waging war is now meant to facilitate overall success in Afghanistan, a prime example of how fear and war need not go hand-in-hand.

Ultimately, the fact remains that war is, and will never be, cut and dried. While fear may motivate countries to go to war, fear can also end those wars. While the iron fist may be employed in conflicts, it is worth remembering the olive branch. And most unfortunately, fear may not be the root of war – it may be its fruit. Perhaps the whole issue was best summed up by a British Captain in World War II who wrote in his diary about war, “fear is a disease, but sometimes it is also the cure.”

***Comments:***

***A coherent and well-argued essay.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 2010

## essay 3

Have international sporting events lost their true purpose today?

Ng Li Hui | 10A13A

"Citius, altius, fortius" are the three famous words that represent the spirit and soul of the world's greatest sporting event – the Olympics. Revived in the early 19th century, the Olympics was born of one man's vision to recreate the sporting intensity and passion of ancient Greece and to create a platform for countries to interact and exhibit their abilities, therein creating a sort of "universal brotherhood". Yet, the myriad issues ranging from doping to profit-seeking have belied the ideals that are the foundation of sporting events and have negated much of their purpose today.

Sport is heralded as a test of human strength and character. The values of sports that international sporting events aim to highlight are still pertinent today. Many athletes have pushed beyond the perceived boundaries of human anatomy to achieve the impossible such as during the Beijing Olympics where the ten-second barrier for the hundred metres sprint was smashed by athletes including Usain Bolt. Athletes like Michael Phelps, a multiple Olympic Gold medallist for swimming, have inspired many to test boundaries and have given us a temporary reprieve from the harsh realities of the world today when they capture our imagination with their great abilities and, for a magical moment, encapsulate the audience within a bubble where human strength and mankind's greatest qualities are exalted. The beauty of sports lies in the ability to merge both strength and grace, and international sporting events provide the best platform for legendary performances and historical records to be set. Michelle Kwan's ability to move even the judges to tears with her artistry on ice is testament to international sporting events' presentation of their true purpose – to show the greatness of humanity.

International sporting events today also add a new dimension to the original goal of creating a "universal brotherhood" where all athletes, regardless of race, ethnicity or language, are able to compete and achieve their best through the controversial feature of wild-cards. While the "wild-card" has been argued to be an obstacle to the goal of achieving the "impossible" and allowing the best to achieve their best results, it has brought sports closer to the ideal of being universal. For example, African Olympic swimmer, Eric Moussambani, affectionately named "Eric the Eel" by the media, may have swum at a speed that the average swimmer among us could have easily exceeded, but his determination to finish the race won the hearts of many among the spectators' stand during the Beijing Olympics. While there has been a slight compromise on excellence, an all-encompassing element has been introduced into the previously exclusive sphere of international sporting events since only developed countries truly have the resources to support their athletic community. Hence, it would seem that international sports events have, in fact, moved closer to the ultimate goal of engaging all countries by allowing athletes from less developed countries the chance to compete – whether they would have qualified on merit or not.

Yet, while the optimism of the sporting spirit may take centre stage during international sporting events, George Orwell revealed its unpleasant side in his telling comment that "at the international level sport is frankly mimic warfare." Under the glory of sports, there are, more often than not, darker issues that tarnish the polished surface upon which these international sporting events are reflected.

International sporting events are chiefly concerned with profits today. It is not the honour of hosting the events or the proliferation of sporting ideals that drives a country to zealously bid for the right to host it, and neither are the organisers of the event anticipating the great triumphs or grandiose falls of athletes that would leave a mark on history. What they anticipate is this: profits. While these countries and organisers cannot be faulted for wanting to make profits – which are, after all, essential for the events' continuity – the extent to which they go to seek profits have negated much of their initial true purpose of holding international sporting events. The upcoming Fifa World Cup

generated much uproar in Singapore when organisers doubled the fees they typically charge the telecommunications companies, SingTel and Starhub, for the rights to broadcast the event. Clearly, the event organisers did not take into consideration the ideals of the universal sharing of the joys of sport and global participation (since fans and supporters were deprived of the chance to catch the action live on television). Many other international events such as Wimbledon have also been criticised as simply being a background for companies to showcase their products. Maria Sharapova and Nike were heavily criticized when shots of Sharapova's underwear (revealed when her skirt rose during the tennis match) were widely posted on the internet with the infamous Nike swoosh logo prominently displayed. Athletes are no longer competing at these events as individuals. For many athletes, the money that comes from endorsement is now their primary concern, and when athletes themselves do not see competing as their greatest drive, the ideals and purpose of international sporting events as the platform for excellence is undermined.

Cooperation and friendship are also no longer an ideal in the sporting actions of many countries. International sporting events are now, as Orwell put it, "mimic warfare", whereby the pride of a country is at stake. The recently concluded Vancouver Winter Olympics is a prime example of the frenetic drive to achieve victory at any cost. Canada's record breaking fourteen-medal tally may be highly impressive, but the one nagging detail behind their glory is their US\$115 million "Own the Podium" programme designed to help their athletes bring home the medal and the various measures they had taken to restrict the facilities from competitors from other countries. Impressive indeed. International sporting events no longer foster global cooperation; they are a mini-battlefield for countries to display their athletic abilities and, indirectly, their economic and political might. In fact, the bitter rivalry between Kim Yu-Na and Mao Asada, the two women figure skaters from South Korea and Japan respectively, stretched beyond the personal level to a nation-wide magnitude during the Vancouver Winter Olympics. In celebrating Kim Yu-Na's eventual victory, the South Koreans were also rejoicing over their victory over Japan. Clearly, international sporting events no longer celebrate excellence – a gold medal victory is what counts, especially if won at the expense of one's traditional rivals.

International sporting events have, most importantly, been damaged by the very athletes who are the essence of them. These events no longer celebrate human ability, but "super-human" abilities. The great records and unbelievable races that we see today could be negated the next day with the discovery that the athlete doped. Fallen heroes include sprinter Marion Jones, America's once golden girl who was stripped of all her gold medals. The Tour de France was marred by allegations against the Chinese team which was accused of riding behind the American team in order to avoid the effects of wind on their stamina. From issues of drugs to underhanded tactics to sex changes, many now look at new records and incredible performances with disbelief. We no longer simply exalt in human achievements; we doubt them.

Why is it then that we continue to – almost religiously – follow the World Cups, the Olympics and World Championships? These sporting events continue to appeal to us, perhaps, because we are entertained by the darker side of it as well. For example, tennis fans have been engaged by Serena Williams' flamboyant fashion style. The rabid competition between countries serves as a greater draw for many to catch those clashes of the Titans. Our willingness to accept these undesirable practices and changes and even our guilty enjoyment of the drama (off the court) that now accompanies sports has undeniably fuelled the movement of sports away from the original goals. It is not the events that have to change; it is our attitudes.

#### **Comments:**

***A cogent argument that is fluently supported by concise and relevant examples. Well-organised with good use of topic sentences and sign-posting. Appropriate use of cohesive devices.***



# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 2010

## essay 4

“Going green is a luxury only developed countries can afford.”  
Comment.

Andrew Tam Le Xiang | 10S06Q

In this age where rallying cries of “save our planet” and clichéd slogans of “reuse, reduce, and recycle” are all so common, some have proposed that this emphasis on environmental protection and conservation is a luxury that can only be afforded by industrialised first world nations. However, this essay contends with the premise that going green is a luxury; in fact it is absolutely essential that both developed and developing countries alike “go green” for us to make tangible progress to alleviate existing problems and avert the imminent environmental crisis.

Proponents of the view that going green is only for the richer, more developed nations rest their case on two primary arguments. Firstly, developed countries by definition have already industrialised and are more likely to have the financial resources and technological infrastructure to go green. Technologies that tap on alternative fuel – which does not pollute the atmosphere like coal or oil – such as solar, wind, hydro and nuclear power plants, require substantial capital startups with no economic benefit in the short run. For developing countries, the existing priority is to industrialise the economy and raise output and efficiency. Implementing such green technology would hamper their efforts to develop economically. Also, such green technologies tap upon relatively advanced infrastructure, such as solar panels or hydro-electric dams. Not only do developing nations lack the financial ability to sustain such practices, the prerequisite infrastructure and trained manpower are sorely lacking as well. In stark contrast are nations like the USA, France and Japan, the original inventors of such green technologies. The USA has already demonstrated its ability to go green by investing in a billion dollar biofuel programme, in addition to existing research on nuclear power. The reason why developed nations can afford to invest in greener technologies, although they are more costly, is the fact that they have amassed capital reserves and benefited from industrialisation. Their developing cousins, on the other hand, cannot afford to do so.

However, it would be reductionist to expect developed countries to adopt green policies while developing nations release billowing columns of soot into the atmosphere. In a world where the CFC levels rise anyway, regardless of where the incineration plant is, where global temperature rises a notch regardless of whether the polluting factory is in Antarctica or Zambia, a concerted approach is necessary. To allow some to pollute and not others is equivalent to taking one step forward and two steps backwards in solving the environmental issues we face today. Although the implementation of green technologies like recyclable paper bags and automobiles that run on Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) goes a long way in reducing a nation’s carbon emissions, rapidly industrialising giants like China and Brazil account for a whopping 37% of global carbon emissions. Hence, it is plain to see that a select camp of nations going green while the rest of the world remains at status quo would be ineffective and self-defeating.

On the other hand, there exists a group of people who advocate that the global environment threat is not as alarming as paranoid “tree huggers” would like us to believe. They argue that it is possible for developed nations to implement green policies while developing countries focus on industrialisation and healthy economic growth before going green, all the while avoiding a global environmental calamity. After all, going green is a luxury that is good to have but not critical.

However, such a view ignores recent developments in meteorological studies. The rise in sea levels, arising from the melting of polar ice caps, has threatened many low-lying regions with the possible fate of being submerged. The recent ice block that broke off the Arctic has threatened to throw Europe into a bitter winter unprecedented in centuries. Apparently, our pollution of the atmosphere has taken a toll on the environment, resulting in much destruction and impending loss. The clearing of the Brazilian Amazon has seen a tremendous reduction in nature’s ability to regulate greenhouse gas levels within the atmosphere, resulting in global warming and ozone depletion. The need for



radical change, as Nobel laureate Al Gore stated, has never been more urgent than in this generation. We can ill afford to continue this dizzying rate of environmental destruction. Much of what has been done to the planet is irreparable, pointing to the urgency and the necessity of going green.

The proposition then is for a concerted effort between both developed and developing nations to halt this pending catastrophe. Admittedly, the switch to green technologies and environmentally-friendly policies is a tough call for nations all around. As mentioned above, it requires tremendous startup capital and reaps little benefit in the short run. As such, political will in both developed and developing nations alike is crucial to going green. Developed nations have to share technologies with less developed nations and invest in these budding industries offshore. Although it is not the most intuitive economic policy, developing nations have the onus to industrialise responsibly by imposing carbon taxes and carbon caps. To play the blame game and point out that developed nations polluted irresponsibly in the past is defeatist. The onus on developed nations now is to finance green practices in developing nations as well. Only with a global “green wave” can we hope to achieve the repeat success of the Montreal Protocol, which successfully brought down Chloro-fluro-carbon (CFC) levels to virtually zero. All nations share the common fate of our planet, regardless of the origin of pollution and degradation. To suggest otherwise would be to tread down the path of the fiasco of the Kyoto Protocol, where national self-interest prevailed, where only a few select countries were willing to go green, and where no tangible change was affected.

**Comments:**

***Good understanding of the question and the issues involved. A clear and balanced discussion. Fluently written.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 1

Can having too much knowledge in today's world be dangerous?

Goh Su Fen | 10S06Q

Knowledge is power and power is a dangerous thing. When Hobbes spoke of the liberties of man, he made it clear that our freedom to act depends on our physical and mental limitations. While knowledge cannot help much with the former, it does provide us with the means to surmount the latter. The world today is defined by our extraordinary ability to disseminate information quickly using technology. While this explosion of knowledge may seem liberating in Hobbesian terms, too much knowledge is actually concentrated in the hands of too few. These select few are then able to exert tremendous influence on society, a dangerous thing if they have sinister motives. Furthermore, knowledge is not wisdom. To utilise knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, without proper consideration can only lead to catastrophe. Yet the lack of knowledge or incompleteness of knowledge can also be equally hazardous. Considering this, I feel that too much knowledge is not dangerous to humanity, provided that it is tempered with reason and shared equally amongst us all.

The internet explosion in the past decade has led to the widespread dissemination of knowledge and information. Due to this, many political commentators assumed that this would bring about an end to the knowledge inequity between the well-educated and the less educated. However, nothing could be further from the truth, especially in less developed countries, where illiteracy cuts off more than half of the population from the "freely-available" information. On the other hand, the availability of information from all over the world has simply given the educated another opportunity to amass more knowledge for themselves, thereby widening the knowledge gap. The rise of Osama bin Laden is but one of many terrifying consequences of the growing knowledge gap. Osama bin Laden hails from a rich Saudi family and is undoubtedly proficient in reading and writing Arabic. Through the use of modern communications, he was able to amass a group of experts with knowledge in politics, bomb-engineering, Islam and war. With knowledge of the Quran limited only to him and his Al Qaeda commanders, through their knowledge of writing, Osama was able to preach his militant version of Islam to peasants who blindly accepted it as they knew no better. In a globalised and inter-connected world, the rise of Islamic radicalism would prove fatal. Osama's activities were no longer limited geographically. He could wield his knowledge-backed influence to attack even America, once believed to be the bastion of freedom and safety. It is thus apparent that the knowledgeable can influence even the most normal of people to believe ridiculous notions of attaining martyrdom through jihad. It is true that those with knowledge can bend the multitudes to their sinister will. And it is true that the whole inter-connected world suffers as a consequence.

Even if knowledge is in the hands of people who mean well, having too much knowledge without enough wisdom is also a risky thing. Issac Asimov once commented that modern man was like a child with the power of God, and I believe that nothing could more aptly describe the state of a technologically-driven society like ours. Near the end of World War II, President Harry S. Truman gave the order to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the then newly-developed atomic bomb. This occurred despite the grave warnings from scientists heading the Manhattan Project of the radioactive fallout which would mutate countless innocent civilians and unborn children. Armed with the knowledge of making atom bombs, President Truman lacked the empathetic and moral wisdom to realise the devastating consequences of his actions on not only the Japanese people, but on the entire human memory – he thought only of ending the war as quickly as possible. His story is an illustration of the dire consequences of humans wielding scientific knowledge that is beyond their ability to use responsibly. Without proper ethical considerations, we are unable to fully comprehend the impact of our actions and are thus more likely to make unsound decisions with horrific results. Given that the state of technology has evolved vastly since 1945 to the extent that we now possess the tools of genetic manipulation, it is justified to say that having too much knowledge without sufficient maturity is indeed a dangerous affair.



While too much knowledge in the wrong hands and too much knowledge without wisdom can both be dangerous for humanity, the lack of knowledge or even incomplete knowledge is even worse. Osama bin Laden's rise to prominence in Afghanistan was due not only to the concentration of knowledge in his hands, but also to the corresponding lack of knowledge amongst the masses. If the Afghan locals had been more knowledgeable, they would have been aware of more peaceful brands of Islam such as the mystical Sufi teachings. They would have been conscious of cases where Muslims lived together with Christians and Jews in historic kingdoms like the Fatimid Caliphate and modern day countries like Jordan. It was the very lack of knowledge that rendered the common man's mind a tabula rasa incapable of resisting Osama's seductive but ultimately senseless teachings. Thus, I think that it would be more accurate to say that too much knowledge in the hands of too few is dangerous, but "too much" knowledge shared equally amongst people is in fact the key to mutual understanding and peace in our multicultural modern world.

Incomplete knowledge and half-truths are even more detrimental than total ignorance. Antonio Gramsci, a philosopher who lived through Mussolini's Fascist Italy, suggested that hegemonies can exist by manipulating the media to show only half-truths, since total lies would be too unconvincing and full truths would usually discredit the ruling elite. Truly, in the modern era, the rise of internet control tools and media censorship has led to the continued existence of government hegemonies like the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). While such strong governments inevitably interfere with individuals' lives and reduce personal liberty, this is not the worst damage a series of half-truths can cause. In order to stir up popular support for its heavy-handed reactions to criticism and to reduce public sympathy for protesters, the CCP routinely monitors internet traffic and has even uploaded an internet-wide filter, dubbed by critics the "Great Firewall of China". Through such internet controls, the government feeds its majority Han Chinese with propaganda demonising minority groups like the Tibetans and Uyghurs while wrongly labelling the Dalai Lama, a Nobel Peace Prize winner, a "terrorist". Fed only one side of the story, many Han Chinese grow up unable to comprehend the complexity of the fierce ethnic conflicts in China. This has led to a disturbing level of racism and hatred against the targeted minority groups. Last year, this resulted in a series of highly-publicised riots in Xinjiang, a testament to the dangers of having only incomplete knowledge. Arguably, more understanding of both sides of the issue could have led to more tolerance and harmony, thus demonstrating that more knowledge or even "too much" knowledge can sometimes be preferred to incomplete knowledge, which is actually more dangerous.

It is tempting to think that humans would be better off living in a world of ignorant bliss or, at most, having just enough knowledge to get by. Yet I think that knowledge is dangerous only when it is not tempered by ethics and when it is concentrated in only the elite. In fact, the lack of knowledge is the more dangerous situation, especially considering the complexities of our modern societies. It would be senseless to move away from knowledge just because we feel overwhelmed; after all, it is our relentless pursuit of knowledge that advances the human race. Guided by morality and shared amongst all people, knowledge can never be "too much"; we only fear it is too little.

#### **Comments:**

***Su Fen, this is an excellent attempt at the question! Many insightful points of discussion, supported with apt examples and well-chosen references. Points show maturity and depth. Well done!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 2

To what extent can international aid be truly effective?

Tang Kai Wen Aaron | 10S030

Over the past decade, governments have debated furiously over the effectiveness of financial aid. Despite the financial largesse that has been spent on countries mired in poverty or destruction, at least 1.1 billion people live under \$1 a day – the benchmark of extreme poverty. It is thus no wonder that governments are wondering if international aid is working at all. While some believe that it is morally justified to provide aid to countries in need, others wonder if international aid is indeed alleviating the complications at hand at all. While international aid can indeed go a long way towards providing food and necessities, amongst other things, to people in need, I will provisionally make a stand that international aid can never be truly effective, at least in the long term.

Opponents of this stand are indeed numerous. Jeffrey Sachs, a former Harvard professor who is currently teaching at Columbia University, wrote in his book *The End of Poverty* that given enough financial aid, poverty can be ended in 2025. This stand is unsurprising. After all, despite the fact that a hefty proportion of the aid provided ends up in corrupt hands, aid nevertheless sustains many countries such as Ethiopia and Somalia. In fact, at the Monterrey Conference, rich nations were urged to raise their amount of aid to needy nations to 0.7% of their GDP (the USA's was at 0.15% as of 2005). Aid, it seems, does go a long way in alleviating poverty and saving lives. Of course, international aid does not solely refer to monetary aid. Aid provided in the form of peacekeeping and the eradication of insurgencies has also proved useful and effective in some cases. For example, NATO operations in Kandahar, Afghanistan, have wiped out many of the Taliban strongholds and freed other parts of Afghanistan from the hold of terrorists.

Yet despite these instances of success of international aid, one wonders whether international aid can be truly effective. Can international aid, for one, truly alleviate the root problems faced by needy nations?

One reason why international aid can never be truly effective is due to the Machiavellian nature of countries. As Niccolo Machiavelli rightly stated in his concept of *realpolitik*, the actions of all countries are carried out solely to benefit themselves. This is a logical postulate. After all, most countries, especially democratic ones, are installed into power by the people of the country and not by people from other countries. The result of this is the inability of countries to truly solve problems and aid countries in need. This, in turn, stems from the reason that in the solving of root problems, conflicts of interest will almost definitely arise so long as countries embrace *realpolitik*. A prime example that illustrates this is the situation between the USA and Africa. Every year, the US dedicates US\$16 billion, or 0.15% of its GDP, for international aid, most of which goes to Africa. In fact, the Bush administration unveiled another plan worth over US\$10 billion to counter HIV/AIDS in Africa. According to USAID, America does so to build microeconomies, develop villages and so on, to ensure long term solutions to the problems of poverty and violence in Africa. Yet when African countries decided to export agricultural products to the USA to boost their economies and to provide income to their farmers, the USA spent billions of dollars raising protectionist barriers to protect its own farmers. It was estimated that this cost African countries close to \$50 billion dollars, an amount close to the net amount of aid provided to African countries. As we can see, the Machiavellian nature of politics and international relations provides a huge stumbling block to the true effectiveness of aid. In the case of the USA, the government placed the interests of its farmers over that of the African farmers. The conflict of interests thus reduced the effectiveness of international aid.

The second reason why international aid can never be truly effective is due to the difficulties inherent in directing aid. For one, countries in need of international aid often lack proper infrastructure and stability. After the recent Haiti earthquake for example, roads and infrastructure were destroyed, so much so that the government had to take refuge in a police station. Secondly, disorder often



erupts in places in need of international aid. For example, mass looting erupted days after the Haiti earthquake.

These problems make it difficult for countries or aid organisations to ascertain the exact group of people in need. This in turn can lead to a multitude of consequences. Firstly, aid often ends up in the wrong hands. Recently, for example, leaked reports from the World Food Programme reveal that close to half of the food donated to Somalia ended up in the hands of corrupt dealers. This is expected, especially since the failure to direct aid properly would lead to a greater frequency of exchange before the resources donated reached the people in need, which in turn leads to a greater susceptibility to corruption. Secondly, the greater exchange of hands reduces the amount of aid available to the poor or needy, even in the absence of corruption. These reasons explain why international aid can never be truly effective.

The third reason why international aid can never be truly effective is the difficulty in coordinating aid. This is due to the fact that there is no single body that coordinates all the aid provided by the various countries and organisations. The primary reason behind this is the lack of trust between organisations. Transparency International reports that the bulk of the NGOs do not allow government access to their balance sheets. The lack of coordination between sources of aid creates three problems. Firstly, it makes it difficult for aid to be accounted for. Secondly, it makes it impossible for organisations to pool resources to tackle root problems. This leads to problems, such as the over-diversification of aid. It must be understood that aid must be of a certain minimal amount before it can be used effectively. If aid is over-diversified, its efficacy is greatly reduced as the measures that can be adopted are significantly limited. Thirdly, the lack of accountability of aid creates even more problems. For example, when an earthquake struck Iran in the 1990s, donations that were unacceptable by the mostly Muslim population of Iran – such as non-halal food – poured into the country, thereby creating even more problems.

The aforementioned reasons have significant implications on the effectiveness of international aid. For one, they explain why many countries are overly dependent on aid (aid accounts for most of their GDP) as the lack of coordination of aid and the conflict of interests make it difficult for long term plans to be crafted for countries. For example, the long term solution to poverty in African countries would be to kick-start the economy by creating trade. However, with the erection of protectionist barriers worldwide, this seems difficult.

Nevertheless, we must note that while international aid may not be truly effective, it is necessary in the short term and long term. Countries with natural disasters might not have the economic means to solve the problems at hand on their own. Haiti, for example, strapped with debts and budget deficits, had absolutely no way of alleviating the problems at hand on its own. For countries stricken with poverty or conflict, international aid is also required to provide additional support and stimuli to kick-start solutions, whether short term or long term, without which countries might be in an even worse situation than the quagmires they are in now.

In conclusion, international aid, while necessary, can never be truly effective, at least in the long run, due to the inherent realist nature of states and the innate problems faced by all events of international aid. Nevertheless, international aid is necessary due to the lack of viable alternatives. Aid, it seems, is the best tool to alleviate the world's problems.

#### **Comments:**

***A well-argued essay that features multiple perspectives on the issue. Your knowledge on the topic is impressive, and is effectively woven into well-considered arguments, which show insight and maturity. Excellent work, Aaron!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 3

### Can terrorism ever be eradicated?

Jarrell Ng Jun Jie | 10A01A

September 11 2001 was indubitably an epochal day in the lives of our generation. People all around the globe were glued to their television screens, shaking with fear as they watched the tragic fates of the World Trade Centre and thousands of innocent people unfold before their very eyes. Yet this merely marked the start of a series of similarly unforgiving attacks, and no doubt terrorism is to this day one of the greatest threats plaguing the international community. A brutal, relentless form of political violence that uses fear as a key weapon, terrorism is a force that has been hard to eradicate completely, as specific features of it as a political tool allow it to thrive in the global context we live in today. However, it is still paramount for us to understand that, while impossible to extirpate completely, terrorism is a threat that can be contained, with sufficient effort from political leaders, individuals and the global community as a whole.

Firstly, the nature of terrorism as a political weapon makes it tremendously difficult to control. For one, its choice of victims is often random and impossible to predict. Unlike conventional war, which targets mainly soldiers and the important figureheads of the opposition force, terrorist attacks are aimed at innocent civilians. The motive of the terrorist is not to kill specific targets, but to engage in scattered, inexplicable and unjustifiable attacks in order to incite fear in the populace and to drive home a strong political message. If we recall the train bombings in Madrid and London for instance, not a single political figure was part of the death toll; only innocent commuters were victimised. This of course makes terrorist attacks hard to predict, and almost impossible to prevent – after all, anyone, anywhere in the world, can be a target.

Also, terrorism is often hard to eradicate because the demands it makes are typically outrageous and hard to fulfil, and until terrorists fully achieve the political agenda they set out with in the first place, it is hard to imagine that they will ever back down. In his “Letter to the American People”, Osama bin Laden expounds on the grievances that the Muslim fundamentalists have against the United States, and lays down a whole plethora of demands that America must fulfil before Al Qaeda and the global network of terrorists will back down. One of the more extreme of these demands is for the whole of America to convert to Islam, which is no doubt a complete impossibility. Moreover, Muslim fundamentalists are by no means the only terrorist groups in existence, and the demands of Osama are the ideas of only one man. Terrorists are a pervasive force scattered all over the globe; other examples include Christian and Jewish fundamentalists. Increasingly, we even see the emergence of individual terrorists with no affiliations or plausible political motives whatsoever, a prime example being the case of Umar Abdulmutallab, who attempted to bomb an American flight with explosives hidden in his underwear. Terrorists are definitely too diverse, too scattered, and have too unreasonable of demands for them to be eradicated completely.

More importantly, we find that many features of the globalised and rapidly developing world we live in today present favourable conditions for terrorism to thrive. For one, the astonishing rate of technological advancement we enjoy today poses a major threat to our safety should terrorists be capable of exploiting such developments for the manufacture of weapons. After all, historical precedents have shown that many of the biggest terrorist organisations today were funded and even trained by the superpower nations of our world. Al Qaeda, as we know, was started by the United States as a counter-insurgency force in Afghanistan. Put simply, terrorists fight with the weapons of nations, and as long as countries around the world continue seeking advancement in technology, especially in military technology, we are effectively equipping terrorists with the means to attack us. With the recent rise in nuclear and even biochemical weapons, aggravated by the virulent corruption present in many of the national leaders who possess such weapons (take Iran and North Korea for instance), one can only wonder where these dangerous weapons can end up.

Secondly, globalisation has meant the breaking down of barriers between nations, and easy cross-border access. As nations continue to attract foreigners, and as people continue to move across immigration checkpoints, potential threats become increasingly difficult to track down. For instance, the 3% Muslim demographic in Europe means that a terrorist from Al Qaeda can easily blend into the crowd, allowing him time and space to plan the perfect attack. Globalisation has meant that it is now easier to board a plane than ever before, and we need look no further than the case of Umar Abdulmutallab to understand why this may pose a threat. The breaking down of borders means that not only ordinary civilians are moving around the globe more, but terrorists as well.

Most importantly, terrorists can never be eradicated for the simple reason that, the more media becomes a powerful and pervasive influence in the lives of people today, the more potent is the terrorists' use of fear as their ultimate weapon. While only a few thousand Americans perished in the September 11 attacks, the effects of the attacks were transmitted globally by media coverage of the events, inciting fear in the entire global community. The death count was not the terrorists' biggest weapon. Rather, it was the harrowing and dramatic images of destruction that were transmitted onto television screens worldwide. The internet too, can be an extremely potent tool for terrorists. It is an unregulated body of information, presenting terrorists with the perfect chance to spread their message and agenda worldwide. While television took 13 years to reach a market audience of 50 million, the internet took a mere 4 years. This means that any information, good or bad, is transferred to millions instantaneously. For terrorists who use fear and propaganda as their main weapon, this only means that their presence and influence is ever more pervasive than before.

For all these reasons, terrorism can never be eradicated. In fact, we must be prepared that terrorism and terrorists will be an ever growing threat in our globalised world, becoming increasingly dangerous as they continue to exploit advancements in media, technology and other aspects of development in the global community. Yet this is not to say that terrorism cannot be contained. On a national and societal level, nations continue to enforce a whole plethora of counter-terrorism measures from increasing cross-border security to cooperating with other nations to guarantee national security.

Yet the most important weapon against terrorism is still the individual. Terrorism, as mentioned, uses fear as a weapon, and what the individual can do is to remain fearless in the face of a global terrorist threat and vigilant in his daily life. Thus, while terrorism cannot be eradicated, its effects can be greatly mediated.

#### **Comments:**

***An excellent piece of work, Jarrell. Well-thought and well-presented with adequate examples. Effective use of personal voice as well.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 4

### Can terrorism ever be eradicated?

Claire Tan Pin Hua | 10A13A

With the onslaught of globalisation that has led to the rapid spread of information through the new media and the internet, threats have also taken on a global, transnational nature, including terrorism. Newspapers all over the world constantly report about suicide bombings in the Middle East or Southeast Asia. Some even view 9/11, where the iconic World Trade Centre was utterly decimated at the hands of Al Qaeda, as a key turning point that revolutionised terrorism. Yet, terrorism has constantly played a key role in the challenges of each society and the international community. This asymmetrical warfare is often born out of political aims that have been constantly suppressed or denied by governments, forcing many disillusioned citizens to take up arms and seek to deliberately create violence and fear, disrupting the delicate harmony and social fabric of society so that their demands will be heard. While counter terrorist measures have been effective at quelling these terrorists, often these measures are a double-edged sword that has the adverse effect of fuelling and further radicalising many to become terrorists. The uncompromising nature of terrorists, and political motivations behind them, as seen in state-sponsored terrorism, often provides a bleak precedence that suggests that it will be difficult to eradicate terrorism in the future.

Some optimists would argue that there have been effective counter-terrorist measures that have enabled governments to crack down on terrorists and terrorist organisations. These measures have brought about an increase in information sharing and intelligence both within and between countries, enabling governments to deprive terrorists of safehavens and preventing nefarious plots of destruction. One such measure is the Patriot Act in the United States of America (USA), where the government passed legislation allowing wire tapping on phone conversations and intelligence gathering through such means to enable the US government to weed out subversive plots by terrorists. Beyond individual government work, globalisation has indeed heralded the liberalist school of thought that suggests that “no man is an island.” Countries and supranational organisations recognise the necessity to collaborate to combat the threat of terrorism, where UN member countries have agreed to freeze the bank accounts of suspected terrorists in their country to deny these terrorists a safehaven. The success of mutual cooperation is exemplified in the way the multi-intelligence sharing among Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia enabled the Indonesian government to find and arrest key leaders of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), which aims to establish the Islamic Republic of Southeast Asia.

In other cases, governments have sought to overpower the terrorists with their military might. As Hillary Clinton once mentioned, it is imperative that we “refuse to legitimise terrorists” and thereby use harsh measures to crack down on them. This is clearly evident in Obama’s support for General McChrystal’s counterinsurgency measures in Afghanistan that not only reinforce the domestic security force by training their police and defence, but also employing state-of-the-art military weapons and air drones to carpet bomb areas considered terrorist hideouts. The fact that the Taliban and Al Qaeda’s key leaders have been killed in the process is a sure indicator of the success of wielding aggression against uncompromising terrorists. The defeat of these terrorists in countries like Sri Lanka, where Mahendra Rajapaksa’s government successfully stamped out the Tamil Tigers of LTTE, points to the successful eradication of terrorists.

By contrast, as Winston Churchill mentioned, some governments affirm that “to jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war” and negotiations between the government and terrorist groups are instrumental in successfully weeding out terrorism. Most terrorist groups, such as the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, are disenfranchised groups that seek political freedoms of equality in treatment or an autonomous region and have only resorted to terrorism because the majority government has constantly refused to accede to their requests and marginalised them. By granting political concessions, as seen in the Northern Ireland conflict, terrorist groups have less need to adopt violence and create fear as they have achieved their objectives, thereby aiding the eradication of terrorism in society, ending drawn-out wars and violence.

Yet, despite such a plethora of measures used to outsmart, overpower, or compromise with terrorists, these measures are still ineffectual insofar as they only successfully curb organised terrorism and do not provide sufficient measures to deal with self-radicalised terrorists and state-sponsored terrorism by rogue states or autocratic dictators.

At its core, terrorism is about “winning the hearts and minds of the people.” Yet, often, harsh counter-terrorist measures often serve to create breeding grounds for further radicalisation, creating a government that is no different from the terrorists it purports to be defending its citizens from. Nietzsche once warned that when dealing with a monster, one has to be careful “lest you turn into the monster yourself.” This adage rings true for governments which adopt harsh measures to deal with terrorists. In the USA, the Patriot Act, while seemingly effective, remains highly contentious as it infringes upon a person’s right to privacy, which is enshrined in the American Constitution. Furthermore, the atrocities committed in Guantanamo Bay and the Abu Graib prison in Iraq not only go against the Geneva Conventions, but also provide further fuel for terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda to characterise the USA as power-hungry and hypocritical, shifting moderate



Muslims towards radicalisation. Although Obama has promised to close down Guantanamo Bay, tangible results have yet to be achieved. Hence, in the long run, such aggressive, harsh measures only serve to radicalise individuals, co-opting more people into terrorist organisations, or even self-radicalisation as seen in the rise of many American-born Muslims turning to terrorism, evident in the recent shootings at the US military base and headquarters.

Often harsh aggressive measures fail to address the political grievances and aims of terrorist organisations, creating situations termed “negative peace” in countries which have defeated the terrorist groups, where simmering tensions still brew and threaten to erupt, destroying the fragile peace that has been obtained. This is clearly exemplified in Sri Lanka, where the government’s vicious destruction of the LTTE not only violated international human rights, but has also led to growing discontent and protest from the Tamil diaspora worldwide that would provide a fertile ground for the LTTE to regroup and re-emerge. This is especially so given that such governments, such as Rajapaksa’s government, refuse to acknowledge the political marginalisation and deprivations of these groups, the root cause of the emergence of terrorism.

Furthermore, while some terrorist groups have political motives, often others are purely terror driven and uncompromising in their position, making any rational political situation ineffectual. The rise of Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups such as the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) in Kashmir and Hamas in the Palestinian Israeli conflict have added a new layer of violence, exacerbating an originally political conflict to a more dangerous, intractable cycle of bloodshed. This lies in the fundamental nature of such groups, which fervently believe they are fighting a holy war, or Jihad, against foreign influences in their land, based on a distorted interpretation of the Koran. These fanatic religious beliefs make conflict resolution difficult as these terrorists refuse to accept mere concessions from governments, believing their cause to be sanctified by God.

Furthermore, state-sponsored terrorism remains a difficult issue to resolve. Conflicting with Liberalism, the Realist school of thought asserts that many countries are motivated by self-interest, most exemplified through gaining military might. While most countries have recognised international cooperation as paramount to achieving their political self-interest, there still exist radical dictators and theocracies that continually fund militant terrorist groups in fulfilment of realism, making it difficult to curb terrorism. Al Qaeda, itself, was the product of Saudi Arabia and the USA’s funding of the mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghanistan War, ironically creating the monster that is one of their greatest threats. Such a trend still exists today where countries such as Iran and Libya, in their defiance of the West and modernity, continually fund groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Pakistan, too, continually funds the Laksha-e-Toiba (LeT), which was responsible for the Mumbai bombings in India in November 2008, as a measure of exhibiting its might against its long-time rival India, furthering antagonism between the two countries. This lack of respect for mutual consensus has made it difficult to achieve effective outcomes from counter-terrorist measures as well. Obama’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan hinge ultimately on Pakistan’s cooperation in denying Al Qaeda a safehaven along its borders. Pakistan’s prevarication on this issue does not bode well and provides an ominous sign of a protracted conflict that might prolong American troop involvement beyond the promised 18 months.

Lastly, the proliferation of new media, primarily the internet, has created a platform for many terrorist groups to send their message to other users, inciting many to be influenced by such subversive messages and self-radicalising. Easy instructions on creating bombs are used by such individuals to create more fear and terror. Arguably, these individuals are even more insidious and pose a greater threat as they are difficult to track down.

Terrorists are a multifaceted, complex group of people supported by states or groundswells of disenfranchised people and cannot be view simplistically as a homogenous groups. Despite the plethora of counter-terrorist measures that provide both the carrot and stick, such measure are insufficient in dealing with the wide diversity of terrorists. As such, the challenge of terrorism will sadly be present both now and for future generations. Often, there is a fine line between dealing effectively with terrorists and compromising one’s values and principles to the point that the government itself becomes defamed as the terrorist. Perhaps this is the greatest threat of all, that governments, in seeking to fulfil the social contract towards the people, justify the means for the ends and not only turn into the monster they set out to destroy, but incite more to join terrorism.

Comments:

A comprehensive and well-written essay. Keep up the good work,Claire!

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

essay 5

“At the end of the day, government is all about teamwork and partnership”. Comment.

Kristabelle Tan Chu Qian | 10S07A

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, which swiftly ended the Cold War that had lasted for close to half a century, marked an era when the world was split into two camps – the Capitalists and the Communists. Whilst democracy can be said to be the best form of government, exemplified by the economic and socio-political success enjoyed by third world countries that have modelled their form of governance after the United States of America (USA), inherently all forms of governance – democracy, communism and even monarchy – are the same. All of them stress the importance of teamwork and partnership to bring about not just political stability but also economic and social success. The difference lies in the partnerships formed, that is, with whom do governments form alliances? This essay will attempt to show that at the end of the day, governments are all about teamwork and partnership. The different levels of teamwork displayed by the two most common types of government – communism and democracy – in today’s world will be explored. Of course, there are bound to be exceptions and this, too, will be discussed by examining extreme cases of governance, such as authoritarian regimes under the likes of Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union, as well as times when a government needs to act alone for the benefit of most, if not all, in the country, even if it means not cooperating with other segments of society, such as civilians.

Sir Winston Churchill once said, “Democracy is the worst solution to all your problems – until you compare it to other [forms of governance]”. Democracy, despite all its shortcomings and apparent flaws, is still the most widely practised form of governance as it is about “people’s power”. Probably the most obvious partnership is that between the state and its people. Democratic governments work closely with their people to ensure strong and transparent governance. In Switzerland, home to possibly the world’s most politically active citizens, a consensus must be reached between the ruling party and the citizens before a bill or policy is passed by the government. Even in Singapore, steps have been undertaken by the government to enhance teamwork and cooperation between the government and ordinary Singaporeans, through the Feedback Unit, Residents’ Committees (RC) and weekly meet-the-people sessions held by constitutional ministers. All these are ways through which the Singapore government seeks to govern the country by establishing partnerships with its people and taking into consideration opinions and feedback received from such channels. As such, we can see that democracy, with its emphasis on the slogan “for the people, by the people”, is all about teamwork and partnership between the ruling party or coalition and its people.

Even in communist governments, we can see teamwork and partnership taking place, albeit on a smaller scale, amongst members of the parliament or the ruling party. In Vietnam, policies are debated by members of the communist party before they are passed. Therefore, even within communist governments, teamwork has to be present amongst the members of the party so that they can reach a compromise amongst the differing factions and successfully undertake a policy. This can be observed in China as well, which has increasingly injected elements of democracy into its governing style with a parliament that opens debate to party members.

As a popular saying goes, “who guards the guardians?” In the context of a government, it is the opposition. The opposition acts as a watchdog of sorts, making sure the ruling party does not commit mistakes that may (or may not) bring harm to the people of the nation. In the case of a ruling coalition such as that of Singapore (though it is not an extreme case), the ruling majority People’s Action Party (PAP) takes into account the views of other political parties, such as those of the Workers’ Party. Despite slightly incongruent party aims, resources are always shared to ensure political stability in the country. As such, the government does seem to be all about teamwork and partnership – with the people, within the ruling party, and even with the opposition. With unity comes strength; a government does seem to hinge upon alliances for

survival (i.e. longer lasting rule), as seen by the PAP's success in capturing the hearts and minds of generations with its policy of cooperation with ordinary Singaporeans.

However, there are always exceptions to consider. Adolf Hitler, ruler of post-WWII Germany and filled with an insatiable hunger for power, ousted the ruling Weimar government and took over the reins of control as Chancellor and President at the same time. He had no need for teamwork and partnership as he could pass laws without the consent of the electorate following the 1939 Emergency Law. Similarly, in the Soviet Union, Stalin ruled with an iron fist, silencing all opposition either through assassinations or by exiling his political opponents. Critics of an all-cooperating government may argue that such authoritarian regimes have existed throughout history and have had their share of success. This argument is definitely invalid. By silencing the opposition through instilling fear by the use of the Gestapo, Hitler went on to commit various indescribable atrocities on the Jews during the Holocaust. Stalin, without first consulting the people, introduced collectivisation in the Soviet Union that led to much suffering amongst peasants who rebelled as they burnt their crops and livestock to prevent Stalin's men from getting them. In the long run, it can be seen that these regimes did not last long. Without cooperation with the other segments of society, those leaders only made ill-intentioned and mis-informed policies that ultimately harmed the civilians.

There are still times when the government should act alone. One example includes crises such as earthquakes or tsunamis. In those cases, to prevent time-lags due to policy debates and to save as many lives as possible, leaders should take matters into their own hands and undertake relief aid and rescue work immediately. Another instance is when the opposition proves to be disruptive to domestic politics and social stability. Take the example of Chee Soon Juan, whose political speeches only served to belittle the PAP and misrepresent the party's importance in Singapore. His claims are baseless and would only create unnecessary socio-political instability. The PAP was right to sue him even if it did not first approach the public to reach a consensus. However, one must remember that these are special circumstances and should not be taken as a rule.

In conclusion, it is true that governments are all about partnership and teamwork.

#### **Comments:**

***This essay is well-informed, controlled and well-organised. Good effort! For more balance and breadth, could consider other possible key aspects of governance, given the modifier "all". Conclusion is abrupt.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

essay 6

“The media does not require more freedom; rather it needs to exercise more responsibility.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Tham Ying Ling | 10S07A

Living in a world where the advertising budget of multinational corporations is equivalent to half of the money channelled into education across all countries, it becomes apparent that the media has great influence on the world. Besides a few repressive states, the media is often allowed sufficient freedom to present the truths of various issues. However, this ability to influence, due in part to people's trust in the validity of the news, is often exploited for commercial interests. This results in grossly biased information, sensationalised and inaccurate reports and content that is violent or sexual to target the scandal-mongering natures of people. This deviation of the media from being a portal to convey the truth is due to excess freedom and a lack of responsibility of content producers, hence I agree largely with this statement.

Though proponents of further media freedom claim that more freedom allows minority voices to be heard and that it presents a more holistic picture of the situation, the very fact that the media is operated by innately biased humans challenges their argument. Despite the freedom offered, content providers have already censored the content to present the views that they support. It does not matter if the media has more freedom, for the end result will be the same. However, if the media were to fulfil its responsibility to present a truthful and balanced account of any situation, freedom actually propagates the ideal of a truth-seeking press. Take, for example, the United States' Fox news channel. Being headed by Republican supporters, it often projects the image of Democrats very negatively. During the recent nuclear technology forums, Fox's anchormen started comparing the symbol for the talks, which President Obama approved of, with the Muslim crescent, accusing President Obama of Muslim inclinations. The truth was that the symbol was derived from the scientific drawing of an atom, wholly unrelated to Muslim nations or Islam. Here is a case where media freedoms allow content providers to criticise or speculate about their country's leaders, but such freedoms are misappropriated for defamation and to intentionally mislead. Therefore, it is clear that the media should exercise more responsibility, rather than have more freedom.

As important as freedom is, responsibility is crucial in forming media content. As most media content providers are privatised, it is inevitable that commercial interests come into play when deciding the content of programmes. However, if giving the media free reign over the shows they produce ultimately results in trashy content full of sex and violence to satisfy the carnal desires of people, is this not compromising the media's true purpose to inform and to educate? Studies have shown that exposure to violent images have the capability to “teach” young, impressionable children how to commit violence. With the proliferation of media platforms, it also becomes a hard battle for parents to control the content viewed by their children. The responsibility of communicating quality content, removed of the vice and horror commonly associated with great viewership and profits, hence falls on the shoulders of the media content producer. If the media fails to exercise responsibility, I believe that we shall see more “Grand Theft Auto”-inspired massacres in the future.

As Uncle Ben famously said in the blockbuster movie Spiderman, “With great power comes great responsibility”. The nature of the media is such that the tiniest error is magnified when it is processed by the media. Whether it is through hyped-up reports or the fact that millions are watching, the media opens up a black hole of possibilities for tensions and strife to occur. This immense power wielded by content providers and media personalities makes it pertinent for these authority holders to be mindful of their actions. Take for example the Danish cartoons that degraded the image of Allah. This may have remained a mere quibble if the cartoons had been posted on a notice board. Placed in the papers, it escalated into a multi-national, heated religious row. To think that all it takes for such a saga to brew large-scale conflicts is one frame of cartoon, obviously suggests the great power and responsibility the media has. Nowadays, with the popularisation of the World Wide Web, anyone has the freedom to write an incendiary comment, but who will bear the

consequences as a result of insensitive and irresponsible content? It is definitely responsibility that our media providers should exercise, instead of lusting for more freedom to sensationalise largely useless information.

This is not to say that press freedoms are wholly irrelevant; in fact, press freedom liberates people by handing them knowledge to make informed decisions. This is especially true in repressive states such as North Korea and Myanmar. With press freedom, people are able to learn about their rights and demand fair treatment. However, given the current stage of development of most of the world, freedom is no longer a limit on the pursuit of truth. Instead, more responsibility of the media should be exercised to further their pursuit via more balanced and accurate reports of affairs.

**Comments:**

***This essay is sensitive, well-argued and shows depth and maturity of thought. Could take more care to address/refute possible counter-arguments for better balance.***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 7

"One ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Discuss this statement with reference to the role of modern medicine in the world today.

Zhang Wei | 10S06Q

A well known adage goes, "prevention is better than cure." Indeed, we are taught from a very young age to maintain good personal hygiene so as not to suffer the pain and the inconvenience wrought upon us by common maladies such as the flu. National leaders, regardless of the level of development of their countries, also engage in nation-wide campaigns to educate the public on disease-prevention techniques as well as tips on how to lead a healthy lifestyle so as to maintain a healthy, productive workforce and reduce the national health bill. Even on an international level, prevention and eradication of such diseases as malaria and AIDS have never lost their support from the international community. As such, it is not out of place to reflect on the saying "one ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure", especially with reference to the role of modern medicine in the world today. In this area, I strongly believe that the prevention of health problems is much more valuable, beneficial and effective than curing such diseases. This is because the prevention of maladies can play an important role not only in reducing world inequality and human suffering, but also in improving people's standard of living. Prevention is also much more feasible than the valiant but often futile pursuit and implementation of a cure.

One of the essential roles of modern medicine is arguably that of the reduction of global inequalities – specifically with regard to one's access to good health. Global inequality in terms of an individual's state of well-being is stark and undeniable. Many African countries remain debilitated by the high occurrence of AIDS within their populace. It has been estimated that hundreds of children die every day in developing countries such as India and Kenya from malaria – a disease already wiped out in virtually all developed countries. It is no wonder that the average life expectancy of a person living in Sierra Leone is 20 to 30 years lower than that of someone from Japan, for example. Some proponents of cure see it as the better method to reduce global health disparity by pointing to the apparent futility of prevention. They argue that the social problems – including high incidence of rape, extreme poverty and low levels of education and hence ignorance of disease prevention techniques – are so deeply entrenched in the societies of these nations that it is not worth the while to devote resources to disease prevention. They claim that after decades of campaigns to inculcate AIDS-prevention techniques in certain African countries such as Benin, there still seems to be no reduction in the severity of the epidemic in these countries. In fact, the number of people contracting AIDS in Sierra Leone has increased significantly over the last decade. As such, detractors of "disease prevention" believe that it is more worthwhile to instead focus on cure as a remedy to this health issue. They give the example of tuberculosis in Europe in the late 1800s and early 1900s – after an effective cure for tuberculosis was discovered in the early 1900s, tuberculosis was very much reduced in the then-developing Europe, even though Europe at the time suffered from similar social problems (such as overpopulation and/or low levels of education) that developing countries are facing today. As such, these people conclude that with reference to reducing global health inequality, prevention is definitely not as worthwhile as cure.

However, I disagree strongly with the above point of view. Firstly, it is very apparent that the biggest disease to plague developing countries (especially those in Africa) – AIDS – has no known cure. Furthermore, even if diseases that plague poor nations such as tuberculosis and malaria do have effective treatments, it is impossible to provide the majority of the afflicted with a cure. This is not only because these poor nations simply cannot afford to do so, or are too corrupt to provide effective medical treatment to their people, but also because the developed nations that possess the know-how and resources to eliminate such diseases seem to be unwilling to donate adequate aid to help the developing nations. For instance, France, Europe's most generous aid-giver, only gives 0.5% of its GDP as relief aid to developing nations. On the other hand, prevention seems to be a much more effective and feasible alternative, specifically because disease-prevention programmes are cheaper as they circumvent the long-term use of large quantities of expensive pharmaceutical products



required for curing diseases. Indeed, this is perhaps why small pox was effectively eliminated from developing countries with a simple vaccine that is definitely more cost-effective than regular pills and surgeries.

In addition, prevention is more worthwhile than cure because, in the process, the former engenders more beneficial social change than the latter. Indeed, one of the main contributing factors towards the AIDS epidemic in Uganda is the low level of education of women and hence their financial dependence on men and increased vulnerability to sexual abuse (accelerating the spread of AIDS). In response, the Ugandan government put in place measures to encourage girls to receive an education as part of its AIDS prevention scheme. It is no wonder that Uganda has seen one of the most successful reductions in AIDS infection rates of any African country. The education of girls will also likely benefit society by emancipating women. This would not be possible by simply providing a cure for diseases. Hence, by producing beneficial social changes along the way, prevention is indeed worth a lot more than cure.

Another important role of modern medicine is to reduce human suffering. In this respect, it is beyond doubt that a little effort of prevention is more effective than a lot of effort at curing because the former circumvents the suffering in the process of medical treatment altogether. More significantly, however, spending a little effort at avoiding disease is more worthwhile than treating the affliction for two reasons. Firstly and most apparently, an effective cure for certain lethal diseases, such as cancer, does not exist. As such, preventive efforts such as maintaining a healthy lifestyle will be more effective in doing away with the pains that come with the disease than hoping in vain for a cure. Secondly, for diseases such as obesity, a person's own habits are arguably a much larger contributing factor than, say, the environment or a virus. Once such poor eating habits set in, it will be difficult for one to change one's lifestyle and to slim down again (i.e. to procure a "cure"). This is probably why America is still very much troubled by obesity (one third of American adults are overweight), despite having very advanced medical technologies. On the other hand, we can envision that implementing "preventive" techniques such as good eating habits at a young age – even if such efforts are gradual and nuanced rather than forceful or intense – is more effective at reducing suffering incurred from being obese. As such, being more flexible and effective, prevention is more worthwhile than cure.

A third role of modern medicine is perhaps to limit the damages inflicted on our society by global pandemics such as the bird flu. In this respect, prevention is significantly more worthwhile than cure because once the pandemic sets in, it will be extremely difficult to eliminate or cure. This is because the governments of certain developing countries tend to be bureaucratic and ineffective at dealing with pandemics. As a consequence, these countries can remain a "source" of the pandemic. They prolong the duration of the pandemic even while the infectious disease is kept under control in other parts of the world. For example, the Chinese government's refusal to share information on the severity of the SARS epidemic in their country as well as their inability to keep the epidemic under control prolonged the duration and increased the spread of the SARS pandemic, contributing to the terrible death toll of the SARS pandemic. Therefore, since waiting until a stage where a "cure" will be required can prove deadly when it comes to difficult-to-suppress global pandemics, prevention seems to be a more worthwhile alternative. Governments can work towards preventing the possibility of pandemics by, for example, utilising temperature sensors at airports, which is already implemented in several countries today.

In conclusion, although prevention of disease can be difficult, it is still much more worthwhile to attempt prevention rather than spending large amounts of resources at implementing a cure.

### **Comments:**

***Your essay shows clear conceptualisation of issues central to the discussion. You've managed to successfully and meaningfully weave the significance of the quote and the role of modern medicine to produce a coherent, persuasive response. Overall, an engaging read!***

# General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 8

“One ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Discuss this statement with reference to the role of modern medicine in the world today.

Chan Shu Kiat, Sukit C | 10S06K

Two days prior to the writing of this essay, the chief operating officer of the Singapore General Hospital was struck down by a case of brain haemorrhage. Wong Yue Sie was the poster boy of healthy living in Singapore. He was known as a strong advocate of preventive medicine, and at the same time, he lived a squeaky clean life. However, what strikes lay persons like myself is the highlighting of a preponderant misconception that exists locally and, I daresay, around the world: it is often believed that it is possible to prevent all diseases. This essay question is predicated upon the notion that both prevention and cure are mutually exclusive. The existence of prevention will negate the need for cure and without prevention there will be a slew of diseases that require curing. The latter seems to make enough sense, but the former has to be analysed especially in the world today where a box of organic cherries are priced at fifteen dollars with the promise of cancer prevention. Sure, prevention is better than cure. As the statement puts it, one ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. However, what happens when prevention is impossible? That is when modern medicine and its improved healing qualities come in to save the day.

There is no denying that if prevention is possible, it is obviously a better choice. Many a times, people fail to see that even though cures for various diseases are readily available today, the process of going through the treatments or the diseases themselves is an excruciating one. Just as modern medicine has evolved from its primitive ancestors, so has the world. The world has undergone a paradigm shift that has given people more choices (medicines included), and now with improved living conditions in general, a simple correction of a lifestyle choice can go a long way in preventing diseases. Take the overly used but very relevant example of smoking; just by cutting out smoking, the chances of lung cancer, aneurysms and other respiratory diseases (including the extremely irritating bronchitis) decreases by almost 80%.

Furthermore, even with the presence of modern medicine, healthcare costs are still exorbitant when compared to the wages of the average person. Locally, even though the Medisave scheme has included strokes, diabetes and other common diseases, it does not change the fact that treatment for these diseases can rise to almost twenty thousand dollars for five years in the case of diabetes treatments. Not only is this unaffordable and taxing for the average blue-collar worker, it also poses a huge burden for governments. Countries like Singapore and the USA which place huge emphasis on healthcare systems and financial support, are often faced with an equally huge bill that comes after every fiscal year. In Germany, when Angela Merkel highlighted the rising costs of healthcare and its huge burden on the already burdened European country, her political allies quickly brushed this aside for fear of losing their votebanks. The fact is that healthcare is still pricey, even with modern medicine. Hence, we must acknowledge that the more cost-effective prevention is worth more than a pound of cure.

When Louis Pasteur first came up with the vaccination for cow pox, he unlocked a whole new area of medicine aimed at preventing diseases from attacking our bodies. Today, with the advancement of technologies and medicine, countless vaccines have been rushed out by profit-driven pharmaceutical companies. Most recently with the outbreak of the swine flu, scientists have come up with various forms of vaccines aimed at countering further mutations of the disease. In Singapore and all across the world, tuberculosis vaccination has become almost mandatory. Looking back in history, we see that the flu and tuberculosis have been eradicated as killers in many, if not in all, societies. Preventive medicine reduced the effort needed to tackle these diseases and reduced the need for doctors to expend their energies to cure them. These vaccines are often readily available and are also often administered by other healthcare staff. Truly, prevention has become an easier task thanks to the presence of modern medicine.

However, prevention is not always the most viable alternative as there are diseases which cannot be prevented. Myasthenia gravis causes an individual to completely lose the ability to move if medication is not taken regularly. Myasthenia gravis, like Huntington's disease, cannot be prevented. Yet these diseases have been present for ages and still life has continued. Furthermore, modern medicine has made life with these diseases easier to go through if proper medication is taken. As such, we must take into account the situations whereby prevention is impossible and cure is the only solution. In today's world, with modern medicine close at hand, the world is not as scary as it used to be and new cures are worth their weight in gold.

Lastly, modern medicine has made it easy to tackle diseases and illnesses. As CEO of Singhealth Tan Ser Kiat observed, the world of medicine has taken on a "sniper" approach as opposed to its previous "shotgun" approach. Medical cures coupled with modern technology have made the lives of both doctors and patients easier. Imagine a world without Panadol, a cure for various aches and pains, and you see the progress that we have made in terms of medicine. Even common gastric problems have now been tackled with drugs like Omeprazole that have proven to be extremely effective and cheap. So with more medicines available, the role of prevention has been overshadowed by the "cure" giants of Pfizer and other pharmaceutical companies.

In conclusion, it is impossible to clearly assert that prevention is better than cure since the world that we live in is not that clear cut. To say that prevention is better than cure is to overlook diseases that are not preventable and to say that cure takes the trophy is to overlook the fact that many diseases can be prevented. Hence, we have to remain agnostic about the issue and tackle each disease on its own battlefield.

**Comments:**

***Valid ideas with a wealth of examples, and expressed with some creativity. Mostly convincing and well-articulated but watch out for expressions that are informal, and the occasional digression from the question.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 1

“Education is the great leveller.” How far is this true?

Pratyusha Mukherjee | 11S06L

Many consider basic education to be a fundamental human right just as indispensable to the survival and progress of mankind as other basic necessities such as food and water. As HG Wells once said, “Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.” It is imperative that the world be rid of the greatest enemy of progress – ignorance – allowing for the rise of a new era of knowledgeable, enlightened and socially conscious global citizens who will work for the betterment of society. The growing inequalities brought about by globalisation and the disparate developmental stages of different regions in the world is now of growing concern. I thus believe that it is indeed true that education is the great leveller and the widespread dissemination of knowledge is necessary to iron out the inequities that society faces today.

It may appear that education fails to act as a leveller and only intensifies the inequality between the rich and the poor, for only a privileged few have access to the funds that will greatly ease the process of their entry into a world-class educational institution. This has led to accusations of elitism being hurled at top schools and universities. Educated, wealthy parents are more likely to have the means of providing their children with a strong academic foundation at home and will be better able to afford the hefty fees required at academically superior primary and secondary schools. Students from less financially secure backgrounds must content themselves with a government school education, which may not offer as diverse and enriching opportunities as a private, more expensive school would. For example, in South Korea, parents spend up to \$10,000 a month on each child’s education, sending them to premier educational institutions and enrolling them in various tuition programmes designed to help them maximise their potential. This trend is observable elsewhere. Wealthy students in the US attend “fast-track Ivy League” high schools that prepare them for admission into Ivy League colleges. In Third World countries, the inequality is even more pronounced. A typical school in Somalia is so severely understaffed that one teacher has to manage as many as fifty children, who may range from grades one to five, in a ramshackle classroom with poor facilities. These students do not have a conducive environment to learn in hence they fail to benefit from their education. Those who are able to afford it attend privately run international schools which are properly staffed and which have better facilities.

Furthermore, children from wealthier, better-educated backgrounds are more likely to perform well in school and go on to command higher positions and salaries later in life, as compared to their less well-off counterparts. They are often groomed for success from an early age by concerned, supportive parents and are pressured to do well academically. The adults in lower income families are often preoccupied by financial insecurities and their associated problems. Thus, they are less likely to be able to monitor their child’s academic performance and exhort him or her to study hard and to score well on examinations. Studies have revealed an unfortunate but very pronounced correlation between a student’s academic performance and his or her family’s income level. Even in so-called meritocratic Singapore, students from wealthier backgrounds have a higher chance of scoring well in examinations and securing prestigious scholarships. In Singapore 80% of the general population live in the government’s Housing Development Board (HDB) flats yet only 47% of the students who win the much coveted Public Service Commission (PSC) scholarships stay in HDB flats. Perhaps education merely enables privileged students to succeed further in life at the expense of those from humbler backgrounds and does not act as a great leveller at all.

However, one must consider the fact that education has made startling progress over the past decades and the fruits of these efforts are evident today in many parts of the world. If not for the window of opportunity that education provided them, many currently successful individuals would remain entrenched in the vicious poverty cycle afflicting a large percentage of the world’s population. After China implemented a policy that made primary school education mandatory for all children

in the 1980s, the country progressed by leaps and bounds. The newly educated rural population was given the opportunity to learn and to benefit from the country's rapid industrialisation. This lifted 50.1% of China's poor out of extreme poverty. In India, the Pratichi Trust Fund established by economist Amartya Sen has helped to provide rural children with a basic education, equipping them with the skills necessary to attain a higher standard of living. A non-profit organisation set up in Bihar, an impoverished Indian state with a low literacy rate, has groomed rural children with exceptional talent to enter the nation's most prestigious university, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT). This year, the school achieved an astonishing 100% pass rate, a commendable feat for any educational institution. With this in mind, education does act as a leveller and enables poorer children to compete on an equal footing with others and move up in life.

Moreover, education is particularly vital and acts as a leveller because it makes people aware of their rights and the options and opportunities available to them. It is only by defeating the vice of ignorance that we can effectively respond to and deal with the various problems plaguing the world today. Ignorance breeds intolerance, and even now there are countries where gender and racial discrimination is rampant and people are unfairly oppressed. Education brings enlightenment and makes people more aware and tolerant. For example, in Kerala, the fertility rate is a fifth lower than other Indian states, which results in greater female labour force participation rates and healthier demographics. This fact can be largely attributed to the high female literacy rate in Kerala and the relatively widespread education of females. Women are more aware of contraceptive measures and of their individual rights. Conversely, a lack of education can have a serious and dangerous impact on countries. For instance, the poorly educated citizens of Venezuela lacked the knowledge and awareness to elect a responsible democratic leader. They were easily swayed into voting Hugo Chavez into power in 1998. His ensuing militaristic regime has had devastating effects on the nation as a whole. We need education, especially in less developed countries, to progress as a society and to counter the expansion of the income gap between the rich and the poor.

In conclusion, education is indeed the great leveller. However, in the cautionary words of Alexander Pope, "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing." In order for education to be truly effective as a leveller in today's society, every student must be given the opportunity to obtain a thorough, well-grounded academic foundation that will propel him onto the path of success. It is only then that we can claim to have achieved the Millennium Development Project's goal of providing a basic education to each and every child.

**Comments:**

***Pratyusha, fairly convincing argument put forth. Examples are generally relevant with a few exceptions.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 2

“Education is the great leveller.” How far is this true?

Andrew Ryan Ming-Hui Anderson | 11A01B

Throughout history, the search for a mechanism for equality has always been ongoing. In the past seventy or so years, however, the idea of education as a great leveller has become more and more popular. As the great statesman Winston Churchill once said, “I owe everything I am today to the time I spent in school.” Education is often seen to be an equaliser, a provider of equal opportunities, and a beacon for all to start on the same level; hence the term “great leveller”. I believe this title is justified as education for the most part is able, and has been able, to achieve that. While some point to incidences of unfairness in educational systems, I believe that the unfairness is less due to education than to other factors.

The goal for universal primary education is listed as part of the United Nations’ Millennium Development Goals. UN press releases have consistently labelled Africa as the target of these goals, as education is often seen to be a way of breaking out of the poverty cycle. In this they are indeed correct. Education can provide skills to the poor to help them escape the poverty trap. Take for example South Africa where a farmer can earn US\$1-2 a day. With primary education and a job in the city, a South African can expect to earn US\$10 a day. While this is still a low salary, education has led to an increase of at least five-fold in salary. The International Herald Tribune reports that in Vietnam, “higher levels of education have led to... a more skilled and higher quality workforce... commanding a greater salary than ever before.” The removal of the poverty cycle in these countries has given the poor greater opportunities as compared to their richer counterparts, thus allowing them to level the playing field.

Education also encourages political freedom and the lessening of discrimination, allowing people of all sorts to be able to have equal opportunities. Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s foremost henchman, said, “Naturally people don’t want to be deceived, but education is a dangerous tool, one that must be kept away from the masses because they might get too smart for their own good.” Education and the dissemination of information were what the Nazis feared the most, as it encouraged political activism and freedom. Education gives people greater understanding of what their rights are and it empowers them to fight for these rights. In China we see a new generation of youths – not raised under the Communist system – with access to modern, free education, who are gradually realising what should be accorded to them. They have responded with calls for corruption crackdowns, ends to favouritism, and calls for freedom of expression. The government, famous for its hard-line position and crackdowns like the infamous Tiananmen Square incident, has been forced to order the resignation of several party officials. Education helps to remove the politically discriminatory barriers that prevent true equality.

Education has also been able to end or lessen traditional discrimination like sexism and racism in many societies. In India, for example, a traditionally patriarchal society, education has allowed women in the world’s greatest democracy to enjoy greater rights. Access to modern, proper education has made many understand the importance of gender equality, something new in a society that (still, in a few areas) embraced polygamy, male rape if marriage followed, and the punishment of wives if they brought shame to the family. Nowadays, women in India have a far more equal standing in society.

Some detractors might argue that education will only work as a leveller if it is provided fairly, and non-universal education is often counter-productive in the pursuit of equality. I think that there are fundamental flaws in that argument. First of all, the fact that something is a “leveller” means that it has to be provided equally; if not, the hypothetical levels will not be equal. It is therefore not a fault specific to education, but rather anything that aspires to be a “leveller”. Secondly and more importantly, education is often not universal due to other factors; it is not the fault of education itself. Granted, if education is only given to the ruling elite and not to the masses, this would ensure that



class stagnation would be prevalent and the poor would never be able to compete on an equal footing with the elite. However, I believe that this problem, prevalent in countries like Indonesia and African states, is more a problem of corruption than education.

Other detractors raise the point that education itself may be a vicious cycle as only rich people can afford to give their children good education and good education ensures that these children become wealthy in the future. Conversely, poorer people do not have the resources to give their children high-level education and frills like tuition, and their children end up with fewer skills and thus with lower paying jobs. This is indeed the case in the Ivy League universities, where it is common that the number of students of upper class origins is disproportionate to that of students from lower classes. This is indeed a pertinent point, but I believe that with financial assistance from the government, this problem would be tempered, at the very least. In fact, educational reforms in the US seem to have kept this problem in mind as well.

Lastly, some detractors also believe that education may be hijacked by unsavoury characters for their own immoral schemes. They point to Nazi race education or Soviet re-education practices as examples of the misuses of education and what terrors they might bring. Surely, in these cases, education is not a great leveller at all! However, I think that they are confusing education with a bastardised and perverted variant that many term “propaganda” or “brainwashing”. Nazi teachings of the superiority of the Master Race were hardly based on fact or science. This is more propaganda than education, and thus cannot be said to be a fault of education.

In conclusion, education plays an immensely important role in levelling the playing field, removing barriers of race, religion, political leanings and poverty to provide the equality that all democracies aspire to achieve. There may be minor faults in education, but these are mostly due to the presence of other factors, or can be solved through government intervention. Thomas Jefferson once said, “Education is what makes us free.” I believe he is well and truly right.

#### **Comments:**

***Andrew, this is a cogent, fluent and persuasive piece with several insightful arguments. I'm not so sure about some of your “quotes” though. On the whole, excellent work!***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 3

“Education is the great leveller.” How far is this true?

Chin Ken Min | 11S03S

Education is of paramount importance in any society today. It is what shapes the leaders of the future, and what prepares the rest of the population to make contributions to society while carving out a living for themselves. For many from underprivileged backgrounds, an education is the only ticket to success, and the only remote chance of fair competition they would experience in their formative years. It might be said that education, being blind to societal structure and hierarchy, is the great leveller in today's class-conscious and pragmatic society. However, there are certain areas that suggest that education might not be the great leveller, but a means of forced conformity to societal expectations on the country's youngest and brightest minds.

The levelling effect that education has on our society is undeniable. Education bases success on factors that one can control. Hard work, talent, sweat, and sacrifice are the main keys to success in education. Society's conception of success may be warped, defining it more as a direct product of one's family background, social strata, and, more depressingly, family influence and income. It is this societal construct that all the more highlights the levelling ability of education in a society. Whether a student is from the poorest of slums or from the richest of neighbourhoods, he will receive the same education, be imparted with the same knowledge, and sit for common national examinations. In this case, social status and backgrounds count for nothing, and all advantages that one possesses not out of one's own ability, but through one's luck of being from a well-to-do family, are thrown out. Everyone starts from scratch and one's own effort and ability are the catalysts to success.

Secondly, education gives everyone the basic knowledge on which to build. Education, whether for the rich or poor, imparts the same set of values and knowledge. However successful a person becomes depends solely on how he or she makes use of this teaching to achieve success. While a child from a poorer family might not benefit as much from his parents' influence or financial capabilities as his counterparts, an education provides him with the basic knowledge on which he can build. In this way, it levels the playing field by giving the underprivileged child a foundation on which to build an “arsenal of weapons” that can help him to compete effectively and realistically with his richer and more advantaged counterparts. While many might say that it is naive to believe that education can bring the underprivileged on par with the rich and influential, suffice it to say that an education is the tool needed to at least give the underprivileged a chance of fair competition in society. While a lot of hard work, blood, sweat and tears might be necessary for the less privileged to sufficiently build upon this foundation, the mere fact that a foundation is present lends tremendous weight to the claim that education indeed levels our society.

Finally, in many countries, throughout history, success or failure in the field of education is determined by national examinations. National examinations are a simple test of one's capability. The fact that the results of such examinations carry enough weight to decide a person's future and career all the more justifies that education can act as a leveller of society. One of the greatest models of education ever adopted by any society was the Chinese Imperial Examinations. The concept of meritocracy took centre stage as entrants were given the same examinations, with success or failure dependent on one's effort, preparation and hard work, independent of family background and influence. In this way, although the road to the examination hall might have been difficult for different students, the mere fact that everyone was given a chance to succeed was a refreshing idea, and one that contrasted with the grossly unequal chance of success that different people from unequal social strata have.

However, it is untrue to solely state that education is the great leveller in society. Firstly, it is undoubtedly true that the rich still have an advantage over the poor. Tuition and extra classes might be a given form of help for the rich, but to the underprivileged who are struggling to make ends meet, tuition might seem like a luxury out of their reach. In this way, education is definitely not the leveller that

many believe it to be. While what is taught in school might be fair and equal, and while examinations are blind to name and status, the financial muscle of the rich converts itself into superior learning methods with more effective, efficient and superior results. How then, can education be considered to level the playing field completely? Typically, tuition fees and miscellaneous expenses for junior college students in Singapore range from \$500 to \$1000 a month. For many, that amount is equal to or more than a family's combined salary. Considering the above mentioned viewpoint, it is easy to see why a society's education system is not completely blind to background and influence.

Secondly, while education might level the playing field for many, providing them with an equal chance of success, it is undoubtedly true that for many, this is solely restricted to the academic arena. While national examinations might reward those who are academically talented and hardworking, it is an undeniable fact that many are not academically inclined, but possess passion and talent in other fields. With respect to Singapore, top students who ace their examinations are given huge advantages and often, tailor-made paths to success and achievement. However, it is important to note that not every child is blessed with a brain suited to academia. Many bright and talented young minds today find themselves tending towards alternate forms of excellence such as the arts and sports. However, given the obsession that society has with grades, marks and results, many of these talents are not given room to flourish, for the simple reason that society as a whole does not recognise the arts and sports as a conventional and feasible road to success. Thus, many such talents are forced into the depths of unwelcoming textbooks and daunting examinations, while their true talent is conveniently dismissed and overlooked as "co-curricular activities". Should the phrase "level the playing field" be solely restricted to that of the difference between rich and poor? I think not. The fact is that an education is unable to provide a feasible means to success for students with alternative talents, forcing conformity among the diverse spectrum of talents that students have. How then can the education system be considered to level the playing field when only students who are academically inclined are given the deserved recognition, accolades and, more importantly, the great chance to enhance their talents and to make a success of themselves?

Finally, while it may be taken for granted by many in Singapore that education is mandatory for the young, this is by no means true for other countries. Many Third World countries provide education only to those who can afford it. The poor have to tend to family businesses and other domestic day-to-day issues. In this case, how can education be considered to level the playing field? It is just another means of widening the already massive gap between the rich and the poor, and the haves and the have-nots.

It is conclusive to say that education in Singapore and evidently in many parts of the world is a levelling factor, bridging the gap between the rich and the poor through the concept of "blind meritocracy". However, for a model of education to be completely levelling, it has to take into account many more inequalities than just that of income and background, one of which is the diverse range of talents that exists. Besides this, it also has to be applied equally and unconditionally to all members of a society. To say that any model of education is the "great leveller" would be an overstatement. Education is merely a leveller in a restricted arena and, even so, is definitely not a complete one. The statement is thus true only to a limited and restricted extent.

#### **Comments:**

***Interesting read, with an adequate and relatively thorough exploration of the different kinds of education in the first and third world countries. Examples are also sufficiently and adequately used to make your arguments. Good work.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 4

Should the responsibility for environmental conservation be shouldered solely by developed nations?

Jin Chentian | 11S03E

John F Kennedy once famously remarked, "There is too much point to the wisecrack that life on other planets is extinct because their scientists were more advanced than ours." Today, we are faced with precisely the same problem that he foresaw 40 years ago. The dramatic rise of science and technology that we have witnessed over the past two centuries has revolutionised our way of life, but at a terrible price. Our factories work round the clock to churn out the latest gadget that we all clamour for, in the process, producing tremendous amounts of toxic chemicals with the potential to eradicate life on Earth. We fly around the world at increasingly impressive speeds, all the while releasing tonnes of greenhouse gases that threaten to bring about calamity in the form of rising sea levels and ever more vicious floods and hurricanes. We live in homes that grow ever more luxurious as the years go by, sustained by the clearing of forests and the ever more efficient exploitation of nature. It seems that we have finally realised the danger that we have brought to our doorstep with this relentless and ruthless exploitation of the environment, and it is now a common consensus that we have to conserve the environment, but now a new problem arises. Is it, as developing countries assert, solely the responsibility of the developed nations which have undeniably played a major part in the degradation of the environment? Or should developing countries also be made to shoulder some of this burden, in the name of equality and universal solidarity? I believe that developing nations should rise to the call to play their part. The world is in peril, and it is time for all of us to act.

There will be many, especially in developing countries, who will staunchly disagree, for the environmental degradation that we see today is by and large brought about by the ignorant and irresponsible actions of developed nations. The developed nations, with the advent of the Industrial Revolution and the resulting industrialisation, are responsible for nearly all of the deforestation, pollution, and greenhouse gas emissions that we see today. In the name of fairness, surely developed nations should step up to clean the mess that they have created, without inconveniencing their less well-off neighbours who are no more than spectators caught in the mess. Indeed, statistics appear to back up their claims, for developed countries are in fact responsible for 97% of the greenhouse gas emissions trapped in our atmosphere and 93% of the toxic waste in our rivers and seas. Furthermore, researchers have stepped forward to publish their findings that the way of life in most developing countries in the past was environmentally sustainable. As such, it can be seen that the need for environmental conservation may be solely attributed to the actions of the developed nations, and they should have the moral courage to assume sole responsibility in atoning for their faults.

Moreover, it is incontestable that developed nations are much better equipped to handle the environmental conservation effort as compared to developing nations, and as the old adage goes, "from each according to his ability." Developed nations, equipped with advanced technology and more developed workforces, are constantly pursuing novel and more effective technologies to counter the problem of environmental degradation. Their efforts are paying off. In Switzerland, a carbon storing system was created a decade ago, allowing man to theoretically store all of the excess carbon dioxide, a potent greenhouse gas, in chambers housed thousands of metres underground. In America, improved methods of purifying seawater and removing toxic chemicals are also being developed. In contrast, developing countries have to tackle their bread-and-butter issues and often have no funds to dedicate to such technology. In Ghana, for example, research and development in the environmental sciences is for all practical purposes non-existent, with a nominal budget of US\$1000. Evidently, developed countries are in a much better position to manage environmental conservation, while developing countries are simply unable to do so, and, as such, developed nations should indeed shoulder the sole responsibility for environmental conservation in the interest of the success of the entire conservation effort.

Nevertheless, developing nations may also need to shoulder this responsibility, for even if it is granted that their lifestyles were environmentally sustainable in the past, this is definitely not the case today. China, for example, has seen its economy balloon over the past two decades, accompanied by a slew of greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, China is now the world's second largest emitter of greenhouse gases, and is set to overtake the USA before the decade is over. In Brazil, another developing country, we find the fastest rate of deforestation, with primary virgin forest the size of a football field being cleared every minute. Clearly, these are not what we would call sustainable practices, and clearly, developing nations have contributed to the environmental degradation in recent years. So, it is critical that developing nations shoulder their part of the burden if they do not wish to be guilty of hypocrisy, and if they want developed nations to act.

Besides, developing nations are in fact in a better position to tackle the environmental problems going on in their own backyard, so even though we should not force them to assume responsibility for the environmental degradation that has occurred in the past, they should take the initiative to solve the problems which are currently going on. We have seen from the example of how China successfully embarked in a massive clean-up of its capital prior to the 2008 Olympic Games that developing countries are most able to regulate environmental degradation if they set their mind to it, and if they are given good incentives to do so. In contrast, imagine if American engineers had gone into China with all their environmentally – friendly technology. Would they have succeeded, in the face of all the bureaucracy, language barriers, and their lack of authority? Probably not. As such, developing nations should assume the responsibility of fixing the environmental problems in their own territories, because they have potential polluters, and it is only they who have the power to effectively fix their own problems.

Furthermore, whatever developing nations might say about the fact that developed nations have contributed most to the cumulative effect of environmental degradation, it is time to realise that we live in one small world, and that we will either flourish or go extinct together, so we all have to play our part. For one, natural disasters are blind to the “morality” and “sins” of the various nations. America may have contributed the most to greenhouse gas emissions, but it is the Maldives that will soon sink below sea level should the rise in sea levels go unchecked. As such, it is time to abandon the blame game and politics that we have so often engaged in and work as one world towards solving the problems we face. This global effort can only gather momentum and succeed if we all agree to work towards this common cause, so for the sake of their own prosperity and that of the entire world, developing nations should have the wisdom to agree to play their part.

In conclusion, the environmental degradation situation that faces us is grave, and the way ahead is not easy. Granted, developed nations might be the main culprits, but the question now is not how to punish them. Rather, the question is how to solve the common problem that has arisen. Consider the recent example of the Greek debt crisis that has threatened to pull down the Euro zone along with it. In the face of the irresponsibility of Greece, did the European leaders let Greece suffer the consequences alone? No they did not, because the problem was faced by the entire Euro zone.

#### **Comments:**

***Chentian, this is a pretty good essay. Argued with a degree of passion. Structurally sound with relevant examples.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 5

Should the responsibility for environmental conservation be shouldered solely by developed nations?

Sim Fu-Hua | 11S06Q

Over the past few decades, the threats of global warming, environmental pollution and dwindling resources have brought the issue of environmental conservation into the spotlight of international politics. Someone has to take responsibility for environmental conservation, along which comes the debate of “who should be the one paying the price.” In this essay, I shall define “responsibility for environmental conservation” as the financial and political burdens of paying for and implementing environmentally-friendly initiatives and projects.

I believe that the responsibility for environmental conservation should not be shouldered solely by developed nations, as many developing nations are now taking up increasingly larger proportions of global carbon emissions and environmental degradation and should bear some cost of it. Besides, collective action by all countries is needed to achieve any effective efforts to conserve the environment.

There are those who say that developed nations should be solely responsible for environmental conservation due to historical reasons. Developed countries started industrialising at the turn of the 20th century, and have been spewing massive amounts of pollutants and carbon emissions into the atmosphere for over a century. In fact, pollution was so bad during the initial industrialisation stage of the UK and USA that Clean Air Acts had to be passed to curb the situation. On the other hand, developing countries did not contribute much to the global environmental degradation for most of modern world history. It is only in recent years, when they started industrialising, that they can be said to contribute to environmental problems. The United States had been the world's largest carbon emitter until recent years when China replaced it. Thus, most of the damage seen in the global environment today is largely a result of developed nations' actions, and they should take responsibility for it by now conserving the environment.

However, while I concede that developed countries are much to be blamed for most of the environmental damage seen today, this does not mean that developing countries can shirk their responsibility for environmental conservation. It should be noted that developing countries have also contributed to environmental degradation and pollution over the past century or so, although not as much as developed countries. The former's share increases when it comes to non-atmospheric pollution, such as discharge of toxic chemicals into rivers and massive deforestation. India has been dumping toxic waste into the Ganges River for decades on end, while Indonesia has destroyed much of Sumatra's rainforests since the 1950s. These are instances of environmental damage that developing countries are responsible for, and hence they should also put in some effort to repair or at least mitigate the damage.

Others point out that developed countries should be solely responsible for environmental conservation, simply because they have the finances to carry out the necessary steps. Developing countries are generally poorer, and this is compounded by the fact that much of a developing country's resources are needed to improve the living conditions of its people. However, I do not agree with this viewpoint. Having fewer resources does not imply that a country is less responsible for protecting the environment. Financial aid could be granted by developed countries or international organisations like the IMF to help fund environmentally-friendly initiatives in developing countries. The latter would be responsible for having the political will to make sure that aid resources actually go to what they are intended for. Financial aid has actually been implemented in the world today, such as during the recent Copenhagen summit on climate change, where a fund was set up to help developing countries take environmentally-friendly measures. Thus, having fewer resources is not an excuse for developing countries to not take ownership of environmental conservation.



One of the strongest reasons put forth by developed countries regarding why developing countries should help protect the environment is the fact that many of the latter are increasingly bigger polluters and carbon emitters. We should consider this point alongside the nature of international agreements on environmental conservation. Such agreements and treaties typically last for decades after signing and ratifying, such as the Kyoto Protocol. The carbon footprint and pollutant emissions of developing countries like China, India, and Mexico are expected to rise over the next few decades as they press on with industrialisation. Although their pollutant emissions per capita are generally lower than those of developed countries, these figures are expected to rise tremendously in the future. If the responsibility of environmental conservation is not imposed upon the developing countries in global agreements, then they would be doing great damage to the earth for the whole duration of the agreement's validity period. This would be happening alongside liabilities of developed countries for conserving the environment, which in the end works out to little progress on the environmental front for the whole planet. Thus, responsibilities of environmental conservation should never be shouldered by developed countries alone, as their efforts are expected to be useless on the global scale without the developing countries' participation.

Finally, any action on the developed countries' part to conserve the environment is unlikely to take place at all, should they be the only ones being held responsible for it. This is typically in the arena of international politics, in which no country wants to be disadvantaged against another. This can be seen in the 2010 Copenhagen Climate Change Summit in which China and the United States were in a negotiation deadlock as neither wanted to sacrifice more relative to the other party. In the end, a few concessions were made and a general agreement was hammered out. However, these concessions are simply insufficient in achieving decisive and effective global action on climate change. Points of agreement are general and non-binding, which consequently renders the agreement powerless and without "political teeth". Thus, unless every country in the world contributes its fair share of saving the environment, no single country or group of countries is likely to start environmental conservation efforts unilaterally.

In conclusion, the responsibility for environmental conservation should never be shouldered solely by developed nations, simply because any one-sided action by them, without the support of other nations, is unlikely. Even if it does happen in a political breakthrough, the effort is likely to be futile. While developing countries are quite reasonable in asking their developed counterparts to take up more responsibility due to historical and financial reasons, the former must also do their fair share in making our world a better place.

#### **Comments:**

***Excellent piece, Fu-Hua! Wonderful insight on this matter and argumentation was clear and concise.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 6

Should the responsibility for environmental conservation be shouldered solely by developed nations?

Benjamin Mak Jia Ming | 11A01B

As climate change begins to rear its ugly head, the call for environmental conservation has grown louder. From the speeches of world leaders to the protests of earnest youths in Copenhagen last December at the failed global climate talks, questions and discussions on how best environmental conservation can be achieved and who should bear the burden of such measures have become prominent in the public eye. Keeping these pivotal challenges in mind, I will argue against the idea that developed nations should take sole responsibility for environmental conservation. Instead, I will demonstrate that for credible and sustainable environmental conservation to be gained, we must ultimately rely upon multilateral cooperation between the developed and the developing nations. This in turn relies on the acceptance of a collective responsibility for environmental conservation, possibly involving the developed world taking the lead in the immediate future, given their relatively superior economic and technological position today.

Having clarified my views on the scope and demands of this discussion, what arguments might justify the idea that developed nations should take sole responsibility for environmental conservation? The basic logic lies in their moral culpability for most of the global warming and the increased anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. From the first half of the nineteenth century onwards, as the Industrial Revolution which began in Britain had begun to spread quickly to continental Europe, eminent scholars like the French polymath Joseph Fourier and the Austrian chemist Svante Arrhenius had already indicated, in their scientific writings, the dangers of emitting excessive amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Yet such warnings were wilfully ignored by profit-driven industrialists eager to turn in ever larger earnings. Hence, the developed world built its prosperity upon severe environmental pollution that today remains significantly disproportionate relative to developing countries. Indeed, the average person in Britain emits the same amount of carbon dioxide in a day that a citizen in Mali does over a year, according to the Worldwatch Institute. Furthermore, the developed world has built its prosperity, especially from the late nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, by exploiting the natural resources of its colonies in the developing world. From Belgium's ravaging of the Congolese landscape for diamonds to the British pursuit of South Africa for gold, the developed nations caused immense destruction to the natural environment in developing nations. Given that they realised the environmental horrors of their policies both domestically and internationally, there is a clear case of guilt on the part of developed nations. Since a basic tenet of our justice system is that the guilty must be made to compensate their victims for the harms their actions have wrought, the statement appears to be proven.

Even if we sideline the moral discussion in favour of pragmatism, there are grounds for affirming the statement. Given that developed nations have a much higher technological advantage in environmental conservation as compared with developing countries, the world should make faster progress on the conservation front if they were to take sole responsibility, which implies that they would be the leaders by default. In areas as wide ranging as private transportation, where Toyota in Japan makes the world's most reliable hybrid fuel cars, to alternative energy, where an entire area in Germany called Freiburg City now runs only on solar power, the developed world is far more technologically prepared to support the cause of environmental conservation. Furthermore, the citizens of developed countries are in a far better position to take advantage of such technologies, given that they have the economic means to do so. Compared to the one billion people in the developing world who do not even earn enough to buy food, most citizens in developed nations can afford products such as chlorofluorocarbon-free refrigerators or contribute to animal habitat protection efforts like the World Wildlife Fund without reaching too deep into their pockets. Finally, the governments of developed nations have the political capital and clout necessary to push for environmental conservation efforts, as manifested best by the Emissions Trading Zone to limit carbon emissions that currently involves sixteen European Union member states. Thus, on a pragmatic level, developed nations should take sole responsibility for environmental conservation.

The final angle we must analyse is the needs of developing countries themselves. Given that over a billion people still live under the World Bank-defined poverty line of US\$1.25 a day, governments in developing countries must understandably put the demands of their citizens for basic sustenance before they can even contemplate wooing their support for environmental conservation efforts which do not seem to yield any tangible benefits in the immediate future. In the eloquent though ironic terms a Prospect Magazine writer uses, China's First Raise Our Growth (FROG) has allowed millions of impoverished

Chinese citizens to seek employment in manufacturing industries, and thereby to climb out of the poverty cycle. Given that the developed world grew in markedly similar circumstances just over two centuries ago, it is patently unfair for the developed world to now begrudge the developing world a chance at swift development, even though it might be polluting in the short run. Again, on a principled level, the developed world should take sole responsibility for environmental conservation.

Nonetheless, such an analysis remains incomplete. From a pragmatic level, making the developed world solely responsible for environmental conservation entails laying absolutely no burden for environmental protection on the part of governments and companies in developing countries. This effectively means giving them a mandate to pollute as much as they want, a situation which leaves disastrous consequences for the indigent, neglected people in developing countries. Currently, without such a mandate, we have witnessed horrific disasters like the algae blooms and water poisoning in Lake Taihu in China due to the wanton dumping of industrial chemicals by state enterprises. This has destroyed the economic opportunities for thousands of poor fishermen and has left the waters around toxic for even bathing, killing hundreds of women and children unaware of this. More crucially, the effects of environmental abuse in developing nations can often be felt across the world, not only because of the esoteric dictates of chaos theory, but also because of the inter-linkages within the global climate system. Indonesian farmers who practise slash-and-burn techniques in preparation for a new season of crops create a trans-boundary haze problem that is threatening the health of thousands of asthma-prone individuals in Southeast Asia. Similarly, the massive deforestation currently occurring in the Brazilian Amazon is reducing the size of the world's largest natural carbon sink, meaning that most of our greenhouse gas emissions are steadily contributing to potentially cataclysmic change. Thus, affirming the statement is likely to worsen the existing environmental crisis for the world.

Moreover, this runs counter to the purpose of environmental conservation itself, which is to protect the unique biodiversity around the world. Forests in Burma and Malaysia are home to thousands of endangered species like the Malayan Tapir, and they could be potentially wiped out if developing nations are not co-opted into the global effort for environmental conservation. Further, this helps to perpetuate the free-rider mentality, which we identified in 1968 through the eyes of Garrett Harding. This mentality leads to a tragedy of the commons where everyone can use the resources of the global commons but, because parties can be irresponsible, resources are swiftly depleted. And even if developed countries are willing to transfer their technologies by setting up green ventures in developing countries, such as the current multi-billion dollar contracts for solar plants in China for Siemens, developing nations will see this as an expensive alternative to coal-fired power plants, for instance. More perniciously, however, they may even view it as another Western colonial plot to make them dependent once again on Western expertise.

In essence, given the likely deleterious effects that will arise if we affirm the absolutist stance of the question, what is to be done? Here, I emphasise the importance of multilateral cooperation between developed and developing nations on environmental conservation, and suggest that this should be further enhanced despite the many obstacles that now appear to threaten it. Developing nations now have the benefit of hindsight and technological advancement that the Western countries have developed, and they can benefit from these advances by cooperating with developed nations, as witnessed by the recent partnership affirmed between the global North and Brazil to provide funding and much needed infrastructure to protect Brazil's forests from illegal deforesters. Such partnerships can only be meaningful in the context of shared responsibility; otherwise developing nations with millions of unemployed poor clamouring for jobs would hardly put environmental conservation on their list of priorities. Making it a shared responsibility also promotes global reconciliation and can accelerate progress, because developed nations can now admit to their guilt and work constructively towards the benefit of the global community. Though we currently seem far off from this rosy scenario, it is better that we work asymptotically towards it than return to a world polarised between the global North and South.

As Warren Buffett once mused, "it is better to be approximately right than to be precisely wrong". While developed nations may have and should bear a greater burden of responsibility for our current environmental malaise, pushing the blame entirely to them in practice will generate harms far worse than those we already have to bear. Indeed, we must sometimes sacrifice punishment in extremis to avoid tragedy from befalling us all.

#### **Comments:**

***Benjamin, this is an articulate, persuasive and well-substantiated piece. However, please qualify some of your earlier arguments to avoid sounding self-contradictory. On the whole, a great job!***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 7

“Literature is useless in a pragmatic world.” Do you agree with this view?

Fu Xiyue Joy | 11S03B

Although some people may argue that the pragmatic world requires people to be adept in the sciences and mathematics, as these areas may be applied to everyday life and provide some of the most high-paying jobs, I do not agree that literature is useless in this pragmatic world. Literature consists of everything from poetry to prose, and has been part of people's lives since the first historical annals were recorded. With the “pragmatic world” referring to people's continuous quest for comfort and an easy life – invariably causing them to search for jobs with pay checks capable of fulfilling this desire, or to only pick up skills they deem useful in the globalised and competitive economy – it cannot be said that literature is of no value in the face of these practicalities, as its innate heritage value and potential as an endless source of knowledge will even benefit people entrenched in ostensibly practical lifestyles and mindsets.

Prima facie, it is understandable that people write off literature as “useless”, given their quests for the wealth and power deemed so necessary in today's competitive and practical society, where money and status seem to be the prerequisites for happiness. Given this prevalent mindset, people find jobs in the engineering or the medical fields more desirable, as these jobs provide higher pay. Medicine and engineering are fields in which science is crucial, so it is no wonder that in the pursuit of these high-paying jobs and more, literature, as an art, is grossly overlooked and undervalued. With jobs like accountancy – which is necessary in every single business, regardless of the company's size – requiring more mathematical skills than artistic or linguistic flair, it can be seen that many of the jobs deemed political and necessary in daily life require no part in literature, and this is hence reflected in people's attitudes towards the arts.

However, literature's usefulness cannot merely be defined by its impact, or lack thereof, on “high-paying” and “successful” jobs; this would not do justice to its relevance to life and the endless possibilities it presents, both as an art and as a teaching tool.

Firstly, literature develops cognitive skills and the understanding of life and the human mind. Its variety of forms, with poems, plays and novels being the most basic types, cover a range of themes applicable to everyday life. Examples of this can be seen from the works of renowned poets and playwrights Shakespeare, John Donne, and George Herbert. One of Shakespeare's simpler plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, concerns themes of love and the difference between reality and illusion, while Donne and Herbert, have tried to express the brevity of life and possible ways to deal with that, amongst other things, in their poems such as “The Anniversary” and “Life” respectively. This expression of themes is relevant to everyday life, and appreciation of literature will allow leaders to better understand and appreciate life and how the world works. This is definitely useful in the pragmatic world, for how else can life be lived without an attempt to understand and appreciate it?

Secondly, literature provides language skills like no other textbook can. Literature in all languages exposes readers to various styles of speaking and writing, and these skills are definitely useful in everyday life. In the midst of a technological culture happy to misspell or shorten words for apparent convenience, the use of proper language in literature helps young readers' understanding and grasp of the language. Language skills gleaned from literature texts can be used anywhere, from the mandatory essay-writing for examinations in schools to interview and report writing in the working world. Readers of literature will benefit from it in the most practical aspects of their lives, and thus it would be absurd to say that literature is useless due to its lack of practicality.

Thirdly, literature has intrinsic entertainment value. In a world obsessed with climbing the proverbial “ladder of success”, stress has become more pronounced, and people have been rapidly turning to various entertainment forms to relieve stress. This can be seen from the influx of new media

programmes from a variety of shows on television like reality programmes 'Survivor' or 'Fear Factor' to satisfy voyeuristic tendencies, to interactive gaming like 'World of Warcraft'. The advent of cable television from providers like Starhub and Singtel also reflects how much people value the entertainment industry. Literature, like any other source of entertainment, is a means to relax minds and relieve stress, as classical novels like *Pride and Prejudice* or *Little Women* have been appreciated by many people over the years. The value of entertainment in this pragmatic world is undeniable. Therefore literature, as a provider of so much entertainment, certainly cannot be deemed useless.

Fourthly, the study of literature can also provide for a variety of well-paying and relevant jobs, and thus is not useless in the pragmatic world. Offering literature in university paves the way for careers in journalism and teaching, amongst many other possibilities. These two careers are necessary and important in today's world, as journalism provides people with information and serves to connect the world, and education is of course greatly necessary in developing society. With these viable jobs that studying literature can provide, detractors who believe that literature cannot advance careers are thus proven wrong, and there is no doubting the usefulness of the subject and field.

Lastly, literature also shapes culture, attitudes and behaviour. It is a provider of values and different mindsets, and thus necessary for the development of wholesome individuals. A good example would be the texts of Chinese philosopher Confucius, who, among other things, was an advocate of values like filial piety and forgiveness. Thus it can be seen that appreciation of literature can cultivate values, and this is not useless for a well-mannered and stable society.

In conclusion, although literature may initially seem useless in the light of the proven and obvious benefits of mathematics and science, it provides readers with many useful lessons and gives insight to the world that we live in.

#### **Comments:**

***Very good piece, Joy! Clear and concise presentation of good ideas and arguments in support of your stand. You clearly know what you are talking about as well. Well done!***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 8

“Literature is useless in a pragmatic world.” Do you agree with this view?

Lin Wen | 11S03B

In today's society where pragmatism holds sway, more people are choosing to venture into the fields of science and technology, casually dismissing literature on the grounds that literature holds no bright future for them. Yet literature is the study of humanity and without it, mankind will lose much of its rich culture and heritage over the ages. Hence, though many might view literature as redundant in the practical world today, literature is not completely useless.

One might argue that in view of today's ever expanding field of science and technology, one may have a brighter future and a higher paying job if one ventures into the fields of science and engineering. Undoubtedly, technology is more advanced now as compared to the past, as people in today's world are equipped with high-technology, impressive machinery and necessary technological skills with high incomes to match. However, it seems that many people are only interested in science due to the boundless opportunities offered as science appeals to their pragmatic nature. They would only invest in a career that brings material, monetary benefits. As society becomes increasingly more competitive, people are constantly coming up with new schemes to be wealthier than their neighbours, and the sciences seem to be the way. Often, parents have chided or dismissed their child's dreams to be a budding writer or poet, by arguing that such dreams would get them nowhere in life. As such, there is no place for literature in the minds of the public.

Yet, as science brings about monetary rewards, literature reaps benefits for the mind and soul. It allows the creative juices of humans to flow freely, and the imaginative expressions that translate into ink and paper that reflect a person's way of life. Literature is essentially a study of human culture, as it evolves through the ages. Literary works are definitive of the culture and society in which they were written, and the study of literature allows us to learn more about the different eras and hence the evolution of society. Shakespearean works represent early English culture; the Renaissance brings about literature that involves the pastoral, religious, and critical thinking; the Romantic era produced works that were idealistic, and war poetry reflects the brutality of war. Through the study of literature, one can learn about humanity and culture through the ages, a feat which science and technology would not be able to achieve.

In addition, literature provides the perfect relaxation required in today's fast-paced society. Modern citizens are over-fraught with stress and pressures of life, and reading seems to be a Herculean task for many. However, reading is one of the most basic forms of leisure. Not only can one learn much from reading and gain new knowledge, reading also provides much needed relaxation and allows one's imagination to take over, as novels transport one into many different worlds. Especially in today's world of technology, where people's idea of unwinding would be to watch a movie or a television programme, where visual entertainment dominates, reading becomes even more essential since it allows for the imaginative processes that visual entertainment can never achieve. In addition, the spiritual and mental advantages of literature far outweigh the mercenary benefits of the practical world. Without literature, humans would turn into mindless working robots, whose sole duty in life is to churn out money. But humans are emotional beings who require literature.

Also, contrary to popular belief, literature is not merely about reading books and poetry, but also making sense of the writing and understanding the author's or poet's background and culture. It also requires the knowledge of historical events, scientific knowledge and other fields of knowledge. In fact, literature is an all-encompassing subject in which one needs to be equipped with knowledge from numerous fields. With such a wide repertoire of expertise, how could anyone possibly deem literature redundant?

Also, it is a misconception that there is no future for literature students. In Singapore, there are young budding writers who publish and gain recognition from the public for their talent. In addition, it is easy for one to publish works online. There is also increased emphasis on the arts and literature by the Singapore government and generally there have been more endorsements and patrons of the arts. Hence, while scientific or technological careers may seem to be the jobs reaping high salaries, writers and poets can also earn sufficient money to sustain a living. Besides, literature may not necessarily have to be a main career, but merely a form of leisure. Thus, literature should not be construed as useless in today's world.

There is a saying that "money makes the world go round". This is to say that people chase after the material and strive to achieve material wealth, which leads to the notion that literature has no place in today's money-minded world. Yet, as compared to science, there is no doubt that literature is an amalgamation of cultural value and emotional benefit, and it allows humans to explore and to delve deeper into the very meaning of humanity. In addition, it is sustenance for the mind and soul, and can also sustain a living as it is not completely without financial rewards. Therefore, even in the pragmatic world of the present, literature is not redundant.

**Comments:**

***Excellent work, Lin Wen. You have sufficiently explored the main issues involved in the question, and gave good arguments in support of your stand. Writing is fluent and expressions are appropriate. Well done.***



# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

## essay 9

“Literature is useless in a pragmatic world.” Do you agree with this view?

Tan Si Rui | 11A03B

Literature is often seen as the subject for the dreamers, the idealists and the artistic. Such a connotation has, rather unfortunately, placed this exceedingly underrated subject under great scrutiny by those who cannot grasp its true meaning and, hence, mistakenly attack it for being useless in today's increasingly economic-driven world. Encompassing any form of the written word, literature may at first glance seem rather meaningless due to its perceived lack of monetary value but this would be taking a blinkered view of such a rich and deep subject. Literature's value lies not in the economic sphere but rather in the social and personal arenas where it can serve as a means to enrich one's being and also to expand a country's influence.

While literature can look as if it does not contribute, especially in the financial sense, this does not mean that it has no value whatsoever. Given today's increasingly materialistic society where most are more inclined to worry about bread-and-butter issues such as the current financial crisis than to read a good book, literature could seem a haven for the more imaginative in our midst but not a place for the truly pragmatic people who spend their time elsewhere in pursuit of more “pragmatic” aims – like that of earning money. Here, though, one must question if usefulness seems to be measured solely by what the object can bring in terms of income. Here, literature, or more specifically its writing, is conventionally seen as the leisure activity of someone who already has sufficient fiscal power to sustain himself, hence rendering it impossible for the common man to enjoy and making it unrealistic to consider as a full-time job. In this way, literature can be seen as unsustainable, so it is pointless to consider the writing of literature when one has more pressing concerns like paying the mortgage. Yet this is not always true – witness the Man Booker prize winners who see their award-winning books snapped up and their incomes burgeoning as a result. Literature can provide an income.

However, literature does not necessarily have to remain the exclusive domain of those with free time or those with wealth. It can be a method by which the reader can be a gateway to escape the over-mechanised humdrums of daily life. The emotional catharsis experienced when reading a meaningful poem by Sylvia Plath or Maya Angelou is just as fulfilling as finishing an assigned job. In fact, appreciating literature grows increasingly important in the pragmatic world as people need a way to enrich their personal being when their surroundings seem to gradually transform them into monetarily-driven creatures. The purity of words that encapsulates a resonating theme can thoroughly refresh the reader and invigorate him to face a world that is intolerant of illusions and that is filled with anxiety. In this manner, by being a wellspring of knowledge that readers can refresh themselves in, literature can make itself useful especially when the world becomes more purpose-driven and more worrying.

Furthermore, literature can assist in the construction of a national identity, an issue that has great implications for a country. By virtue of its underlying messages, which can hopefully touch the hearts of a diverse group of people, literature has the potential to build pride within the nation's population and bring them closer together. An example would be *The Great Gatsby*, one of the defining books of America which helped to unite the diverse American population under the national ideal of the American Dream. It still remains one of the basic tenets of the American national identity. Such untapped potential of literature in bonding the country's citizens is of obvious use to newly-formed states still struggling in search of their unique identity, such as Singapore. The encouragement to be exposed to books with nationalistic undertones can help to shape a country's identity through a sharing of common values. Of course, literature's link to pragmatism is made very clear here as it can be of definitive assistance towards the journey for a country's national identity, which in turn bonds the people as one entity. Like what then Prime Minister of Singapore Goh Chok Tong stated, it is necessary for Singaporeans to have the “hardware” and the “software” to succeed as a nation. Literature's contributions towards the “software” – referring to social bonds – is undeniable.

and, hence, plays an indirect but still integral role towards the social unity of a country.

At the same time, even when naysayers decry teaching literature as a waste of resources since it serves no higher purpose, it would be a timely reminder that the spread of a nation's literature would help in increasing its "soft power". Coined by renowned sociologist Joseph Nye, a nation's soft power includes its pop culture and ideals, but, most importantly, its prose. Having more people globally read, understand and even accept a certain country's literature can boost that country's image as well as further understanding of its values. China illustrates this well through its determination to reach out worldwide via Confucian Institutes where classic Confucian texts and Tang dynasty poems are taught. The near doubling in the number of Confucian Institutes from 2006 to 2010 serves to show how China, even though it is an undisputed economic powerhouse, has realised the value of its literature in dampening resistance to its rise to power and is intent on utilising its long history of literature to soften its aggressive image. Thus, literature can rightly be said to be a possible tool for countries to spread their ideals and values, which is of course of use for countries wishing to expand their social sphere of influence.

In sum, literature is not a useless commodity that can be discarded in a pragmatic world. Although the word "pragmatic" conjures up images linked to financial issues, this is but a rather narrow view. The world today should not look at everything through money-tinted glasses and literature is no exception. Other than personal relaxation, literature plays an essential role in the global social consciousness by providing an avenue for national identity construction as well as the proliferation of a country's democratic institutions and ideals. In other words, literature cannot be measured by its monetary value alone, but also the social impact it has on people and society. It is not for the jaded, the profit-driven or the money-obsessed; it is for the innovators, the leaders and the superpowers.

**Comments:**

***Si Rui, a spirited defence that takes into account the question's configurations. An enjoyable read.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 10

“New media has made us more self-absorbed than ever before.”  
Comment.

Eng Qian Lin Jazlyn | 11A03B

Almost everybody who surfs the World Wide Web is familiar with the following: the blue logo that represents Facebook, the fruity orange logo of Blogger, and the striking redness that is YouTube's logo. What do Facebook, Blogger and YouTube have in common? These are platforms that have been classified as “new media”, a primarily internet-based means of broadcasting information to the masses. New media promotes the broadcasting of self and of personal views, thoughts and beliefs, allowing individual contribution to the global network of information. It has brought about much change to modern society, redefining conventional media where information is selectively picked and processed before its release to the general public. It has changed the way people view themselves, from their transition of being the mere recipients of information to being the contributors and sharers of information. With all this exposure now given to the individual through new media, it is needless to say that new media has made us, users of new media, more self-absorbed – that is, interested in ourselves almost to the point of obsession – than ever before.

Contenders argue that personal contribution to the information pool through new media hardly promotes higher levels of self-absorption than in the past as conventional media has already shown signs of people being self-absorbed. Conventional media, which consists of the press, radio and television, had led to the advent of celebrities – people who are popular and supported by many. Celebrities can be said to be the epitome of self-absorption as they often have to maintain their image and personas to keep their fans satisfied. Many celebrities obsess over their looks and their figures, crash-dieting or going for plastic surgery to modify their features. They have to be self-absorbed, for if they are not interested in themselves first, who else would be interested in them? We in turn, being influenced by conventional media and celebrities, become self-absorbed as well. We too obsess over our diet and weight, wishing to be as skinny as Kate Moss or to look younger than our age like Madonna. Conventional media already creates self-absorption through the role models that it presents to us. In that sense, one could say that prior to the emergence of new media, self-absorption was already commonplace and new media may not have made us more self-absorbed than we had already been.

However, one must realise that one thing conventional media lacks is personal activity. Most users of conventional media are passive. They watch celebrities and observe how they maintain their image but they themselves are not obliged to do so, as they are not participants, just voyeurs. New media changes that. Individuals can now tell the world how their day went through Facebook, broadcast moving images of themselves through YouTube, or publish their views on various issues through their blogs. Individuals can now sell themselves to the world through new media without a cent – registering for any of these websites is free of charge. Everyone has the potential to be celebrities, and we know that. Thus, in order to appear more appealing to the wider audience and gain the support of others, we too polish our image. We carefully go over and edit our blog posts before publishing them online, ensuring that we give a likeable impression, if not an intelligent one. We polish the images of ourselves that we publish online, deleting those which feature us in compromising positions. New media, which gives every individual the opportunity to expose himself to the public, creates self-absorption as he becomes more concerned with his image than before, when there was less of a personal desire to do so. We can see this happening to the local blogger “Xia Xue”, made famous by her use of new media. Prior to her foray into blogging, she was not as obsessed over her self-image as she is now, having blogged about her cosmetic nose surgery or update on her hair colour. She also openly admits to altering her photographs to make herself look more appealing.

Those who do not agree that new media creates more self-absorption than ever before then mention social media – a subset of new media in which social interactions and circles dictate the information that is broadcast. Social media appears not to create self-absorption as users are encouraged to

show interest in the affairs of others instead of themselves. Social media platforms like Facebook, for example, encourage users to comment on their friends' status updates or on their photos. When the user has not interacted with another user in his list of friends, Facebook recommends that the user catch up with the other person now. Social media focuses on mutual sharing and interaction rather than an individualistic broadcasting of self, thus it can be argued that new media does not necessarily cause self-absorption amongst its users since it can generate interest on the user's social group instead.

Yet, mutual sharing cannot be done without the individual's willingness to share. It is unfortunate that instead of social media generating interest in one's social group through interaction and the sharing of information, the reverse is true instead. Social media actually creates even more self-absorption as users wish to share more about themselves with their peers. Users wish to sound appealing and interesting to their peer group, thus they carefully construct their status updates in ways that will generate discussion. They, in their wish to share more, can also overshare by posting updates about themselves in very short intervals of time. This behaviour, worsened through platforms like Twitter, generates a false sense of self-importance. Users begin to believe that everything about them is important and worth listening to. They believe that everyone will be interested. Self-absorption is thus generated as social media leads one to believe that everything one does on those platforms is being observed and appreciated by their peer groups.

Another argument against new media promoting self-absorption is that people share information because they wish to inform others, not because they are self-interested. Websites like STOMP feature user-submitted reports and news stories based in Singapore. Users contributing to the website do not post news about themselves but about happenings in the country that they believe will be of use to other viewers. However, most contributors show signs of self-absorption. News stories are posted to put the contributor in the limelight most of the time. Most of the site's content features grievances felt by the poster or of complaints of others that have done them wrong.

In conclusion, new media has indeed created more self-absorption amongst its users than conventional media has. New media has given us the need to maintain and be interested in our image due to the exposure that it has given individuals to the world. It has created a personal sense of importance in every individual. New media lets us believe that we are interesting and that we deserve to be heard and that is how one begins to be self-absorbed.

#### **Comments:**

***Jazlyn, the incisive dissection of new media and comparison with old media show insight and good organisation of material.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 11

“New media has made us more self-absorbed than ever before.”  
Comment.

Tjoa Shze Hui | 11A01B

Riding on the crest of technology, new media in all its forms – weblogs, social networking sites and citizen journalism – has become a prevalent, and some might even say, ubiquitous phenomenon of our modern world. Indeed, new media has provided a platform for the man-on-the-street, allowing him (and his peers) to unleash a torrent of information to the world at large, chronicling life from his personal perspective. Hence, some claim that it has made us more self-absorbed than ever before. I, however, believe that while it is impossible to deny this element of self-indulgence, it would also be arguably naive for us to stop our analysis here, without giving due consideration to the capacity of new media to promote the greater good of society.

Before embarking on this analysis, it would perhaps be useful to consider how this claim may be asserted. In this day and age, some point – and rightly so – to the inherently self-centred and self-indulgent nature of the new media. Indeed, at the mention of a weblog, one is inevitably led to conjure up an image of a narcissistic individual (termed a “blogger”) sending massive volumes of badly-written prose about his life and doings across the virtual world. Examples of such individuals abound; witness, for example, Singapore’s most infamous blogger Xia Xue, whose self-absorbed and often profanity-riddled writing continues to attract legions of readers from across the global virtual community. Social networking sites, too, seem to actively promote such an attitude of unhealthy narcissism; with sites such as Twitter and Facebook encouraging users to post abbreviated vanity statements about their lives, and often in abundance. Because new media involves laymen, it is impossible to deny the fact that it can easily degenerate into a tool for propagating a sense of narcissism, which may in fact be detrimental to the development and well-being of individuals involved.

On another level, new media’s propensity for encouraging such attitudes may also bear wider, deleterious consequences for society. By bestowing upon individuals a platform to air their views, warts and all, new media may inadvertently do harm by exacerbating existing social tensions. Nowhere in my opinion is this better illustrated than in the case of Wee Shu Min. A scholarship holder at a prestigious Singapore school, she used her blog as a platform to express her take-no-prisoners view regarding the controversial subject of elitism in Singapore, inviting an avalanche of criticism and a public furore. Similarly, the jailing of several bloggers following their posting of anti-Malay views via the new media points to the capacity of new media to potentially rupture the fragile social fabric of society. While the harm done in both scenarios was arguably unintentional, still the occurrence of such events demonstrates a dangerous underlying attitude of naivety and self-absorption brought about by access to new media.

On the whole, it is impossible to deny the inherently self-indulgent nature of new media. Yet, I believe that it is also pertinent to consider other facets of this phenomenon, which may allow it to move away from encouraging selfish individualism to promoting the overall good of society.

For one, new media may serve as a channel for feedback, consolidating public opinion regarding niche areas such as sports, social causes or even politics, thus catalysing societal progress. Citizen journalism sites such as the Straits Times’ STOMP, for example, provide laymen with a channel for communicating feedback on various societal issues that they feel deserve public attention. New media has also been used as a tool by countless politicians, through which they collect feedback directly from the people they lead. Jerry Brown, former mayor of Oakland, is a case in point. He turned his personal weblog into a forum of sorts, sparking vibrant discussions on various policy issues by netizens in his constituency, many of whom raised salient points which he took into consideration in making further policy decisions. In this way, we see that new media can indeed go beyond being a tool for selfish purposes to being a means to a greater end: the building of a healthy society.

Moreover, new media has an even more critical role to play in countries where citizens are subject to repression by authorities. In these countries, new media moves away from promoting narcissism to providing a crucial space where people can engage in freewheeling discussion and constructive criticism of society, activities that they would otherwise have no access to via traditional forms of media. In China, for example, influential bloggers such as Han Han are able to tap forms of new media to express their views, hurdling over government-imposed censorship by adopting homonyms in their blog entries. In this, new media provides an all-essential avenue, enriching the overall quality of thought and discussion, especially in societies where such expressions of dissident yet constructive personal opinion are sorely lacking.

Finally, while it may be asserted that new media promotes a self-absorbed attitude, this claim fails to take into consideration the possibility that new media may also promote self-fulfilment alongside it. By turning the spotlight on individual expressions of creativity and opinion, new media may bestow upon individuals a chance for asserting their sense of self. One is led to think of Julie Powell, a worker formerly stuck in middle-management, who, through her blog about trying out Julia Child's recipes, managed to attract the attention of scores of readers from every corner of the globe. Eventually, she was offered a publishing deal, and was thus able to fulfil her lifelong dream of becoming a published author. In this way, her access to new media allowed her to flex her literary muscle and gain much needed exposure, resulting in a sense of self-fulfilment that would otherwise be unattainable for her. Of course, some may argue that such "success stories" are few and far between, yet it is impossible to deny their existence. The constructive influence that new media may have on individuals is a point that deserves due consideration, for, as literary iconoclast Jack Kerouac said, it empowers individuals to have "no fear or shame in the dignity of their experience, language or knowledge."

In conclusion, new media may be an inherent propagator of a self-absorbed attitude, yet it also has the vast potential to enrich individual lives and society at large. Ultimately, new media is but a tool, which can be used for narcissistic purposes, or for a greater good. The responsibility to make this choice lies with us.

**Comments:**

***Great work, Shze Hui! You have demonstrated an excellent grasp of the demands of the question. The arguments here are comprehensive, well-substantiated and clearly connected to the question.***

# General Paper Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 12

“New media has made us more self-absorbed than ever before.”  
Comment.

Tay Zong Min | 11S03E

Gone were the days when any chance to see one's name in a printed publication was at the mercies of publishing houses, whose judgement of one's manuscript would determine whether one would achieve global recognition or be reduced to languishing in nameless obscurity. With the rise of new media – most notably, the internet – there has been an unprecedented democratisation of the publishing process, with just about anyone and everyone being entitled to their bit of domain space and bandwidth to broadcast their thoughts to the World Wide Web – and consequently, the whole wide world – without being subjected to the scrutiny of an intermediary. Some have thus criticised new media for promoting a culture of self-absorption, where individuals become so empowered to have their voices heard that all they care about is views of their own, causing them to live in a little bubble of their own with inflated feelings of self-worth and a general uncaring attitude or even condescension towards anything that does not help in extending one's sphere of influence. True as that may be in some instances, I am, however, of the opinion that new media, while affording us new avenues of self-expression and actualisation, has simultaneously transcended temporal and geographical boundaries to bring us in greater contact with each other. It has given us so many new perspectives on this world and enabled us to take such greater global action on a far larger scale that any claim of new media making us self-absorbed would be an overly myopic – and dare I say, self-absorbed – claim in itself.

Nevertheless, it must first be acknowledged that the accessibility, anonymity and freedom of new media tools such as Blogger, Fanfiction.net, and even YouTube have to a certain extent led to the rise of user-generated content that, while beneficial to the wider audience in some instances, more often smacks of self-absorption and self-indulgence. Given that the World Wide Web connects individuals from around the world, and content published in Singapore could very much be seen by someone in Canada, new media clearly opens up opportunities for individuals to have themselves heard on a far greater scale. Coupled with the fact that there is immense liberty on what one can publish on the Internet, with there being minimal regulation and restrictions (unlike the tightly-controlled publishing process in traditional media), many have leveraged the Internet to fulfil their inner desires of having their own one-minute of fame. Take the popular video-uploading site YouTube for instance. For every worthwhile video present on the site (think Annie Leonard's "The Story of Stuff") there are a multitude of videos featuring otherwise inane and banal individuals indulgently banging away at their pianos, or doing less-than-funny spoofs of music videos (think the Two Chinese Boys in their dormitory rooms). While there is nothing wrong with new media giving us a chance to better express ourselves or have our opinions heard – such as the political commentary provided by a certain Kway Teow Man – the fact that there is hardly any oversight over the quality of material that gets published via new media channels means that any work, regardless of its value, can easily get broadcasted to a global audience, promoting a sense of narcissism and self-indulgence that would otherwise be weeded out in the more rigorous and stringent processes of old media.

In addition, with the option of remaining anonymous on new media platforms, individuals are now very much given free rein to publish any thought that comes to mind, even if it may be insensitive or disparaging towards members of other communities. This is yet another form of self-absorption perpetuated by the availability of new media, where an individual becomes empowered to have his views aired without having to consider the potential repercussions and implications on other groups of users, and without having to suffer the ensuing backlash from the discord he has sowed, since his identity is protected by the veil of anonymity. The recent "Everyone Draw Muhammad Day" Facebook page would be a good case in point. Meant to emphasise the need for freedom of speech and expression that has often been curtailed in Muslim communities, it has ended up causing much unhappiness amongst Muslims, who felt that such moves to depict the Prophet Muhammad – the central religious figure in Islam who is not to be visually depicted according to

the religion – was a sign of utter disrespect to the culture and beliefs of their community. In this case, it was new media which allowed the creator of the group to set it up easily and conveniently, and thereafter effortlessly reach the global community without any prior checks as to the appropriateness of the material. It fuelled such an act of blatant self-absorption, where the individual's personal beliefs of the necessity of free speech for all became prioritised over the sensitivities and concerns of the entire Muslim population worldwide.

However, to make a blanket generalisation that new media has only made us more self-absorbed than ever before would be to ignore the multifarious ways in which new media has actually brought us beyond our self-absorbed perspectives and enabled us to become crusaders for causes greater than ourselves and our own selfish interests. For one, new media has made the world far more interconnected than before, such that happenings in one part of the world would not go unnoticed in another. This has helped to increase our awareness of the world at large, and in that sense, worked towards moving us beyond our self-absorbed spheres. With the tight regulations and censorship procedures on media put in place by the Iranian government in the lead-up to the 2009 Presidential elections, any news of a manipulated election process would unlikely have reached the larger global community. It was only with social networking sites like Twitter that Iranian activists could raise the alert as to potential discrepancies in President Ahmadinejad's re-election, and consequently draw our attention to the lack of functional democracy in many parts of our world today. In this sense, new media – in allowing the circumvention of restrictions placed on traditional media – has allowed a plethora of new and alternative perspectives to come through, opening our eyes to the larger world beyond what we experience in our everyday lives and making us more attuned to the happenings of our human counterparts, instead of being more self-absorbed than before.

In addition, new media has also enabled us to move beyond ourselves to actively take a stance on social issues, enabling us to take up causes far greater than ourselves by galvanising and gathering the entire global community into taking concrete action. Avaaz.org is one such group that has successfully utilised new media to gather support for its causes, making use of the benefits of the internet and social media to achieve staggering numbers of signatories on its petitions against the Chinese crackdown on Uighur minorities in Xinjiang just last year. Beyond raising awareness of these issues and thereby removing us from our self-absorbed worlds, such uses of new media have also enabled us to actively take part in the quest for change. By providing us with the avenues for greater communal action and activism, it can hardly be argued that new media has made us more self-absorbed than ever before. In fact, it has emboldened us to move beyond our own interests to actively seek the betterment of others through a simplification of such support-gathering activities like petitions. In this sense, new media has not made us more self-absorbed, but, instead, has promoted a spirit of social consciousness, making it easier for us to start and support such activities.

Clearly, to say that new media has made us more self-absorbed than before would be to consider only one side of the picture. While it may have enabled the flourishing of individual expression to the extent of narcissism and self-absorption, and to the extent where individual rights may inadvertently be placed above those of whole communities, it has also given us the opportunity to gather for ourselves new perspectives and participate in activities beyond our immediate spheres of influence. New media is but a neutral tool; how we use it will determine whether it helps promote the greater good or just selfish individualism.

#### **Comments:**

***Zong Min, this is a well written piece. Forceful argument. You are well informed about current issues. I am impressed.***



# General Paper Class Assignments 2010

## essay 1

Is separation of religion and state a good idea?

Alicia Tan Yan Ling | 10A01A

The idea of religion and the state being closely linked goes back to ancient, unenlightened times. However, with the recent surge in enthusiasm for various religious fundamentalisms, we are once again questioning whether or not religion has a part to play in politics. To that, my answer is a most decided “no”. The very fundamentals of religion and politics are so far removed from one another that the combination of the two can only lead to corruption of the grand ideals embodied in them. There is a reason why history has seen a move towards political secularism, and that is because the insertion of religion into the state mechanism has proved more detrimental than beneficial.

To understand why it is a bad idea to combine religion and the state, however, we must first understand the arguments that support it. The strongest argument in favour of combining religion and state is, in fact, because religion can act as a “moral compass”, a standard to which humanity ought to aspire. The very rise of many religious fundamentalisms that seek to replace secular governments with religious ones can be explained by this desire to rectify the evils that liberalism has brought about. While the secular state is deemed decadent and morally loose, the religious state would be governed by a strict moral code, usually the moral code found in religious texts. Modern theocracies, such as Iran, see the state as an actor of divine religious will, teaching the people how to behave morally, and, if need be, ensuring that they do so through force of law. In the modern world of excess and decadence, the religious state is seen by many as the only force left that can ensure that people remember discipline, self-control and spiritual purity.

However, these righteous ideals fail precisely because of how self-righteous they are. With the ‘divine will’ of ‘God’ behind them, religious states can justify almost any kind of extremist behaviour, claiming it part of a religious mission to cleanse the world of the excesses of the liberal world. This self-righteous ‘crusade’ attitude is what has led to the rise of state-sponsored terrorism in many nations in the Middle East. The very concept of “jihad” is based on the notion of a “Holy War”, a war against the non-Islamic world based on divine command. In Lebanon, Hezbollah, which means “Party of God”, is not only a state recognised organisation, but also a terrorist organisation that has launched multiple attacks on Israel as a response to the ‘anomaly’ that is the Jewish state. Due to the very nature of religion being based on faith, it then provides the state easy justification for all kinds of behaviour. Dissenters are simply labelled non-believers and join the masses of people who stand against the all-righteous religious state as enemies of the ‘will of God’.

That religion acts as a perfect defence for states engaging in all sort of extremist behaviour has led to many international conflicts and made many such conflicts far harder to resolve. Religion gives states the right, even the encouragement, to stand so firm that all compromise seems not only impossible, but detestable. Take for example the Arab-Israeli conflict – as a purely secular conflict, perhaps revolution could have been achieved through the two-state solution. However, with the insertion of religion into the mix, Israel now sees the land it occupies as its Holy Land, and hence absolutely fundamental to its existence. No longer is Israel willing to compromise with the Palestinians, for the religious justification for holding the territories is far too strong. This ability of religion to polarise politics and encourage inter-state rivalry is not new – in fact, it harkens back to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, or perhaps even earlier. The irrational political rivalry between England and Spain is a complex one, but the fundamental divide springs from the fact that Spain was a Catholic nation, and England, a Protestant one. While this religious divide may not have created the political rivalry, it exacerbated it. The religious differences were a constant reminder to both nations that they were political rivals and that they were fundamentally dissimilar. Today, the conflict between India and Pakistan perpetuates because Pakistan, a Muslim

nation, lays claim to the majority Muslim Kashmir, even though India claims to be a secular nation. Pakistan's religious claim to Kashmir is so steadfast that it completely refuses to compromise, perpetuating the political conflict. Religion has the power to polarise, but in the land of politics, where diplomacy and compromise are essential in order to survive alongside other states, this power only leads to irrational rivalries and drawn out conflicts. On the international stage, there is no room for such polarised and unchangeable views.

Yet it is not only internationally that religion plays a dangerous role in politics; domestically, the religious state has proven to be a hazard to the very people it seeks to protect. Once again, the self-righteous attitude of the religious state gives it the right to ignore anything that is incongruous with the religious teachings it follows, and, worse, the right to dole out punishments that often deny the individual all forms of human rights. In the Islamic world, the right to free speech is completely ignored, and speaking out against the state may lead to death, often by inhumane methods such as public stoning. Since the law is also the 'word of God', there is no room for any sort of compromise, and to break the law is far more serious because it is akin to defying the 'word of God'. This allows the state to clamp down on all dissent in order to retain political power, and it becomes possible to ignore all the laments of the people because, with divine justification, the state is all-powerful. This was precisely the case in the Middle Ages; the Roman Catholic Church could claim to focus only on religion, ignoring the general state of dissolution in the country. Religion is based so much on faith and so little on logic that it can be used by the state to instantly silence all dissent, even if the dissenting voices are raising perfectly valid points that could lead to the betterment of the nation. If the state, which exists to protect and govern the people, is no longer answerable to the people, but only to 'God', then the people will undoubtedly suffer.

Therein lies the fundamental incongruity of religion and politics. The two exist as vastly different entities with vastly different functions, and their overlap can only corrupt the purity of both. While it is argued that the morality of religion can keep the state in check, setting standards for its behaviour, this utopian vision could not be further from reality. The social contract between those who govern and those who are governed only stands if the rulers are accountable to the people, which, in the case of religious states, they are not. In fact, religious states are discouraged from listening to the corrupt, selfish voice of the people to focus on the clarity of 'God's will'. Yet 'God's will' is hardly ever clear – governments can claim anything to be 'God's will', and no one would be able to either prove or disprove this. What ultimately results is the all-powerful state, one that has the power to act as it wishes, without any restraint whatsoever.

Machiavelli identifies this problem at the fundamental level. If states exist through the process of acquisition, then they also exist to hold on to that power. In the power struggle that defines the very nature of politics, religion has no room. The fundamentals of religion are that of tolerance, patience and forgiveness. When inserted into the state mechanism, all this is compromised as the state seeks survival through the ruthless, self-centred acquisition of power. Now, this is not a bad thing, and Machiavelli never criticises it – politics is indeed a power struggle, but in order to win the struggle, rulers need to gain legitimacy by remaining answerable to the people. In this way, the ruler checks the people and the people check the rulers. However, when religion comes into the picture, the people lose their voices and the balance is lost. At the end of the day, it is the people who lose out.

This is, of course, not to say that the separation of religion and state will solve all the problems present in society. The communists in Soviet Russia and the Nazis in Hitler's Germany were fundamentally opposed to the very concept of religion; yet the state still managed to achieve an all-powerful status that compromised the rights of the people. However, the combination of religion and state, while a grand ideal on the surface, does present too many problems, and confuses the issue to the extent that their separation can only be a good idea.

#### **Comments:**

***A mature and nuanced response to the question.***

# General Paper Class Assignments 2010

## essay 2

“Happiness is no laughing matter.” Discuss.

Sanusha d/o Sritharan | 10S06Q

Happiness should be taken seriously. This statement seems almost laughable; after all, happiness is about having fun and not being serious, right? Look closer, however, and it becomes apparent that happiness as people view it now has become something that should be considered seriously. Considering that happiness is seen as a long-term goal and is usually amorphous in most minds as well as that the pursuit of happiness is usually in itself not a happy experience or appears poised for failure, I would agree that happiness is no laughing matter.

Firstly, the concept of happiness in itself is highly vague. To the minority, happiness could mean hedonistic pleasure only, while to others it could mean being ‘successful’ in life – yet another vague concept. In today’s world, happiness is seen as more of a long-term goal, a state of mind that can only be achieved after working towards it for a period. Having achieved it, it is then viewed as a permanent rather than a transitory state of mind. This is evident from surveys where more than half the respondents were willing to go through “suffering” in the short term for eventual happiness when they are older and could “retire happily”. If happiness is then a long-term goal to be worked towards, the problem lies in being able to decide what would make one happy because only then can one work towards achieving those objects. Often, due to the media’s aggressive portrayal of celebrities’ glamorous lifestyle as desirable, it is possible to be misled into believing that what makes others happy and being wealthy can be the source of one’s own happiness. If these wrong beliefs are held onto obstinately and pursued, then eventually when one attains them and realises that the expected happiness is not attained, it leads to disgruntled disillusionment which may lead one to seek other ways of attaining happiness. This is obvious from the phenomenon of job-hopping, where people are dissatisfied with their jobs and try to move around in search of that elusive perfect job. From here, it becomes obvious that one needs to seriously consider what makes one happy and be able to differentiate between personal wishes and those propagated by society and the media.

Secondly, continuing in the vein that happiness is viewed as a long-term goal and that simple everyday pleasures eventually do not count, the pursuit of happiness then becomes a matter to be considered seriously. Assuming that one has a clear idea of what one wants to achieve in order to gain happiness, then planning how to achieve those goals has to be approached with some degree of discipline. If material objects like wealth and having degrees are what will make one happy, then the way to achieve those is relatively clearer – not necessarily easier though – than if one had intangible goals such as finding love. The worst would of course be if one had no idea what to aim for in life and thus merely followed parents’ wishes or societal expectations instead of picking a path of one’s own. Just as how the path to hell can be paved with good intentions, it is more than probable that the chosen path to happiness in life will be paved with unhappiness, as oxymoronic as it sounds. Consider the average Singaporean youth. Having been brainwashed since his youth that to be happy one needs to study well and get a good job, education becomes the sole obsession in his life. If it is not, then he usually will get scolded for being distracted by supposedly frivolous temporary pleasures such as hanging out with friends. He then willingly submits to putting himself under huge amounts of stress in the hope that one day in the future, his hard work will pay off and he will be able to say that he has achieved happiness in life. It is possible to see that depending on how one chooses to pursue one’s goals for happiness, he could then be subjecting himself to much unhappiness first. Hence, happiness as a goal is no laughing matter, as benefits will only be seen in the long term and choices have to be made wisely.

Another issue that arises due to the view of happiness as a personal goal that should be worked towards is that of limits. If one’s happiness is something that should be worked towards at all costs, how far should one be willing to go? How far should one possibly destroy others’ chances

of happiness in order to achieve personal happiness? This becomes an increasing concern as more and more people are able to reach decent standards of living such that they are able to think of bettering themselves. Extreme cases would be the likes of Hitler and murderers who destroy others' happiness in order for them to be happy themselves. Hence it is evident that the pursuit of happiness needs to be considered seriously.

On the whole, while happiness appears on the surface to be about being carefree and having light-hearted moments, in today's world, happiness is more of a luxury to be enjoyed during retirement after having worked through one's life. In light of this view of happiness, it becomes evident that considering what makes one happy and the ways of achieving it have to be treated seriously. As such, happiness is no laughing matter.

***Comments:***

***Good work.***

# General Paper Class Assignments 2010

## essay 3

“It would be a mistake for education to ignore the humanities.”  
Comment.

Ooi Li Ting | 10S06Q

The humanities have often been regarded as the lesser field in comparison to science, possibly because the study of the supposed ‘arts-related’ subjects do not produce the same tangible and quantifiable benefits that perhaps the sciences do, and are often also perceived as being less rigorous due to the subjective nature of the study, which differs starkly from the usual insistence of science upon hard facts. Yet, insofar as education is the holistic development of the person, which cannot be reduced to quantifiable and tangible results, it should also not ignore the deeper advantages that a student studying the humanities would receive. In fact, I would contend that it is a mistake for education to ignore the humanities, for in doing so, education will neglect the social growth of the person, hence failing to attune him to the finer sensitivities of our world and the human condition. In short, education would have failed without a teaching of the humanities.

There is a distinction to be made between schooling and education, and as Mark Twain once stated, “I do not let schooling get in the way of my education.” Yet in societies all around the world today, schooling is often equated with education, and as long as this perception stands, schools have the responsibility to include the study of humanities into their core curriculum. The humanities are not “wishy-washy” subjects in which emotion, ranting and vagueness of expressions abound; for this reason, many argue against the allocation of resources to the teaching of the humanities (for why waste precious resources upon impracticalities?) remaining oblivious to the mental discipline and intellectual rigour demanded of the humanities. Conversely, the analysis of the human condition through literature and history calls for a highly rigorous evaluation not just of one's own personal values, but the societal context in which we live. It is insulting to dismiss the humanities as an amorphous expression of eloquent grief, joy, comedy or tragedy; the humanities are often a deliberate reflection of a specific moral ethos or development on the part of an individual to stimulate greater thought into issues that define our humanity. No doubt the sophistication of the world cannot be captured within one piece of work, but the collective study of the humanities would expose us to a larger range of voices that compel us to contemplate the value and relevance of issues that involve the development of society as a whole, and even if it fails to draw us out from a state of apathy, it will, at the very least, prevent us from living a myopic existence isolated from the rest of the world.

The skills derived from the study of the humanities are also highly transferable. Knowing how to add and subtract can only bring us that far, but learning how to effectively communicate our ideas on complex issues will help open many doors in our lives. The humanities are often subjective, for arguably history is only the victor's account of events, and in literature there is no imposition to admire or condemn a character. Yet precisely because they are subjective, these subjects make it more essential that you convey your opinions lucidly and present a persuasive argument for your case. In many ways, the humanities mirror higher level pursuits in advanced fields of science and mathematics. Quantum mechanics contains many uncertainties that greatly increase the demand on the learner to accept and appreciate complexity. Likewise, humans are multi-faceted and the relationships they share are often interlaced with various differing textures of motives. To come to a conclusion on an issue of human affairs would hence require the careful analysis of these various meanings, but beyond that, it requires the learner to then communicate these thoughts persuasively to another person. In that lies one core value of the training through the study of the humanities, and that is arguably one of the most important life skills that education should aim to equip each individual with.

The fluid nature of the humanities also means that even at a relatively low level, learners would already be grappling with sophistication and the concept that there are unlimited ways to view an issue. The sciences also provide this, but only at an advanced level, which a large majority of students never truly reach. Hence by introducing the humanities as part of formal education early on, we open children to the idea that the world is not coloured in black and white, or even the fixed hues of their crayons. What the humanities present is a dynamic model of the world that has great potential for imagination and great room for multiple perspectives. In doing so, they cultivate a diverging style of thinking and an open-mindedness essential in grooming individuals capable of creative thinking who will be tolerant of differing viewpoints. As J.K. Rowling said in her commencement address to Harvard graduates, "In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity, imagination is the unique capacity to empathise with the plights of people you do not know or have not met." All forms of academic study present this scope for imaginative thinking, but the humanities make it their primary preoccupation, without which there is no point in further pursuit of intellectual study. Thus if education is meant to enrich the human mind to the myriad of colours and hues our world has to offer, it should not neglect the humanities.

Because the study of the humanities is highly subjective, the learning process demands great personal input. It is not sufficient to just memorise facts or regurgitate another's observations, for the engagement with any field within the humanities requires one to respond to an issue within the context of one's personal values and beliefs. For that reason, I believe that the study of the humanities often parallels the process of self-discovery, and the manner in which an individual reacts to the entire gamut of diverse opinions he or she is faced with will necessarily reinforce his existing beliefs or inspire a change in them. No man can read *Frankenstein* without due consideration of the implications of man's over-reaching ambitions, eventually reconciling the disturbing idea that even motives driven by virtuous objectives may degrade into ghastly consequences. In history and literature among all other humanities, the learner is forced to confront the action of Man, to contemplate both the valiant and the ugly side of mankind. The process of learning is definitely arduous, but will eventually dispel naivety and engender a more empathetic and well-informed mind. We will emerge more confident of our beliefs, having had them tested by the complex dilemmas in the issues encountered, and this sets the value system that will guide our dealings with all others in the future. If education is a means to self-actualisation, then the study of the humanities is a potent tool by which we can achieve our end goals.

Granted, what the humanities offer may not be exclusive to the field alone, but the humanities prize the exploration and understanding of the human condition above all other priorities, linking the various subjects of the humanities most intuitively to our conscience. There is an engagement of the individual as a person beyond merely just the functioning of the intellectual centre we call the brain. Above all, the humanities constantly remind us that in any academic pursuit, value is found in an active investment of personal interest, and that issues divorced from a consideration of values renders the study meaningless. Thus, people who claim that those who do not intend to have a future career that deals with the humanities do not need to study them have sadly missed the key understanding that the humanities are valuable not so much as merely acquisition of specific knowledge, but are priceless in the general education of any human being.

#### **Comments:**

***You argue fluently and convincingly generally, but perhaps more is needed regarding the aims of education in general as this would better allow you to argue for the humanities' case. Also, you need to show the practical benefits of the humanities – your examples though relevant often just stopped short of this critical step. Another shortcoming is that you seem to reinforce the arts-science dichotomy in singing the humanities' praise. A more balanced and nuanced reflection on the validity of that dichotomy would perhaps have been more illuminating with regard to answering the question.***

# General Paper Class Assignments 2010

## essay 4

### Can terrorism ever be eradicated?

Victoria Ting Yue Xin | 10A13A

Since the events of 9/11, terrorism has, and not entirely undeservingly, been described as the single most significant threat to global security. The international community has correspondingly responded to such portentous statements with a whole arsenal of counter-terrorist measures in its struggle to overcome this. However, the eradication of terrorism is far more complex than it first appears, requiring both the elimination of both current forms of terrorist activity, as well as the effective strangulation of all possible future strains of it. As such, while it remains a goal rightfully at the forefront of worldwide concern and attention, I maintain that it is nevertheless a goal that is, unfortunately, largely unattainable.

This goal, it seems, has never looked closer than it does today. The world has seen an exponential and unprecedented increase in counter-terrorism measures, practices, knowledge and technology, from the approximate 5 million CCTV cameras mushrooming all over the UK to the publicly broadcasted anti-bombing alerts in Singaporean train stations. Relevant technology has similarly undergone leaps and bounds, fuelled by an ever-growing obsession with catching every variant of the multitudinous terrorist threat, from bombs concealed in shoes to ominous biological hazards. The complicated technique of millimetre wave body imaging is an example of technology that has become commonplace in airports.

Counter-terrorism measures, furthermore, have not been limited to the emergence of new and more sophisticated technology alone, but also include a certain fresh spirit of international cooperation, as the global community takes up arms in coordinated defence against its latest adversary. The United Nations Security Council, for example, has gone to the extent of creating a Counter-Terrorism Committee. Even in this age of economic integration, countries including the (free-market proponent) USA and various European nations have jointly undertaken sanctions against other countries for alleged terrorist backing or involvement. As such, this international framework of collaboration seems appropriate, and indeed necessary, to address this risk.

Most encouragingly, however, is perhaps the emerging movement away from 'hard' tactics like coercion or force, and toward 'soft' approaches like the installation of democracies, aid and concessions, persuaded by the realisation that violence often begets nothing but violence. The widely-circulated story of the Al-Qaeda operative convinced into confession not by water-boarding or other gruesome methods but by a empathetic offer of sugar-free cookies (for he was a diabetic), for example, perhaps best encapsulates this development. The lack of legitimate democracy and political representation, furthermore, has been identified as a key factor in the emergence of terrorism in places such as Jammu and Kashmir (where ballot boxes are often pre-stamped with the results, i.e. an Indian victory), and consequent steps to address this grievance have produced tangible results in the decrease of radical activity and support for groups such as the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. As such, this more open-minded attitude certainly seems to deal not only with terrorism's manifestations, but also actively ameliorates what seems to be its roots (the lack of social progress, for one, or resentment of foreign mistreatment).

However, it might perhaps be overly simplistic, and optimistic, to laud this shift towards 'soft' measures as the panacea to the global terrorist threat. Certainly, it seems to lack the obvious, and entirely understandable, exacerbating effect of other out-right oppressive means such as violent invasions or horrific torture, but that is not to conclude that it is without flaws. One such flaw would be the lack of an entirely accepting or supportive public – in an atmosphere where the very word 'terrorism' has become a veritable commonality, it is unsurprising that it is less than empathetic in expecting government retaliation for the grave crimes they see terrorists to have committed. President Obama can perhaps best identify with this, having had to straddle the impossibly fine line between the open-mindedness he hopes to embody and being "so open-minded that his brains fall out", as prominent right-wing critics have taken to accusing. Another flaw would be the relationship, as history has time and again demonstrated, of social change, even progress, and the development of fundamentalism, as a result of perceived anomie. The immense popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood, a



fundamentalist organisation with alleged terrorist connections, has been attributed to the potent combination of social change within Egypt as well as the group's successful depiction of social change as evil and sinful – the liberation of women to work, for one, was declared an “abomination”; the advent of democracy, an insidious grapple for influence by the Western devil, America. As such, both measures hard and soft seem to be inadequate in wholly curbing terrorism and its development, thus leaving us to wonder if anything can truly be effective.

Also, while an effective combination of hard and soft measures would probably achieve significant progress, international cooperation or even political will cannot be taken as a given. While many OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries, particularly those in the West, have gone to great lengths to combat this threat, there remain many instances where electoral or economic interests have led a country to adopt measures that might perhaps be counter-productive. The best example of this is perhaps China, the major trading partner and ally of ‘terrorist states’ (or at least, states allegedly employing terrorist-like tactics), North Korea and Burma. Despite the Burmese junta's frequent and merciless use of violent suppression to weed out separatist activity in its highlands, for example, China continues to shelter Burma from the full brunt of economic sanctions with the extremely lucrative Sino-Burmese oil trade. Even the country most labelled the forerunner of anti-terrorism, the USA, has itself been accused of condoning the Jewish extremist terrorist group Gush Emunim, which carries out merciless ‘vigilantism’ against Palestine civilians in the occupied territories, and is unable to take a tougher stance because of the electoral clout of the Jewish lobby back home.

Furthermore, we should note that terrorism remains one of the most stubborn and resilient threats by its very nature, which is radical and fundamentalist and therefore doggedly uncompromising. Given the religious justification behind many terrorist movements, against which there can be no rational nor fruitful reasoning, it is no surprise that groups from the Palestinian Hamas to the Sikh sect of Jarnail Bhindrawale have ruled out negotiation as a viable approach by rejecting it as a sign of weakness and debility. Their refusal to compromise, furthermore, has rendered many terrorist situations intractable, as there can be no common ground – while Fatah might be prepared to entertain talks about the two-state solution, Hamas rebuffs all settlements short of “sweeping Israel into the sea”. Moreover, even non-religious terrorism, like the Northern Ireland separatists, are often presented in terms of galvanising axioms – Nationalism! Fraternity! – which similarly serve to appeal. Most significantly, lastly, is that this invocation of religion permits the adoption of self-sacrificial and extremist terrorist methods, most notably the emergence of the suicide bomber. Osama bin Laden, for example, cited the Quran in assuring his supporters of supernatural support, and indeed blessing and approval, in their intifada against ‘The Great Satan’. Such preparation to resort to violence ensures that masses on both sides of the war become polarised, and that the conflict is ever more likely to degenerately spiral into blood and casualty.

Lastly, it is essential to understand that the terrorist threat in itself is highly amorphous – without fixed battlegrounds, battle-rules, or indeed soldiers. Examples such as the Second Palestinian Intifada spring to mind, where the assailants were not simply rifle-wielding men, but also elderly women and painfully young children. As such, the world, when confronted with disquieting images of pebble-throwing civilians boldly facing down Israeli tanks, was forced to reconsider the extent to which terrorism could be suppressed before its moral high ground was lost. Apart from that, the emergence of situations that challenge our traditional notions of terrorism – from state-sponsored terrorism (e.g. Burma), to entirely-terrorist states (e.g. North Korea, or even Iran) – all demonstrate that the changing face of terrorism, entailing its complete eradication, is something of a moving target.

In conclusion, it is perhaps most important to remember that terrorists cannot be viewed as deranged extremists without justification. At the end of the day, terrorism, like much else in global politics, is more a matter of perception than of objective judgement; the stereotype of a terrorist in Afghanistan, for example, would likely fall closer to a machine-gun toting G.I. Joe. Thus, even though the intricate complexities of the global terrorist threat mean that its eradication is a goal more idealistic than realistic, it remains a goal the world should not for a second stop striving towards.

#### **Comments:**

***Excellent work, Victoria! A sophisticated analysis of an oft-discussed topic.***



# General Paper Class Assignments 2010

## essay 5

To what extent should the private lives of public figures be the subject of media coverage?

Benjamin Mak Jia Ming | 11A01B

From Princess Diana to Tiger Woods, the headlines on our dailies have consistently exposed the sordid details of the private lives of public figures. While such irascible coverage may harm public figures or prove to be excessive for even public consumption, I believe that the private lives of public figures should remain the subject of media coverage to a large extent, because it upholds the public right to information and potentially promotes better behaviour among public figures.

Before examining the perspectives of this issue, it is perhaps useful to understand what a public figure is. A public figure is an individual who achieves prominence and often extracts considerable benefit from being in the public spotlight. Politicians, prominent actors, and sports stars are all examples of public figures. Their private lives, which refer to their affairs and lifestyle choices unrelated to their professional activities, have often been the subject of immense discussion in publications, on television and now online on websites.

How might one oppose coverage on the private lives of public figures in the media? The largest concern lies in how the right to privacy of public celebrities is unjustifiably infringed. Given that every individual deserves a certain amount of dignity, it follows that his or her actions in the private sphere should not be subject to the intense criticism based on the tastes and preferences of others in society. Since the right to privacy does not cease to exist when an individual is plunged into the public limelight, his or her private life should not become something which can be exploited by media companies to gain profits. Thus, media coverage on the private lives of public figures cannot be justified in principle.

Practically speaking, however, the consequences of such coverage often prove to be deleterious. Firstly, the process of gaining such scoops often involves invading the lives of individuals in their most private moments, with the memory of paparazzi cameras chasing stars like Audrey Hepburn on their summer vacations being the most iconic illustration of this. More insidiously however, such coverage can damage the lives not only of the singular celebrity in question, but also others whom he or she was linked to in private. When the release of sexually revealing photographs of Edison Chen and his multiple partners were splattered on the front pages of Hong Kong newspapers like *Apple Daily*, it did not only cause Chen's musical career to suffer. Fellow celebrities like Gillian Cheung, who chose to have private trysts with Chen but did not consent to having their reputations smeared significantly, were unfairly compromised for an action which had no relation whatsoever to their professional reputations. Moreover, one must consider the psychological stress brought to bear on public figures when details about their families or romantic relationships are forcefully thrust into the public eye. Recent British tabloid reports on a possible affair between the current England football captain John Terry and a former girlfriend of his former Chelsea teammate Wayne Bridge cast enormous pressure on the already struggling player and even called into question his ability to continue serving as England captain. Clearly, media coverage on the private lives of public figures casts unfair aspersions on the professional careers of public figures and produces pernicious outcomes which may damage not just themselves, but also others.

Since it is futile to deny the existence of such effects, I will seek to debunk the arguments raised above by appealing to a principle that trumps the right to privacy – a principle that upholds the public's right to know the truth, warts and all. My analysis begins by isolating the fact that unlike the average Joe, who eschews the media spotlight, individuals become public figures because of the favourable spotlight the media has cast upon them, which allows them to achieve widespread recognition and attract significant support. Without the support of Rupert Murdoch's widely read dailies like *The Sun* in the run-up to the 1997 British General Elections, Tony Blair was unlikely to have won a thumping majority which catapulted him to the premiership. Even when individuals

have become public figures, they rely heavily on the media to connect with and influence the public. The success of David Beckham's endorsement of Adidas soccer boots, for instance, depends heavily upon media advertising to reach customers everywhere, and in turn rakes in massive profits for the player. Hence, public figures benefit from the trust and support the public places in them. By implication, their duty to be accountable to the public is correspondingly much higher than that of the ordinary person. Since the media is the primary means through which the people can find out more about public figures, media coverage on them is justified. More crucially though, since it is essential for the public to know whether the image public figures present to them is merely a facade that hides deceit and socially undesirable behaviour in private, media coverage on public figures should extend to include their private lives. This does not mean that media companies can spread lies about what public figures do in private for their own gain, because they will still be subject to slander and libel suits that public figures can file if they find the media is spreading mistruths that sully their reputation. However, as long as the media reports the truth or can show that it was reasonably certain of its sources, the private lives of public figures can be covered.

Several benefits accrue when this principle is put into practice. First, because the people can check on public figures, we can prevent the people from being lied to which allows the people to make better decisions. This is illustrated in the case of Senator John Edwards, a Democratic presidential hopeful in 2008 in the United States who fell from grace when the Washington Post revealed that he had an extra-marital affair when his wife Elizabeth was undergoing treatment for breast cancer. By exposing the falsity of the squeaky clean image his campaign team had tried to preserve, the American people were able to make better decisions on who they would support in the elections, and duly rejected him. Next, by making public figures realise that their private affairs are not immune to media scrutiny, we encourage them to clean up their act and become better role models that the rest of society can see and be inspired by. The case of Tiger Woods demonstrates this well, because media exposure on the multiple affairs of the world's first billionaire athlete has encouraged him to seek help with his psycho-sexual impulses and to patch up his estranged relationship with his wife Elin Nordegren\*. By spurring him to own up to his fans for his infidelities, media coverage on the private life of Tiger Woods will no longer be able to exude holistic reflection as a public figure, the fact that media coverage spurred his efforts towards reform proves that it can be justified to a large extent. Separately, for the fact that public figures realise from the beginning of their career that the media spotlight could shine on them unfavourably, yet still decided on this path for its lucrative rewards, it is unfair for them to decry the system once they are put on the spot, and it also negates their claim to enjoy the same amount of privacy as the Everyman.

In conclusion, the media should cover the private lives of public figures to a large extent regardless of the potential harms incurred, because these are outweighed by the principled need for public figures to fulfil their responsibility to the people who have supported their endeavours, and especially since the right to privacy is not absolute. For those who want to be larger than life, they must live up to our expectations.

*\*At the time this essay was written.*

### **Comments:**

***Benjamin, a thoroughly enjoyable read! Impressive work!***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 1

“Because our senses deceive us, there is very little knowledge we can claim to have certainty about.” Discuss.

Goh Ruo Ting | 10A01A

In our quest for certainty in knowledge, two main schools of foundationalism have emerged – rationalism and empiricism. Rationalists derive the certainty of their knowledge from a bedrock of what Descartes terms “clear and distinct ideas” gained through reason, while empiricists claim the certainty of knowledge on the basis of the incorrigibility of sense experience. However, sense deception seems to cripple the alleged certainty of sense experience, undermining the empiricists’ claim to certainty, thus leaving the rationalist way as the only path to knowledge that is certain. Yet, the amount of knowledge that can be known through rationalism is very limited, as will be shown later in this essay. Thus, the gravest implication of this is that foundationalism as an enterprise appears to have failed.

How sense deception undermines the incorrigibility of sense data can be illustrated in many ways: train tracks which appear to converge in the distance are actually parallel, water level from a distance appears to be a straight line instead of a curved meniscus, and one’s right and left hand will detect the same pool of water to be of different temperatures if placed in a hot and cold pool respectively right before. A last-ditch attempt to save empiricism is that we are actually aware of these cases of sense deception, and the only way we can recognise them is also through the use of our senses! However, there is no way to ascertain that we can or do always recognise all cases of sense deception when they do occur, thus a margin of uncertainty still remains, and the attack that sense deception poses to the empiricist’s foundation of beliefs can never be completely refuted.

It is precisely due to the half-baked certainty of knowledge derived from sense-data that rationalists claim superiority of their knowledge as the only one with certainty, as with Descartes’s “wax argument”. Descartes argued that as solid wax melts to form liquid wax, nothing in your sense experience tells you that they are still the same substance, hence only reason can. The rationalist school thus proceeds to form knowledge from an entirely different premise of indubitable, transcendental beliefs, the prime example being the Cogito. Most of the knowledge derived is thus analytic truths, in other words, truths by definition, such as “All bachelors are single men” and “A triangle has three sides”, but this amounts to very little because we cannot even possibly know – through rationalism – whether these aforementioned “bachelors” and “triangles” exist! As Kant argues, using reason alone, we cannot posit that “a triangle has three sides” as that presupposes the triangle’s existence; we can only claim that “if a triangle exists, it has three sides.” Descartes attempted to refute this through an argument for a benevolent god who would guarantee the correctness and certainty of his perception of existence and existent concepts, but the tautological argument for God is in fact circular and falls flat. Thus, if the very existence of the concepts generated through rationalism is uncertain, the amount of knowledge that can be gained through rationalism is clearly limited. Hume encapsulated this idea with his famous Hume’s Fork, that “Nothing is both certain and about the world.”

However, Kant seems to resolve this dichotomy with his middle way: By positing a distinction between the noumenal world and the phenomenal world, he concedes that there is very little knowledge of the noumenal world that we can access, however we can access much knowledge about the world that we perceive and live in – the phenomenal world – with “subjective certainty”. What “subjective certainty” means is that while we can doubt whether our perceptions actually give us knowledge of the noumenal world, forever eluded by the veil of perception, we have certainty that our perceptions do give us knowledge of the phenomenal world, through our filters of consciousness.

By subscribing to Kant’s middle way, we do not actually answer the problem of uncertainty in

trying to attain knowledge of the noumenal. Instead, we have a shift of focus altogether to the phenomenal world and, by settling for what Walzer terms a “thin” notion of knowledge and certainty, we can thus accumulate a much broader base of knowledge – for example, we can know for certain that objects fall to the ground according to gravity because this applies in the phenomenal world, regardless of whether it does in the noumenal.

Yet, even Kant’s middle way does not stand up to the ultimate sceptic attack – sense deception being only one of the weaker sceptic attacks – which is the evil demon argument. According to this argument, we cannot even have certain knowledge of the phenomenal world because an evil demon may be manipulating our minds and distorting our perceptions and thought processes. Thus, we cannot even know if the law of gravity applies for sure in the phenomenal world. The evil demon argument seems to hit the nail into the coffin for any variation of foundationalism, even Kant’s, and admits that we really can know nothing for certain.

We are therefore forced to look for alternative paths to knowledge apart from foundationalism and give up our demands for certainty – coherentism presents itself as one alternative, and while it allows for a vast accumulation of knowledge in a “web”, we are constantly aware that the entire web of knowledge is uncertain due to its being a closed belief system and the possibility of other parallel belief systems, e.g. helio-and geo-centrism existing side-by-side.

At this point, however, we should ask ourselves: throughout this essay, we have taken certainty almost as a pre-requisite for knowledge, but should it be so? I argue, no. If we backtrack to Hume’s Fork, “Nothing is both certain and about the world”, Hume’s implication is that we should just pick knowledge about the world, although it has less certainty, since the quest for certainty inevitably leads to solipsism, an unsustainable philosophical position to hold which is impossible to live out.

After all, the quest for certainty, since doomed to fail, should just be viewed as a philosophical exercise, a method of doubt, to test the strength of our knowledge claims, not to simply discard them on the basis of their potential to be doubted, but rather to re-establish these knowledge claims with a sense of awareness of our fallibility. Dubitability does not compromise utility. We can doubt that paracetamol helps to cure fevers, but it is still a largely useful piece of knowledge to have and put into practice, more than “I think therefore I am”.

Besides, within the pool of uncertain knowledge-claims, not all are equally valid or invalid. We do not know for sure if the sun rises in the east, neither can we know for sure if Santa exists, yet the former is considered knowledge and the latter not, because the former is justified by a greater regularity and number of sunrise sightings than that of Santa. In other words, the distinction of knowledge from non-knowledge is no longer made on the basis of certainty, but on the basis of the quality of justification.

The quest for certainty is a quest for the complete elimination of doubt, which has been shown to be impossible and is ultimately disappointing if we try to establish knowledge on the criteria of being “beyond doubt”. The quest for justification, on the other hand, is a quest for the incomplete elimination of doubt, recognising that its complete elimination is impossible, and seeks to establish knowledge as “Justified True Belief”, justification meaning “beyond reasonable doubt” rather than “beyond doubt altogether”. With that, empiricist knowledge, though plagued by sense deception, can be re-established as justified (albeit uncertain) knowledge, since our sense can in fact be trusted the remaining 99% of the time. As Francis Bacon said, “Knowledge is power”, and if the path to gaining more knowledge is by giving up a fruitless search for absolute certainty, it is certainly worth it to give up the insistence on epistemic “superglue”, make do with epistemic “normal glue”, and build a more extensive and useful knowledge base.

#### **Comments:**

***Excellent argument though you would have made your arguments stronger by questioning what certainty entails, therefore staying closer to the quote and addressing it more directly.***

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 2

### How far can mathematical knowledge be considered true?

Chu Junyi | 10S060

Mathematics has been lauded as one of the most certain and objective areas of knowledge because it is so intertwined with logic and because of its focus on deductive proof. Mathematical knowledge is often referred to as “fact”, highlighting the immense confidence that we have in this body of knowledge. However, is mathematical knowledge “true”? In this essay, I will argue that although there are different theories of truth (correspondence, reliabilism, and coherentism) and different theories regarding the nature of mathematical knowledge, we can generally consider mathematical knowledge to be true.

Firstly, truth can be taken in terms of correspondence. What is true is what corresponds to reality and vice versa. Math, as conceived by Plato, is a real thing. Plato conceived of the world as Forms where “perfect entities” existed. These included the forms of beauty, truth, and justice. There were also forms of objects such as triangles, circles and numbers – to Plato, mathematical entities were real and existed independently of the human mind. Fellow philosophers and mathematicians including Aristotle and Pythagoras supported this notion by finding instances of mathematics in nature. For instance, musical harmonies were shown to exist according to simple mathematical ratios.

In addition to the realist view of the nature of mathematics, the construction of mathematical knowledge also has a deductive nature which adds to its certainty. Mathematics consists of basic axioms which are assumed to be true, from which various theorems and “truths” are derived. Euclid’s axioms of geometry are a set of statements from which all of classical geometry can be derived logically. However, this leads us to wonder if the axioms are true in the first place. If we were to take a realist approach to truth, then some axioms would fail. For instance, a key axiom used is the assumption that “two parallel lines will never meet”. It is questionable as to the physical truth of the statement since it is unlikely that we can ever verify the statement. Furthermore, Riemannian geometry has been constructed to demonstrate a separate axiom-theorem program where parallel lines can in fact meet. Which system of geometry is true in this case? This seems to raise a problem with the truth of mathematical knowledge.

Secondly, there are problems with the process of creating mathematical knowledge as well. Assuming that the axioms we have chosen hold up, does our logic (used to derive theorems) hold as well? On the one hand, there is the possibility that Descartes’ evil demon has hoodwinked us into believing that our logic and reasoning is flawless when it is in fact problematic. Even if we reject this far-fetched (but still possible) scenario, efforts to reduce mathematics to a logical programme have thus far failed. Hilbert’s logicism programme to reconstruct mathematics using only logic was undermined by Gödel’s Incompleteness Theorem, which proved that we cannot produce a system of mathematics that is consistent and complete at the same time. Other attempts at creating an axiom-theorem structure from pure logic as opposed to geometry have also been fruitless. For example, only seven out of nine axioms of the Zermelo-Fraenkel Theory have been proven so far.

It seems that mathematicians have so far been unable to construct an entirely coherent body of mathematical knowledge from scratch, and we can only subscribe to the realist interpretation for an account of why mathematics is true. However, there are problems with the realist interpretation. The first problem is with the idea that mathematical entities are real. Although this seems intuitive, as children often learn mathematics and the number “3” by counting 3 objects, it could be argued that it is only “pairs” and “threesomes” that exist in reality, rather than numbers themselves. This argument gathers steam when we consider that many mathematical entities have no place in our physical reality, for instance, negative numbers, the concept of imaginary numbers, or the constant

value “”. They seem to have been constructed by our minds instead.

If we follow this line of reasoning that many mathematical claims have no physical manifestations but are, instead, invented, we could still claim that mathematical knowledge is “true” following the practical view of truth. As Wenger pointed out, mathematics has an “unreasonable effectiveness” in its applicability to the natural sciences. Physics relies on calculus and many biological phenomena can be modelled using mathematics. In fact, Newton and Leibniz independently founded calculus, which became indispensable to explaining key concepts in motion, such as the relation between force and the momentum of an objective (force is the rate of change of momentum). If the natural sciences describe and explain reality, and if we want to believe in the reality of scientific theories (as most of us do), then the indispensability argument suggests that we should believe in the reality of the entities used in such explanations, in other words, mathematical entities. Math is therefore true because it works, especially in science.

Thus far, I have discussed mathematical knowledge as something independent of the human mind, as something found in nature or as something following the rules of logic. However there is one more view of mathematics, brought forth by Kant. To fit with Kant’s overall conception of reality, mathematics is taken to be a construct of the human mind. The truth in mathematical knowledge lies in the objectivity of our knowledge and its universality. For Kant, mathematics is the result of humans applying our necessarily logical understanding to the world around us. We understand the world through the same filters of consciousness, which leads us to apply the same mathematical structures to the natural world. I think Kant manages to respond to both the realist and the anti-realist schools of thought adequately. Mathematical entities appear to “exist” independently in nature because our minds necessarily see the world through the “rose-tinted glasses” of mathematics, which could account for the simultaneous formulation of calculus by different people, and also why different civilisations have created similar mathematical principles differing only to match their unique customs and needs. An example of this is the development of arithmetic in eastern and western civilisations – Arabic mathematics used a base 10 multiplication system, whereas ancient Mesopotamia used a base 5 counting system, but both used the same concepts of arithmetic.

Depending on which view of truth and nature of mathematical knowledge one subscribes to, we may conclude differently the truth value of mathematics. Yet, there may still be a few problems facing mathematics. One of these problems is that some fundamental theorems have not yet been proven. Another is that some proofs (such as the proof for the 4-colour theorem) are so complex and tedious that even though super-computers have constructed proofs for them, humans have as of now been unable to comprehend them. Perhaps these are puzzles that will be solved in the future, or perhaps we may not be able to ascertain these truths for some time. However, judging from the usefulness of mathematics and the strict requirements of proofs before any conjecture is accepted as a mathematical theorem, and also the stringent peer-review system that mathematical ideas have to go through, I conclude that mathematical knowledge is to a large extent true, even if we do not have absolute certainty about it.

**Comments:**

**Excellent.**

# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2 2010

## essay 3

"There is something fascinating about science. One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact." (Mark Twain)  
How apt is this a description of how scientific knowledge is constructed?

Tay Hui Yan Charisse | 10A01A

Science, as a body of knowledge that aspires to accurately reflect and predict the workings of the physical world, should surely not warrant a dismissal as the quote suggests. The scientific method involves such rigorous experimentation and collation of data from varied sources that it would be hasty to label it "trifling". Yet when one considers the magnitude of the mantle that science has taken on, perhaps Twain's awe cannot be faulted.

The scientific method is ultimately intended to be predictive, as experimentation eventually results in the formulation of a hypothesis that is used to predict future occurrences. An essential problem is the problem with prediction, which falls prey to induction. Even simple "laws" such as the daily rising of the sun cannot stand up to induction because the fallibility of men precludes limits to man's knowledge – that we can only know what we have seen. Fortunately, science as a primarily empirical method of inquiry benefits from this, as conjectures are tested based on empirical evidence. One's valuation of science would therefore rely heavily on the extent to which one gives credence to the strength of empirical evidence, as compared to its shortfalls.

Popper's falsificationism lends an easy way out by suggesting that science can remain wholly empirical – theories are assumed to be true until empirical evidence is found which negates them. Technically, science does not always progress this way: Adams and Leverrier found Neptune first by conjecturing its existence and then by proving it. However, in the case of many scientific theories, old theories are neatly replaced by new ones as scientists disprove others' theories and seek to build their own. For instance, the geocentric theory was rejected when Copernicus realised that scientific calculations could only support a heliocentric theory. Thus, it is quite possible for science to be more than mere conjecture, depending on the extent to which empiricism is employed.

On the other hand, the extent of human knowledge is often limiting, despite the rigor of the method itself. Consider that Newton himself, when confronted with the fact that the planets orbited the sun in irregular motion, chose to believe that they were orbiting the sun in smaller twisty motions along their entire orbit. Leibniz suggested correctly that they had elliptical orbits around the sun – suggesting that the problem of underdetermination is a serious one indeed. It is often difficult to select between two alternative theories that both fit the facts. In some cases, such as Leibniz's, it is possible to arrive at the correct conclusion eventually, as technology improves. However, in some cases, one may in fact never be able to determine certain facts. For example, palaeontology and paleogeography are based on hard evidence of tectonic plate movement and migration routes of prehistoric animals. However, the theories are sheer conjecture, or perpetual ignorance, since no amount of DNA-synthesis will allow experts to finally discover what colour dinosaur skin truly was. The limits of human knowledge and ability does mean that for certain areas of science, plain conjecture is bountiful compared to the slim pickings of fact on which scientists must base their theories.

Of course, the beauty of science is the paradox of its unswerving sustainability in the face of rapid changes in underlying theory. The bedrock of science is so quickly changed at times that scientific paradigms often seem about to spring on us. Pessimistic meta-induction would posit that science is doomed to always remain a succession of theories that replace each other, one after another. After all, incommensurability would suggest that different paradigms cannot be compared fairly, given the differences in jargon and worldview. The extent to which science can quickly reconstruct itself from the glowing embers of the previous paradigm is remarkable but would suggest that there is no inherent value or reason to prefer one paradigm over another. Such a coherentist view would be greatly in line with the quote's suggestion that science is only loosely based on fact.

To take the analysis a step further, perhaps one should consider not only whether science is merely conjecture but also how reliable and useful these conjectures may be. Whether science is in fact truth, or an accurate representation of the physical world, depends largely on what we would consider truth. Science would not qualify under foundational truths such as analytic *a priori* statements because of its complete dependence on empiricism. Scientific theory cannot be true by definition because of Hume's Fork – the distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact. Simply put, no statement can be completely true and yet useful. Science, in defining itself along physical lines, would thus be disqualifying itself from the status of analytic *a priori* knowledge.

Fortunately, this does not entirely reflect the reliability of science. The rigor of the scientific method in the face of human limitations and the inherent shortcomings of empiricism contributes to the strength of the method in the process of inquiry into the physical world. In any case, the usefulness of science is often deemed the practical reason as to why it is so favoured. Instrumentally, science and its conjectures should perhaps be accepted as long as they still work and can be applied in the real world. No matter how dismissive one might be about the flimsiness of scientific conjectures, perhaps the principle of charity should be applied here – science has never claimed to be able to predict with utmost certainty, nor has it claimed to be truth personified. The value of science is surely embodied in how the rigor of the method easily translates to useful knowledge about the physical world.

**Comments:**

**Excellent.**



# Knowledge and Inquiry Year 5 Common Test 2010

essay 1

“Foundationalism is untenable. The ‘certain’ knowledge it produces is either very limited or solipsistic.” Discuss.

Hwang Kai Wen | 11S06T

Foundationalism has long been posed as an answer to the radical sceptic, as it seems to solve problems picked on by sceptical arguments. To claim that foundationalism produces “certain” knowledge which is either very limited or solipsistic may be true, but I am of the position that this does not make it untenable.

Foundationalism is a method of formulating knowledge from a bedrock of indubitable beliefs. These beliefs are taken to be true and unquestionable, which allows further knowledge to be built upon them using such foundational beliefs as justification for other beliefs. In this way a set of beliefs may be recognised as knowledge. This was put forth to prevent an infinite regress of justification, where sceptics will continue to question the justification behind a belief, then the justification behind that justification, and so on. For example, I believe that an ambihelical hexnut is an optical illusion to trick the mind. The sceptic would question how I came to believe that, and the response would be, “I read it in Chang Xiang’s brilliant essay on science and its practicability in the KS Bull.” The sceptic would then question if this is sufficient justification, since the publication in question has been known to contain errors. Of course a further justification of actually correlating the information to other sources may be needed, whereupon a possible sceptic retort would be: if all the sources I consulted had the same source, that source could be wrong. Of course it seems silly, even laughable, to doubt the existence of something tangible that can be seen, but this is an example of how scepticism can question knowledge by continually questioning justification. Foundationalism helps to stop the questioning since beliefs are taken as unquestionable and true. However, what knowledge that it produces can be certain?

Foundationalism is split into two schools of thought. The first is that of the rationalists who believe that knowledge is founded upon reason, and it is truths of reason which should be the certain truths used as foundational beliefs. Descartes, one of the well-known proponents of rationalism, claimed that these have “clear and distinct ideas”, that is to say, thoughts that one can formulate just by thinking about them. The famous example of sitting in a dark room and thinking until knowledge is formulated was used to illustrate what types of knowledge rationalism can produce. Tellingly, mathematics is the most commonly used example, along with a priori analytic truths. The former are truths which are true by definition, such as “a square has four sides of equal length.” Since the very definition of a square is just that, it has to be true. Thus analytic truths such as these are the foundational beliefs. Also, Descartes used what Kant would later term “transcendental arguments”. These, such as the famous Cogito ergo sum, along with others such as “Language exists,” cannot be doubted without contradiction – for one to doubt the existence of the self, there must be some being doing the doubting. Hence, all these are the “certain” knowledge that can be gained from rationalist foundationalism.

The second and opposing school of thought is empiricism. Empiricists claimed that foundational beliefs should be based on sense data, since we cannot doubt our senses. Locke formerly called the mind a tabula rasa, or blank slate, onto which our experiences make impressions, which forms the knowledge that we have. He pointed that everything could be reduced to descriptions in terms of sense data, such as, in his own words, “whiteness” and “hardness”. To further strengthen the position of the empiricists, Hume’s copy principle may be utilised. In it, Hume stated that anything that we can possibly imagine is made up of sense data of prior experience, even when imagining what we have never before experienced such as the classic example of a unicorn. It is made up of previous experiences of horses, horns and the colour white. This, he claimed, proved that all knowledge is and must be built upon sense data. Hence, for empiricists, we can only be certain of the sense data we see, which is unquestionable.

However, is this “certain” knowledge very limited or solipsistic? Let us first examine the transcendental arguments and analytic truths of rationalism.

Opponents of rationalism have long claimed that analytic truths can tell us nothing about the physical world, and are of limited use. All is well and good knowing how many sides a square has, or that all spinsters are women, to name another example, but these are useless in finding actual knowledge we can utilise, apply, or gather. It is this that the empiricists claim is problematic, with science as their evidence. One cannot come up with the laws of physics, Newtonian or Einsteinian, without conducting experiments and observing the behaviour of objects. It is claimed that these truths, the synthetic truths, are more useful, and are plentiful, and thus rationalism does lead to limited information.

Another criticism levelled at rationalism is that of solipsistic knowledge. That is to say, the knowledge which we can obtain through thinking alone cannot tell us about the existence of anything but ourselves, the ones doing the thinking. All the examples mentioned, such as “Cogito ergo sum”, seem to support this claim. Descartes himself had to suspend all judgement about the world, and everything about it, and “Cogito ergo sum” only puts forth that the thinker exists, but nothing else. This too is rather limited as not much can be built upon it, and it leads us into the trap of solipsism as we are unable to claim knowledge of anything else. It would seem that rationalism is doomed to be limited and solipsistic.

Then what of empiricists?

It too has been accused of being solipsistic. For while the sense data we experience cannot be questioned, we cannot relate that to the real world at all. For, after all, if we claim to see a human-shaped patch of brown and beige, we cannot claim to know it is a person. It could be that we are hallucinating, or being misled by an evil demon to interpret it as such, or we could actually be seeing what is really a person. Given the uncertainty of these claims, we can at best claim to know our sense data is true, but nothing else. A veil of perception is present between what we experience and what is actually there. Hence empiricists can never know of the existence of anything, just that sense data is being fed to them.

Having seen that the only “certain” knowledge, the foundational beliefs are either limited, solipsistic or both, is foundationalism then untenable? I believe not.

Just because we cannot be “certain” does not, and should not, mean we cannot know. This is exactly what foundationalism attempts to achieve by defeating sceptics claiming that there is an infinite regress of justification. Does it matter that the only “certain” knowledge we can gain is very limited or solipsistic? I say no. This does not make the foundationalist position untenable as it is still practical and applicable. It allows us to claim knowledge of things which we need to know on a daily basis, and while the knowledge which follows from foundational beliefs may not be absolutely certain, we do not need it to be able to function.

Before concluding, it is worth examining how rationalism and empiricism can provide more certain knowledge that pushes back the limits of what we can know. Kant, in his *A Critique of Pure Reason*, did this by brilliantly synthesising the two. He posited that there existed a phenomenal world that we experience (things-as-they-appear) and a noumenal world which is the real world (things-as-they-are). He hypothesised that we can only ever see the phenomenal world and thus cannot draw conclusions as to the real world with empiricism alone. He then put forth that there are forms of sensibility and forms of understanding within us where the forms of sensibility capture the sense data around us – as put forth by the empiricists – while the forms of understanding analyse that sense data, making sense of it – as put forth by the rationalists. In this way a more complete form of foundationalism emerges, combining both the complementary aspects of rationalist and empiricist theories, such that more knowledge, like synthetic a priori knowledge, can be obtained. This also bridges gaps in both theories, such as Hume’s missing shade of blue. A person having seen all

shades of blue but one, would instantly recognise that missing shade of blue as well, after noticing that each shade differed from the next by a hue. Is this not the forms of sensibility capturing the sense data of all the different shades of blue, and the forms of understanding arranging them in order to identify that missing shade? This synthesis of the two allowed foundationalism to produce more knowledge of which we can be certain.

Another point to raise: should we take the position of strict justification and hence declare foundationalism to be untenable? Since we seek to progress epistemologically and cannot remain content with only “knowing” what is practical to know, what else can we turn to? A ready answer is coherentism.

Coherentism is another theory of how knowledge is formed, where beliefs which cohere will fit together in a “web” of beliefs. These beliefs support each other such that no one belief is unquestionable, but all of them together form a set of well-cohering beliefs which we can then accept as knowledge. This can give us more knowledge of the world, in that, within a particular system, such as our world, we can always expect gravity to cause objects to fall and Newton’s laws of physics to remain valid, as these, along with our daily observations of the world, lend credence to those beliefs and further build the web. Also it escapes the trap of solipsism as our belief set can include the beliefs that others exist, and that they respond when called, among others.

So far, coherentism appears to produce unlimited and unsolipsistic knowledge. But then, it fails us when it comes to the “certainty” of our knowledge – which is the main focus of this essay – which has possibly led to foundationalism being untenable for a strict sceptic. For the certainty of any knowledge in coherentism is next to nothing. There exists a plurality of belief sets, where we can form all sorts of beliefs supporting each other, and yet our beliefs differ between sets.

For example, take a fictional world, such as Middle Earth in the Lord of the Rings trilogy by Tolkien. Within this world, all our beliefs regarding the existence of elves and dwarves, magic and might, are formulated and do support each other, as with most fiction with complex backstories and settings. One living his entire life exposed to nothing but the fantasy Tolkien world would formulate an entire set of well-cohering beliefs about the world which happens to be wholly incompatible with someone else who has not. Yet without any further knowledge, or an omnipresent viewpoint, we can never be sure of our entire belief set. Coherentism fails here where foundationalism has succeeded, producing “certain” knowledge which can be used to determine a theory’s tenability.

Hence, while foundationalism may be limited and bordering on the solipsistic in terms of empiricism and rationalism, it can produce much knowledge of which we are certain when considering Kant’s bridging of the two, extending much of what we can know for certain. It too is capable of producing “certain” knowledge, unlike the main rival theory of coherentism, and thus, while still limited, cannot be said to be untenable, due to its practicality and immense value in the formation and sources of knowledge.

#### **Comments:**

***Kai Wen, an extremely comprehensive essay which covers a lot of ground, and was also clearly and effectively argued. Excellent work. If I were to quibble, your analysis of Kant would have benefitted from a little more depth—does his noumenal/phenomenal divide really lead to more knowledge given that we cannot have access to the noumenal world?***

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# Notes



