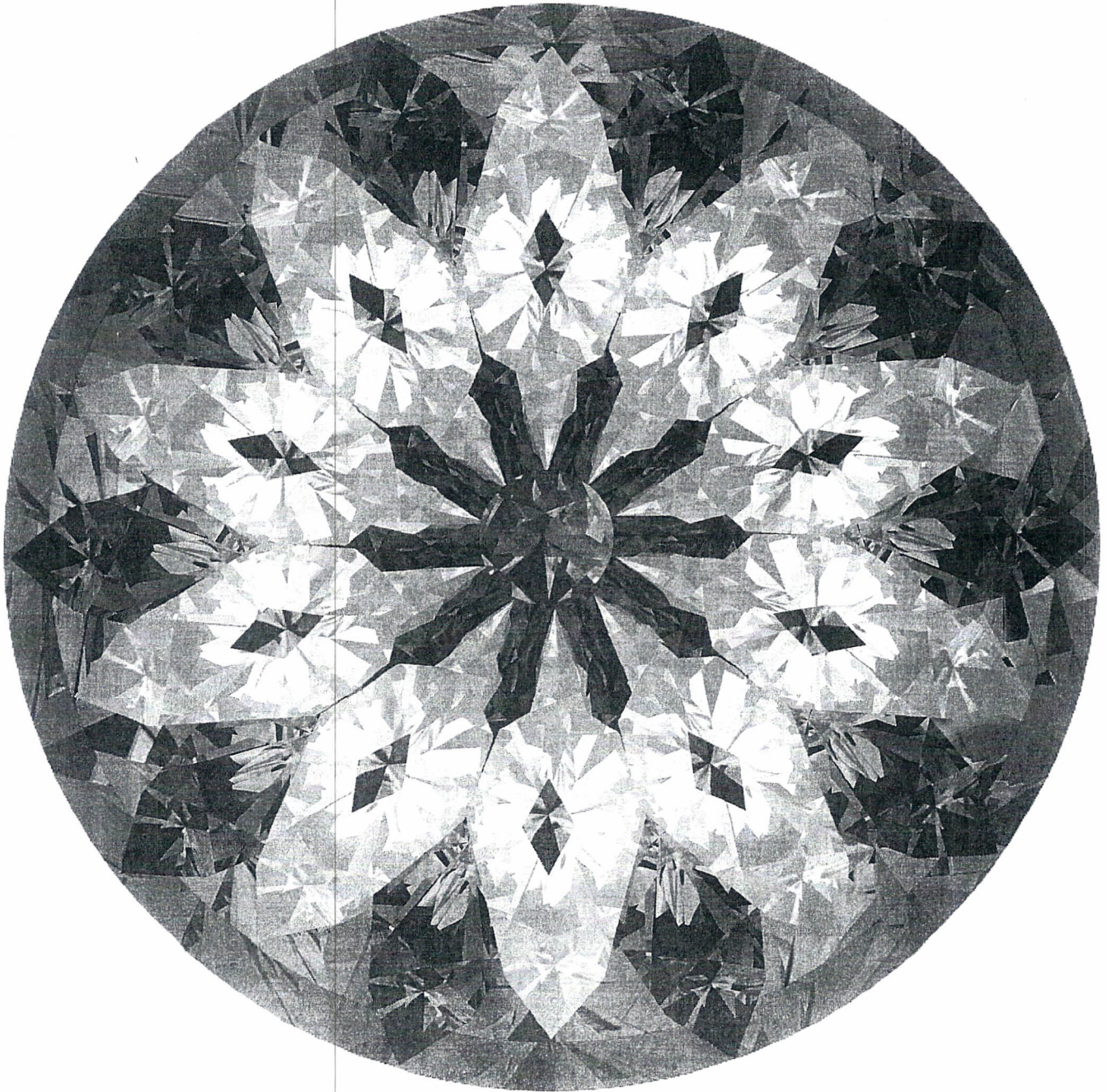


KALEIDOSCOPE

2015



Content

history & politics

‘True democracy is not just about having the right to vote.’ Do you agree?	1
<i>Jiang Han 13S49</i>	
‘True democracy is not just about having the right to vote.’ Do you agree?	3
<i>Wang Haochen 13S40</i>	
‘With increasing emphasis on rights, the state should not interfere in the private life of its citizens.’ Discuss.	5
<i>Seow Wei Liang 14A11</i>	
Should the rights of minorities be protected at all costs?	7
<i>Sng Li Shan 14S39</i>	
How far can politicians change the lives of citizens for the better?	9
<i>Ong Wei Ching 15S30</i>	
How effective have global efforts been in resolving the problem of international conflict?	11
<i>Sarah Tay King Sing 13A11</i>	
Assess the value of the study of History today.	13
<i>Mark Chia 13A12</i>	

economics

‘We need more greed, not less, if we want to develop.’ Do you agree?	16
<i>Deng Renhui 13S63</i>	
Should developed countries do more to help developing countries alleviate poverty?	18
<i>Zelia Seeto 13S42</i>	

science & technology

‘The key to mankind’s survival lies in scientific research.’ Discuss.	21
<i>Gavin Soh Jian Jun 13S55</i>	
Consider the claim that the world cannot do without nuclear technology.	23
<i>Sophie Ang 14S42</i>	
Do you agree that technology has disrupted our lives?	25
<i>Joel Soo Zheng Ying 14S34</i>	
‘Science has made us less human.’ Comment.	27
<i>Rachael Han Fujisawa 15A11</i>	

religion

Consider the view that the world will be a better place without religion.. . . . 30
Angel Lim 14S33

Consider the view that the world will be a better place without religion.. . . . 32
Priya Ramesh 14S33

'Politics and religion should not mix.' Discuss. 34
Priya Ramesh 14S33

'Politics and religion should not mix.' Discuss. 36
Astrid Teo 14A13

environment

'The solution to our environmental problems lie with the people, not with governments.' Do you agree? 39
Zachary Goh 14S32

'The solution to our environmental problems lie with the people, not with governments.' Do you agree? 41
Dennis Ooi Jun Wei 14S32

Do you agree that we deserve the environmental problems we have today? 43
Sarah Tay King Sing 13A11

society

'Society today has become less inclusive.' Is this your view? 46
Xia Mian 15S44

Is gender equality a realistic goal of your society? 48
Chelsea Lim 14S34

How far do you agree that in the modern world, the definition of the family has to be broadened? 50
Cristel Chong Kar Yee 15A12

To what extent do you agree that travel can reduce prejudice? 52
Trisha Tej Kumar Partabrai 15S33

education

'The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.' Discuss with reference to your society. 55
Mindy Low 15A15

‘The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.’ Discuss with reference to your society.	57
<i>Desiree Chan 15S45</i>	

‘The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.’ Discuss with reference to your society.	59
<i>Liu Zifei 15S49</i>	

‘University education is no longer necessary in today’s world.’ How realistic is this position?	61
<i>Athena Ng 14S33</i>	

mass media

Do social media truly promote the diversity of opinions?	64
<i>Lin Min Htoo 15S62</i>	

Do social media truly promote the diversity of opinions?	66
<i>Alexander Gan 15S64</i>	

‘In this age of social media, censorship is pointless.’ Is this argument valid?	68
<i>Wong Ue Tsz 14S30</i>	

‘In this age of social media, censorship is pointless.’ Is this argument valid?	70
<i>Lim Kai Zhi 14A14</i>	

‘In this age of social media, censorship is pointless.’ Is this argument valid?	72
<i>Celia Tan Yi Qin 14S30</i>	

art & culture

Can pop music ever be serious?	75
<i>Esther Goh Yu Ning 15S63</i>	

Can pop music ever be serious?	77
<i>Brian Kong 15S52</i>	

‘The appreciation of the arts is what makes us human.’ Do you agree?	79
<i>Lim Shao Yu 14A11</i>	

‘Artists are basically people who are rebelling against accepted norms and beliefs.’ Discuss.	81
<i>Lim Shao Yu 14A11</i>	

Do films offer anything more than an escape from reality?	83
<i>Tor Ming En 14S38</i>	

miscellaneous

- To what extent is the pursuit of perfection a desirable goal? 86
Leung Lok Heng 14S33
- 'We no longer have control over what we eat.' How far do you agree with the statement? 88
Grace Khoo Jiamin 14S34
- How important are national memories to your society? 90
Jocelyn Chan 15S36
- How important is imagination? 92
Rachel Wong 15A15

knowledge & inquiry

- 'Mathematical knowledge is unique in both its nature and its construction.'
Discuss this view of mathematical knowledge, referring closely to at least one other area of knowledge. 95
Chen Yanhua 14A11
- 'We would be wrong to consider scepticism as frustrating our attempts to construct secure knowledge. It is, in fact, an essential part of the justification process.'
Discuss. 97
Feng Shengxiao 15S31
- Is subjectivity inevitable in history writing? If so, does it undermine the intellectual value of historical knowledge? 99
Shi Ke 13S43

Kaleidoscope

noun (pl.histories)

1 [mass noun] the study of past events, particularly in human affairs: *medieval European history*.

- the past considered as a whole: *letters that have changed the course of history*.

2 the whole series of past events connected with a particular person or thing: *the history of the Empire* | *a patient with a complicated medical history*.

- an eventful past: *the group has quite a history*.

- a past characterized by a particular thing: *his family had a history of insanity*.

3 a continuous, typically chronological, record of important or public events or of a particular trend or institution: *a history of the labour movement*.

- a historical play: *Shakespeare's comedies, histories, and tragedies*.

history & politics

plural noun

1 [usu. treated as sing.] the activities associated with the governance of a country or area, especially the debate between parties having power: *the party quickly gained influence in French politics* | *thereafter he dropped out of active politics*.

- the activities of governments concerning the political relations between states: *in the conduct of global politics, economic status must be backed by military capacity*.

- the academic study of government and the state: [as modifier]: *a politics lecturer*.

- a particular set of political beliefs or principles: *people do not buy their paper purely for its politics*.

- (often the politics of) the principles relating to or inherent in a sphere or activity, especially when concerned with power and status: *the politics of gender*.

2 activities aimed at improving someone's status or increasing power within an organization, or a verbal discussion of office politics and personalities.

‘True democracy is not just about having the right to vote.’ Do you agree?

Jiang Han 13S49

Since the birth of modern political theory more than two hundred years ago, democracy, with its high ideals of social contract, rule of law and separation of powers, as espoused by Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and John Locke, has inspired many a generation of political leaders. In the contemporary era after the implosion of the Soviet Union, democracy seems to be on a relentless march towards universal acceptance. However, as recent popular revolutions in the Middle East have shown, too many people merely equate democracy with the right to vote, without attempting to establish concurrently the social foundations that make democracy truly a viable and efficacious system. I believe democracy is much more than just the right to vote, as the power of democratic vote cannot be sustained without other pillars of democracy such as the rule of law, civic engagement and political freedom.

Undoubtedly, the right to vote is a central tenet of democracy. In mature democratic nations, most of the national political life from electing governments to deciding on major national issues seems to revolve around the citizens' vote. One example is Switzerland. In the Alpine nation of eight million, people elect their government by direct democracy. Every Swiss citizen is entitled to vote on the choice of their government leaders as well as every bill that is debated in the Parliament. Allowing every citizen to express his views on government policies through direct voting thus represents the ultimate empowerment of the people and has become a distinctive feature of Swiss democracy. In other countries with larger populations, citizens' views are also solicited on major national issues through a referendum. A timely example could be the referendum scheduled on September 18th in the UK on Scottish independence. As both British and Scottish governments pre-emptively declared the results of the referendum to be binding, citizens thus became the ultimate decision-makers on such an issue of paramount importance to all those involved. Therefore, upon dissecting the political processes in major democracies, one can confidently say that citizens' vote is essential to sustain democracy and its legitimacy.

However, a casual observer should not thus conclude that democracy is only about giving citizens the vote. Such a superficial view masks the other vital elements of democracy that make the vote powerful. Chief among them is the rule of law. The rule of law ensures that free and fair elections will be held and the elected government will discharge their duties in strict accordance to the citizens' wish and mandate. Without the rule of law democracy rapidly loses its legitimacy as elections become rigged and people will lose faith in abiding by the system. The absence of this rule of law explains why many newly-democratic Middle Eastern and North African states such as Egypt and Tunisia, once much vaunted as the new beacons of hope after sweeping popular revolutions, have turned out to become spectacular political failures. In Egypt, parliamentary and presidential elections were held in 2012 which centred power on the Islamist Muslim Brotherhood. However, the notoriously belligerent Egyptian National Party did not recognise the results and proclaimed the elections to be rigged. Rampant protests and gratuitous violence soon gripped the country as people on both sides of the political spectrum, angered by what they perceived as a corrupt and unfair system, took to the streets. As this example demonstrates, the rule of law is a crucial pillar that sustains the legitimacy and power of the vote. Only the rule of law and consequent open and fair elections can ensure citizens' wishes are faithfully expressed through the voting results. Once this essential link breaks down, any election degenerates into nothing more than a political farce staged to confer semblances of legitimacy to an undemocratic government. Therefore, true democracy requires the rule of law for citizens' right to vote to be meaningful.

Furthermore, true democracy also requires political freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and the freedom to form new political parties. These civic liberties are not just corollary benefits of democracy but the essential fertile soil that nurtures democracy in the first place. In many undemocratic states such as China, citizens are also allowed to select the ruling political party through voting. However, such right to vote is meaningless as there is no viable political alternative to the ruling party. In China, any

History & Politics

media reports or even online comments that criticise the ruling Communist Party are severely censored. Outspoken critics of the government have been arrested and confrontational media outlets shut down. No new political parties can ever be formed in China as people are not permitted to assemble to protest or discuss political ideas. Such lack of political freedom severely curtails citizens' ability to acquire vital and unmasked information in making their political decisions. Presented with no credible alternatives and lacking in information regarding any wrongdoings of the government, many Chinese citizens blindly vote to keep the status quo. In stark contrast, Hong Kong citizens, long enjoying uncensored media and an entrenched right to protest, are now clamouring for the democratic vote to select their Chief Executive, despite no experience of wielding the vote. Hong Kong citizens' heightened awareness of their political freedoms and prerogatives has long fomented the desire for the right to vote. After being promised universal suffrage by Beijing since Hong Kong's handover to China, they are determined to make full democracy materialise in Hong Kong. Therefore, we can clearly see that the establishment and survival of democracy depends much less on the nominal right to vote than on the availability of political freedoms to citizens. True democracy is thus much more than just having the right to vote.

Last but not least, active civic engagement and education are also important enabling features of true democracy. Prima facie, democracy's legitimacy does not depend on having an engaged citizenry. However, it is an engaged and educated population that ultimately gives democracy its power and effectiveness. One forthcoming example is the United States where the citizens are generally politically active and informed, thanks to the tradition to assert individual rights and the presence of the media as a powerful watchdog. Therefore, American politicians feel added pressure to make judicious decisions lest their constituents vote them out. The general effectiveness of American democracy thus heavily depends on the supervision of active and informed citizens. We can contrast America's democracy with Japan's, where the citizens are much more politically apathetic and the media much less adversarial. Democracy there seems markedly less vibrant. Japan has suffered chronic economic mismanagement since the early 1990s. However, rotation of political parties is remarkably slow as the ruling Liberal Democratic Party has stayed in power almost uninterrupted for sixty years. Low turnout of voters at Japan's local and national elections also makes politicians feel secure in power. With the attendant complacency on the part of politicians, Japan's inactive democracy runs the risk of degenerating into a lumbering bureaucracy. Therefore, in order for democracy to stay vibrant and efficacious, engaging and informing citizens on the political level is of paramount importance. True democracy, hence, is not just about having the right to vote but about citizens actively exercising the right to vote.

In conclusion, it is easy for politicians and citizens alike to equate democracy with just the right to vote, its most salient feature. However, fundamentally democracy is about seeking collective wisdom of the population to govern the country and empowering each citizen to have a say in the destiny of their nation. Therefore, true democracy requires social foundations such as the rule of law, political liberties as well as civic engagement to be able to authentically represent, empower and consult the citizens on matters of national importance. Indeed, without the vote democracy would lose its most important avenue to solicit honest and informed opinions from the populations. However, without the enabling social foundations, democracy would be losing the source of these opinions altogether. How, then can we say true democracy is just about installing citizens' right to vote?

Teacher's comments: This is a fully relevant essay and ample materials were provided to lend scope and depth to your response. An excellent essay and a pleasure to read for its erudition. (Pity the China example, though; it marred an otherwise outstanding essay)

‘True democracy is not just about having the right to vote.’ Do you agree?

Wang Haochen 13S40

Democracy, as its Latin root *demo-* suggests, literally means governance based on people. Undoubtedly, voting rights, the indispensable element underpinning this political system, are crucial for a successful democracy. Thus, it is tempting to conclude that the right to vote is a sufficient condition for democratic governance. In practice, however, a true democracy encompasses many other aspects as its solid foundation, among which are the rule of law, right of inquiry and free speech and the rights to hold political office. Absence of these cornerstones would very likely cast a political system into a virtual authoritarian regime covered by a facade of democratic righteousness. In this light, without the necessary supplements, voting rights alone are hardly sufficient for true democracy.

One has to acknowledge in the first place, that voting is an important guarantee for democracy to function. Ultimately, the opportunity for each citizen to voice his concerns and exercise his decisions must materialise into a concrete vote. It is through voting that the system of checks and balances are enabled and all political offices are properly assigned. In particular, a legally binding public referendum resolves many of the sensitive national affairs through the citizens’ direct expression, enhancing the accountability of these major decisions. The upcoming Scottish referendum perfectly attests to the crucial role voting has assumed in a functioning democratic body. The national identity of the Scottish population may be redefined based on the results of their collective will and the referendum provides a peaceful channel for the parties of conflicting interests to settle the disputes. Given that the decision is only delivered by an unbiased public event, the impartiality of the process can thus be guaranteed. Similarly in Switzerland, citizens could directly participate in the legislation through petitions. Those garnering enough support within a hundred days of First Declaration Motive will be able to influence Parliament procedures through voting.

Repeatedly testified, voting rights are a peaceful and highly accountable channel through which the public could directly govern themselves. Any attempt at reducing the right to vote would simply render politics into a feudal dynastic authoritarian regime in which the vested interests dominate the political landscape.

Despite the testified wisdom that the right to vote is necessary to democracy, to conclude that the right to vote is sufficient for democracy is an argument worth deliberating. The most blatant contradiction to such a claim would be the one-party rule in China. Contrary to popular belief, each adult citizen above the age of 18 has the right to vote, and indeed the Chinese population has been voting ever since the establishment of the republic in 1949. Surprisingly, the resultant political landscape is far from ideal with an oppressive force controlling People’s Congress with consistent majority seats. A more baffling panoply of such outright failures can be listed effortlessly: North Koreans do vote, Syrians under Assad do vote, Egyptians under Mubarak do vote. Voting, however, has not delivered its promised fruit, owing to the absence of other crucial elements.

The rule of law would be among the first and most important on those elements to be introduced. An independent judiciary system functions as a key supervising power over the execution of national affairs, including the voting process. It must not go unnoticed that in the above-mentioned cases, Switzerland and Scotland can carry out their referendum because a clearly defined and well-adhered legal standard is established in the first place. Without the legal backbone of public scrutiny and supervision, mass voting would deliver no peaceful resolutions but relentless chaos and turmoil. Such instances occur quite often in countries like the Philippines and Indonesia, where an ill-defined legal framework and corrupt judiciary branch altogether nullify the rule of law. The Philippine Aquino family has controlled the judiciary branch for nearly half a century, bribing ranks of judges and exploiting them to their political favor. Correspondingly, the Philippines’ system is notorious for its blatant gerrymandering practices and in certain extreme cases, outrageous cheating by directly re-writing public votes in poll boxes. These distortions of democratic

History & Politics

justice constantly remind us of the precarious isolation of voting from the rule of law, the very promise for successful voting in the first place.

A compounding factor that might endanger democracy is the lack of free speech and inquiry. Democracy, after all, is about granting all citizens the opportunities to express their will and influence governance in an enlightened manner. Free speech is thus a cornerstone safeguarding truly democratic governance. Again, in the most successful democratic bodies, free speech is upheld before any meaningful voting can take place at all. The United States Senate specifically declares that their bicameral legislation would pass no bills attempting at “silencing public dissent and expression on any grounds”. Laudable efforts at silencing disagreement, as President Obama commented, would be expediently exploited to compromise democracy. As expected of such compromise, the Chinese democratic system, in which all dissent concerning political affairs is overly suppressed, fails to fulfill its purported mission of “democratic exercise shared among all, as stipulated in the Constitution”. In an environment where propaganda restructures the entire media industry to a “patriotic” cause, the population will be collectively myopic towards this subtle erosion of their rights to vote, and when a certain authority instructs a community to vote for a particular figure whose public image has been fastidiously tailored and beautified, it is only natural that the public would obey and follow. The right to vote is baseless when the freedom of speech is stifled and people’s eyes blindfolded.

Another prerequisite for democracy is the right to political office. A distinction has to be made that in this case the emphasis is on the political office of a regional level, drawing specific reference to the system of “to the winner goes the spoils”. This is particularly seen in India whose democracy twisted the assignment of public office in such a way that regional governors are all appointed by a central body with majority votes. It should be noted that at a regional level, certain ethnic groups have special religious and racial concerns that should be represented by their own voice. A region with the majority being descendants yet the minority in power disrupts the balance of power.

In conclusion, democracy cannot possibly function without the right to vote, but the right to vote itself is in turn guaranteed and supplemented by other important factors such as the rule of law, right to free speech and inquiry and the right to public office for minority groups on a regional level. These founding pillars buttress successfully democratic governance. As the Chinese proverb goes, “one pillar cannot support a roof”, the right to vote alone is far from the true concept of democracy.

Teacher’s comments: A comprehensive and knowledgeable discussion about the limitations of voting in the face of an absence of certain principles of democracy. The keywords “having the right to vote” could be examined even more closely – consider the argument that voting is a basic right accorded to citizens even if they do not possess adequate knowledge about policies and the possible implications of adhering to those principles. Otherwise, this is a well-written response with a clear personal voice.

‘With increasing emphasis on rights, the state should not interfere in the private lives of its citizens.’ Discuss.

Seow Wei Liang 14A11

The recent uproar over the US government surveillance through its National Security Agency’s PRISM programme has led to fierce debate about the legitimacy of state interfering in the private lives of its citizens. With citizens today becoming more cognisant and assertive of their rights, it is a perennial issue that all governments must confront. It is my conviction that the state should be allowed to interfere when the interests of society supersede an individual’s rights. This can be seen in fulfilling state imperatives of maintaining social harmony, national security and economic well-being. However, any interference should only be legitimised with checks and balances in a larger democratic system of governance.

A compelling argument allowing for the state to intervene in the private lives of its citizens lies in the need to safeguard social harmony. While there have been greater calls for greater freedom of speech in democracies, these have not blunted the imperative that is social stability. For example, while Singapore has allowed freer discourse on both traditional and new media, it still remains underpinned by strict laws such as the Maintenance of Racial and Religious Harmony Act to prevent speeches threatening racial and religious harmony. While the state should enshrine ideals of free speech, such speech should not be without limits. The deleterious consequences were witnessed in the recent Charlie Hebdo attack where a French magazine corporation was attacked for its cartoon portraying the Prophet. While individuals should have the right to voice their opinions on a multitude of public platforms, the state should have the ability to limit this right if it impinges on the sensibilities of other members of society. Such an attitude would ensure the state is able to safeguard the rights of everyone in society while promoting more freedom for individuals.

The need to preserve national security is also another pertinent reason in allowing the interference to the private lives of individuals. The premise of rights is based on upon a secure state. Without it, citizens are unable to enjoy the freedom that they cherish. In fact, citizens already concede some rights to their privacy when they allow closed circuit televisions in their neighbourhoods for the greater public good of combatting crime. Similarly, even as citizens clamour for more privacy today, such demands cannot be disavowed from the reality of a more dangerous world today. Terror groups such as the Islamic State are transcending online platforms to radicalise individuals, as seen from the influx of European citizens fighting for their misguided jihadist quests. The emergence of individuals such as Jihadi John poses a pernicious threat to society as these citizens become enemies of the state. With more non-conventional threats in cyber-security and online warfare with terror groups, there is an even more urgent need to allow surveillance of the private lives of citizens. This empowers the state to pre-emptively isolate and diffuse any threats to our society at large. In exchange, it is only with a secure state can we continue protecting and enjoying more rights.

The state should also be allowed to interfere in the private lives of individuals to protect the economic welfare of the country and its citizens. With a more vocal and educated population, more citizens are rejecting a paternalistic government that interferes in their economic decisions. This is seen in Singapore with the popularisation of the slogan “Return Our CPF” on social media. However, in the context of a rapidly ageing population, more countries are directly mandating personal economic decisions. While the Singapore government has allowed more freedom in usage of the Central Provident Fund (CPF), the continuance of this scheme shows how such interference is key in ensuring Singapore’s long-term economic sustainability where its citizens are self-sufficient. Even the US government which claims to be a bastion for freedom dictates the economic decision of its citizens and continues to implement unpopular initiatives such as Obamacare which mandates every citizen to purchase health insurance. As much as such actions attenuate an individual’s free choice, they are justified so one can enjoy economic security and not be an economic burden to their society already struggling with acute economic challenges and constraints.

History & Politics

However, there are also legitimate concerns that such interference will lead to a slippery slope in eroding the rights of individuals. This devolves into an authoritarian state where individuals have no political voice. This is seen in countries such as North Korea where the government vociferously clamps down on its citizens through fear and repression. Thus, allowing unlimited interference would unleash a Pandora's box where governments would be allowed to interfere in all aspects of citizens' lives. This asymmetry in power would have detrimental effects, trampling upon basic human rights, and such is not ideal for the future society.

Another argument against interference is that the state will be able to systematically discriminate against minorities. Rights, such as the freedom of speech and religion are especially crucial to minorities in preventing subjugation by the majority. However, by allowing the state to interfere in private decisions, the minorities may be marginalized and their needs overlooked by the state. For example, the Rohingya Muslims are powerless against the Burman majority government in Myanmar who denies them even basic rights like citizenship or freedom to reproduce. Without rights to serve as an effective check and balance, minorities will be disenfranchised and excluded from political processes. This ultimately institutionalises discrimination and causes long-term injustice and inequality.

Despite the arguments above, the state should still be allowed to interfere in the private lives of citizens as long as there are sufficient and effectual checks and balances. Considering that multilateral international organisations such as the United Nations prizes the preservation of basic human rights as enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights: any country that violates them would face repercussions on an international stage. Pariah states, such as North Korea and Syria, face sanctions due to their gross human right violations. Moreover, as seen from the 2011 'Arab Spring' uprisings, citizens would still rise up and protest interference in their private lives, should they perceive interference as unjust and undemocratic. With such effective mechanisms, any interference by the state would be carefully regulated.

In conclusion, there has been indeed an increase in emphasis on rights to address the asymmetry in power that the state has over its citizens. However, in the spirit of the government's duty of ensuring social harmony, national security and economic welfare, interference, coupled with checks and balances is still justified and should be allowed.

Teacher's comments: Various points raised and discussed. Apt use of supporting evidence. However, do take note of your link back to the question at the end of each paragraph. A decent attempt.

Should the rights of minorities be protected at all costs?

Sng Li Shan 14S39

The American publisher Larry Flynt once said that “Majority rule only works if you’re considering individual rights, because you can’t have five wolves and one sheep voting on what to have for supper.” In today’s world where the vast majority of countries have adopted some form of democracy, it is often the majority in the country whose views are heard and this could easily lead to suppression of minority views and the tyranny of the majority. Indeed, this is often detrimental to the political and social stability of the country, especially when the minority groups attempt to fight for their rights, for they too are citizens and entitled to good governance that takes their perspectives into consideration. However, defending the rights of the minorities may come at a price, and it is thus the prerogative of the government to assess whether the country is able to pay that price, as not all minority rights can or should be protected.

Protecting minority rights in some circumstances may not be worth the cost and hence should be forgone for the greater good. In the first place, the definition of what constitutes a “right” can be hazy and subjective. Depending on the political system and government, certain rights may not be agreed on and hence governments should take a stand on what they consider to be rights accorded to every citizen and not simply be wavered by every demand from minority groups. Mill’s Harm Principle could be used as a guide as well. If what minorities claim as a right is detrimental to another person or to the majority, then despite social disorder that may arise from denial of their rights, the government ought not to protect these minority rights for the sake of overall benefit to the people as a whole. For instance, countries like Austria and Singapore have banned smoking in public places, in what could be seen by the minority who smoke as a denial of their right to make choices. However, since inhalation of second-hand smoke has been proven to have adverse health effects on a person, for the sake of greater benefit to non-smokers who make up the majority, it is justifiable for the government to not incur the health cost to the population simply for the sake of protecting minority rights. Since the social contract compels the government to provide security for the people, it is only right that they consider the big picture and act in the interests of the majority in such cases. Hence, the cost of protecting minority rights must be carefully considered, as well as the context, as some countries may not be able or obliged to bear the costs.

However, there are certain basic human rights that should not be violated, if not for any other reason than moral principle. For example, the right to live, think freely, move, et cetera, though of course there are exceptions such as the death penalty for criminals. Just recently, many Rohingya Muslims were stranded at sea after they were abandoned by human traffickers. To delve deeper into the issue, they were stranded not just because of the human traffickers, but the fact that they were an unrecognised group in Myanmar where they claimed to have lived for generations. With successive Myanmar governments introducing policies to suppress them, most recently the removal of their right to vote by declaring their temporary registration certificates invalid, the Rohingyas attempted to enter other countries in search of better lives. Perhaps, the cost of protecting the Rohingyas’ rights to live and make a living in Myanmar were seen by the government and some of the Burmese as a dilution of their racial and religious composition, or a burden to their still-developing economy. However, since they are living within the country’s borders and cannot be proven to have illegally migrated until only recently, the Myanmar government could be said to have a moral imperative to protect their rights as humans. Yet, it chose not to sacrifice votes and nationalism to do so. Eventually, many of these Rohingyas were forced to leave and many ended up found dead in gruesome mass graves that were discovered in Thailand and Malaysia. Thus, when it comes to unalienable human rights, the material costs of defending these rights should not be seen as greater than the unseen cost to the human conscience of denying these rights; rather they should be protected as far as possible.

The answer to the question of whether to protect minority rights also becomes more obvious when the minority is a significant one, one whose voice can be clearly heard and has been heard for a long time. In Malaysia, where the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), helmed by the Barisan Nasional

History & Politics

has held power since the country's independence, policies in education, business, healthcare and even jurisdiction have been largely biased to middle- to upper- class Malay Muslims, who make up just over half of the population. This satisfies the slight majority of the population; however it alienates the large minority of Chinese and Indians. For example, Malay businesses are granted loans with more guarantee than Chinese businesses, while Tamil and Hindi Indians are granted meagre religious facilities. Few Chinese and Indians are able to climb the corporate ladder in the civil service as well. Perhaps due to racial pride and a desire to keep a hold on power by satisfying the Malay majority, the Malaysian government was not willing to incur the financial, political and social costs of treating the various races equally. However, the implications of such racial discrimination may very well outweigh its benefits. Many local non-Malay talents go abroad where there are greater opportunities for them, leading to a "brain drain" in Malaysia which will have pernicious consequences. In addition, the special privileges accorded to Malays have led to accusations that they lack drive, which would not bode well for a country that is competing with rapidly-advancing neighbours. Hence, the rights of a significant minority, such as the right to equality of opportunity in this case, should be protected despite the costs, in light of the extensive repercussions of not according them the same rights that the majority enjoy. Besides, democracy is bereft of its true meaning when the views of a large group of citizens are ignored.

Even if a government is unwilling or unable to protect certain minority rights at all costs, efforts should be made to at least alleviate and minimise the suffering of the minority. This would allow a balance between obeying the voice of the majority and sympathising with the minority. For example, minorities may not be granted equal opportunities in politics when voting is polarised along majority-minority lines. On the other hand, the countries are obliged to abide by their democratic electoral systems. In order to work around this problem, some countries reserve seats in government for minorities, such as in Mauritius, where there are a maximum of 8 additional seats allocated to the "best losers" and divided among constitutionally-recognised ethnic groups. This ensures that the views of various minority groups can be represented in policy-making. Such special provisions are also made in India for linguistic minorities, as the sheer number of languages spoken makes it impossible for the Indian government to grant each group the right to use their language in official settings. Parliamentary proceedings are carried out in English; however, there are laws that allow exceptions to be made for members of Parliament who are not fluent in English to use their mother tongues instead. Recognising and giving genuine attention to the rights of minorities signals to them that they are at least being respected, which may reduce political or social repercussions of not being able to protect these rights. Hence, efforts should be made to grant minority groups a degree of the rights they desire — "at some costs", even if the government is unprepared to make all necessary sacrifices to completely safeguard them.

In conclusion, the rights of the minorities should not be protected at all costs as not all rights are worth the costs and not all costs are justifiable or bearable. However, minority rights must at least be given serious consideration and protected in justifiable circumstances, and effort should be made to avoid alienating the minority even when it is not possible to secure these rights for them.

Teacher's comments: Well-written for the most part, but you could have discussed the issue of "at all cost" and the level of analysis could have been a bit more consistent.

How far can politicians change the lives of citizens for the better?

Ong Wei Ching 15S30

Politicians, the leaders of nations, hold the power to execute policies which can make a tremendous improvement in citizens' well-being. Indeed, many who have ameliorated citizens' lives are effective and visionary. Yet, to stay in power, corrupt officials may listen and cater to the majority only, neglecting the needs of the minorities. Moreover, politicians may bring unintended negative consequences due to conflicting ideals between politicians and their citizens. Meanwhile, due to the plethora of challenges developing countries face, the efficacy of reforms is undermined. Hence, politicians have limited ability to change the lives of their citizens for the better.

Effective politicians who dare to execute policies they believe are beneficial to their people, despite the voices of naysayers, are the ones who positively impact the lives of their citizens. They foresee that their people will gain from their policies. Hence, no matter how much opposition they face from experts or opposition parties, they still carry these policies out, with the aim of improving the lives of their citizens. Singapore's late forefather, Lee Kuan Yew, was a strong believer in his policies and actions. Many people did not agree with his views, but he stayed firm in his beliefs. As the then Prime Minister of Singapore, he executed reforms that transformed Singapore from a Third World country to one of the world's top economies today in a short span of a few decades. In Myanmar, Aung San Suu Kyi spoke out against dictator U Ne Win, pushing for democracy and human rights in her country. Despite numerous house arrest and months in jail, Aung San Suu Kyi continued in her rally against the brutal laws of dictatorship, eventually winning an election in 2012, to assume the leadership role and bring justice to her people. Definitely, politicians have the ability to create change in the lives of their citizens, and more so for those who are firm believers of their policies.

Yet, at times politicians are unwilling to improve the lives of their people because they are overly concerned about the popularity of their policies and not about the effectiveness of their policies. Because the people who make up the majority in their country hold the power to vote them into the office, politicians tread cautiously in the political arena. When coming up with policies, they keep in mind the people who make up the majority in their countries. As a result, the minorities are neglected and their lives do not change for the better. An example is Malaysia where politicians create policies that are beneficial to the larger proportion of Malaysian Malays. The voices of other races are not heard during elections, and in terms of schooling, they find it difficult to get into university. The privileges bestowed upon the Malaysian Malays are certainly greater than those given to the other races although all of them are Malaysian citizens. Such unfair treatment is visible because of the politicians' concern - that they are unable to continue their term in office. Therefore, politicians who are concerned about the popularity of their decisions are unable to make a positive impact on the lives of their citizens, like those in Malaysia.

In the case where politicians execute policies that are beneficial to their country, the lives of their citizens may not necessarily have improved. Some policies have unintended consequences and it is the people of the country who have to bear such consequences. As a result, their lives are negatively affected. The growing unhappiness among Singaporeans is a testament to this. The Singapore government was concerned about the shrinking labour force due to the silvering of its population. As such, they welcomed foreign workers with open arms. However, Singaporeans now lament that their country is overflowing with people and that their national identity is being diluted due to the influx of these people. Yet, Singapore's leaders are still concerned with the economic growth of their country because the shrinking labour force entails a slow economy. With different priorities and concerns in mind, Singaporeans are becoming unhappy. They have to contend with foreign talent and their jobs are at stake. Thus, policies may not always have a positive impact on the lives of the citizens, especially when there are conflicting ideas over what truly benefit the citizens.

History & Politics

On the other hand, politicians in developing countries where poverty exists have too many issues to be concerned with that they are unable to effectively create a positive change in the lives of their citizens. They may be willing, but they are unable to do so because of the lack of funding. In order to lift the thousands or even millions of people out of poverty, huge spending and even debt have to be incurred, not to mention other national concerns where money has to be poured into. India is a country mired in poverty. The government has been pouring in billions of dollars into subsidising agricultural production, in the hopes of bringing down prices of agricultural goods and making it affordable to the poor. However, the Indian government has a limit to how much money can be spent in this area as other national concerns such as the development of infrastructure and transport requires huge spending too. Consequently, there are still many people mired in poverty and even Indian farmers themselves are in debt. Many of them have resorted to committing suicide to escape from their life struggles. Other than the lack of funding, politicians in developing countries have to keep cultural issues in mind. Taking India as an example again, gender inequality has arisen from patriarchy. Although the Indian government tries to raise women's quality of life, they are wary of the social repercussions their actions may bring as there are deep-seated cultural roots involved. Because of this, women's lives have barely improved. Therefore, it can be seen that though politicians have the aim of serving their citizens and improving their lives, there are many other issues politicians face, which prevent positive change from occurring.

In conclusion, politicians have limited capacity to better citizens' lives, specifically when they are more concerned about the popularity of their policies over their effectiveness. Improvement becomes hard to come by as well when politicians and citizens have variance in their views on what truly helps them. And in developing countries, politicians face many barriers in implementing policies that raise citizens' quality of life. Nonetheless, effective and far-sighted politicians are able to ameliorate citizens' lives notwithstanding strong opposition.

Teacher's comments: Impressive maturity of thought and competent understanding of political issues, as evident in your cogent arguments presented here! Excellent substantiation in each paragraph. A pleasing read indeed!

How effective have global efforts been in resolving the problem of international conflict?

Sarah Tay King Sing 13A11

International conflicts have long been a threat to global society and peace, to the extent that countries can hardly remain isolationist and uninvolved in the many geopolitical hotspots around the world. Global efforts to combat and resolve conflicts have certainly been established, through international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and collective plans of action such as international condemnation and sanctions. However, the effectiveness of these methods in not only addressing the immediate threat at hand, but also de-escalating tensions and resolving the matter in the long run at minimal human cost can be questionable, especially across the spectrum of different conflicts that have erupted over time. This essay examines international efforts to resolve inter-state tension, civil wars and non-state conflicts to argue that resolution efforts while present have been largely ineffective due to structural inadequacies of international action and their reliance on superpower backing, and even when successful, come at high human costs.

The first and most prominent type of international conflict is one fought between states, and international efforts have had fairly successful track records in resolving these disputes. As interstate conflicts are propagated by state actions and governments, these conflicts can be mostly addressed through international organizations and collective actions such as the UN and the slew of sanctions and resolutions they can pass. This serves to diplomatically pressure states away from war and towards more peaceful solutions, and if unsuccessful, also provides an earlier group of economic and political leverage to rein in rogue states. This has been proven to be successful during the Third Indochina War, where UN condemnation in the General Assembly and the subsequent resolution passed as well as ASEAN's sanctions against Myanmar, helped to push Myanmar into withdrawing from Cambodia. This shows how diplomatic and economic pressure can be effectively adopted in order to resolve conflicts between states, but can only be done on an international platform that allows for collective actions. This has also proven to be effective in preemptively resolving tensions between states before they erupt into large-scale conflicts, such as in the Pedra Branca dispute between Malaysia and Singapore that was resolved in the National Court of Justice. Therefore, the associated framework that has been established through the formation of international organizations is also effective in dealing with the root problem of issues and promoting peaceful solutions rather than military actions, hence reducing the likelihood of international conflict and minimizing the security threats that we face today.

However, global efforts have still encountered setbacks, even in the realm of inter-state conflicts, though that was arguably the purpose in forming these organizations in the first place. Whilst effective in restraining smaller countries such as Myanmar that are economically weaker and lack any substantial economic or political power to withstand international action, international efforts tend to lose their bite when it comes to restraining larger powers. For instance, no amount of condemnation was able to restrain Russia from annexing Crimea earlier this year. Nor was international arbitration effective in the South China Sea despite the Philippines filing its claim over the Spratly Islands to the International Court of Justice as China blatantly refused to subject itself to arbitration. Hence, when it comes to reining in big powers, international organizations essentially become a paper tiger as they lack the leverage to enact any real change, as is the case with the UN Security Council, where the permanent members can use veto rights to table any resolution. International efforts thus have only limited effectiveness in resolving disputes between states.

Secondly, in its involvement in resolving cruel disputes or domestic strife, global efforts have only experienced limited success as well. There has been much debate on whether the internal affairs of a country should fall under the purview of international scrutiny but undeniably, when mass genocides begin to take place and UN Peacekeeping forces are mobilised, these situations quickly escalate into an international crisis.

History & Politics

International efforts at stemming the escalation of such conflicts have indeed been somewhat successful in the past, usually in circumstances of civil war such as the Korean War or the Vietnam War, as these countries are relatively at peace now and have achieved some tenuous stability. However, this comes at the cost of thousands of lives and years of fighting. Even if a solution appears to be present on the surface, this is very much a façade as it comes at a great cost which suggests that international efforts have simply not been effective enough in resolving the disputes peacefully. How forthcoming global efforts have been are also dependent on the extent of vested interests that the international community has in the conflict. The Korean and Vietnam Wars were important in the context of the Cold War, and hence received heavy attention. However, with the end of the Cold War, direct confrontation between superpowers through proxy wars have ended, resulting in many more conflicts going unnoticed. For instance, the genocides in Rwanda and Somalia both received little international support, and even UN Peacekeeping Operations in those conflicts were largely criticized and deemed a failure. In fact, global efforts to even mitigate this were so unsuccessful that close to a million people were killed in Rwanda in the short span of a few months, as the international community stood idly by and even withdrew UN Peacekeeping forces from the area. Therefore, it is evident that global efforts to curb civil wars and conflicts have had very little success, coming at high human costs and certainly failing to resolve the conflicts in their entirety.

Lastly, recent years have also seen the emergence of a new type of security threat involving non-state actors, usually labelled as “terrorism”. This has by far been the weakest area in which global efforts have attempted and to resolve, as little headway has been made in curbing the growth of terrorism, and the problem continues to plague us even at this very moment. It is undeniable that efforts have been made to combat terrorism, such as in the search and killing of Osama Bin Laden in an attempt to cripple Al Qaeda after the September 11 attacks. However, the distinct nature of terrorism has allowed it to elude international attempts to repress it. Terrorist organizations have often been associated with the hydra in that killing off the top leadership would result in only more replacements filling in often countering with more violence and extremism. Moreover, terrorist organizations work in cells with a very decentralized organizational structure, making it not only difficult to target any “leadership figure”, but also undermining the usual model of negotiations and diplomacy as it is difficult to strike a deal with a faceless enemy. This has made terrorist organizations a huge and uncontrolled threat in today’s world, giving them the ability to target even the biggest superpowers like the US and the UK. Furthermore, the transnational nature of terrorist organizations make them elusive to capture as well, as demonstrated in current efforts to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, more commonly known as the ISIS as they move between Western Iraq and Northern Syria unhindered. It has hence been difficult to formulate any military action against them, even after their recent execution of James Foley, an American journalist that has vividly led to calls for American Intervention in the region. Obama’s failure thus far, to call for anything more than air strikes, and the current stalemate on the front of collective international actions, have made clear the ineffectiveness of current established solutions to the ever-changing enemy of terrorism. Global efforts to combat international conflicts when they perpetrated outside of the state apparatus are hence, largely unsuccessful.

In conclusion, whilst effects have certainly been made on the international front in dealing with the various types of conflicts that threaten international security, the effects have been limited and largely ineffective. Terrorism still runs rampant and civil wars are only inconsistently addressed. Even in the more clear-cut types of conflicts between states, international efforts have only had marginal success and are severely hindered by their own structural dependence on the support of superpowers to provide the bite behind the bark. Therefore, global efforts can be concluded to be largely ineffective in resolving international conflicts, mostly due to their own structural inadequacies and reliance on state-to-state methods of success, international efforts also come at high human costs, and hence cannot be deemed to be truly effective in resolving international conflicts.

Teacher’s comments: An excellent essay which deals comprehensively with the issue.

Historians are a funny breed of people. They are the ones who peer into the past, reading and writing about distant events, sometimes dating even to antiquity. Some, like J.M. Roberts in *The History of the World*, even attempt to trace the very origins of the world, in order to predict the future. The paradox is heightened further with the burgeoning age of globalisation and a forward-looking generation who have no interest in the past. Thus as each new moment passes to become history, there are those who declare that the study of History has no value today: the past is the past, the future is the focus. Yet there indeed is still value in a seemingly irrelevant field of discipline. History shapes the mind of the student, History helps Man understand his present, and there is an optimism that in studying past mistakes, there would not be the repeating of old errors and oversights.

Opponents of History as a valued field of study proclaim and exalt the arrival of Science. Science is forward-looking: it takes past materials, existing natural phenomena like electricity or gravity, and fashions some gadgets, a symbol of the future, allowing Mankind to hope and anticipate the coming era. Technology exists as a supplement to Science, allowing Man to play God, thus instilling confidence and hope about the future. "If you want to be sure of your future, make it" said Lincoln, encapsulating the mind-set of people today: forget the past, let us make our own future. Furthermore, those who allow a cursory sweep of History scoff, how can there be reliable sources of History if the only History we read are crafted by people and "written by the victors" (Churchill)? Thus there is reason for these people to dismiss the value of History, deciding instead to look deep into the future that has not happened and forget the ugly past that has already occurred.

Yet the past is not something anyone can run away from. It stretches till the present, as time is not organised; it spills over into various time frames and sometimes there is a relevance in the present, of the past. The study of the past does allow people to become better in the future. History is messy and disorganised, and it is a mammoth task to make sense of anything out of it. However, historians are precisely able to do that. They read secondary sources to try and figure out the big picture of events that had long happened, and delve into pathway sources such that they might be able to produce their own history, shaped by their own evaluation. This academic exercise sharpens the minds of the historians. E.H. Carr, of "What is History?" fame, published in the same book, a lecture on causation and history. He posited that there are a multitude of causes of any historical event and it is the duty and job of the historians, through means of primary and secondary sources, to sift and rank these causes in matter and level of importance or significance. It is this process that so tests the historian's mind, that each time a conclusion is reached, critical thinking is developed within the historian's brain. History trains the man or woman to think, to evaluate, to articulate, to argue, to seek. Empirical facts remain constant: Hitler invaded Poland and started the Second World War; that is fact. Yet the testing of the historian's ability is to argue that reason to be the most significant cause for the origin of World War II. The ability to think like a historian applies even till today, as what people call current affairs today would become history ten years later. Thus events and causes have to be evaluated and justified, which is precisely the kind of thinking the study of History trains one to do. The mind can be applied in anything, across time, across disciplines, and the study of History sharpens the mind, imbuing one with the ability to reason and to judge, to posit and to explain, making it valuable still in today's world.

"To understand the present, we must study the past", so said American novelist Pearl Sydenstricker Buck. People today marvel at China's economic might and wonder how in such short few decades, it rose as the world's second largest economy. Others ask, since when did the USA become the world's dominant military and economic giant, its influence stretching to every part of the world, aided by globalisation – the age of McDomination. The present issues that people face more often than not do not begin with a 'big bang', a sudden explosion of conflict. Palestinians are relegated to only the Gaza Strip and West Bank today because of the United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine in 1947. China grew exponentially from the 1970s to

History & Politics

become what it is today because of Deng Xiaoping's open market reforms in 1975. The Indonesians suffer from separatist movement in Aceh due to the hasty cobbling together of the Dutch East Indies in the 19th century, which put together people of different cultures and races, to be ruled by a state from a foreign island called Java. Recent issues that the world faces today happened because of reasons that can only be discovered by studying the past. Perhaps by studying the reasons, Man would be more informed and able to develop solutions for social issues. There was never an issue that appeared out of nowhere; it had origins, origins that exist only in history, and not the present "Causation and History" (Carr). There is never an issue that Man faces today that cannot be explained by History. If knowledge is so promoted and espoused in today's society, would it not then be logical to study History so as to gain knowledge of why and how of the present? For what future does Man have if he does not understand the present?

Furthermore, the study of History can prevent us from repeating the same mistakes as before. "Those who do not study the past are doomed to repeat it". When Man studies History, he learns how past mistakes shape the world today – what went right, and what went wrong. Napoleon, after conquering Europe and redrawing its whole map, proceeded to march into Russia, but failed due to the bitter Siberian winter and the vast Russian landscape. Hitler apparently did not read of Napoleon, for after successfully taking over Europe, in 1943, he marched into Russia, then called the Soviet Union, only to suffer the same fate as the French Supreme leader a century ago. Hitler shows the successful and failed experiments of Man; studying these will enable the contemporary man to appreciate these successes and failures, to improve on those that passed, and learn from those that did not, so as not to repeat them. After the carnage of the two world wars, the United Nations was formed, with its first perambulatory clause in its Charter declaring, "having experienced the scourge and sorrow of two world wars in our generation ... will come together to prevent the same from happening again". And thus, while bipolarity ensued in the form of the Cold War, there was never a 'hot war' that enveloped the whole world ever since the surrender of the Japanese in 1945. Thus, in that aspect, the United Nations did succeed in learning from past mistakes to create a better future. The USA supported Germany's recovery despite French insistence on heavy reparations after WWII, as they knew that a harsh post-war agreement, very much like the Treaty of Versailles in 1918 after WWI, would lead to breeding ground for extreme dictators like Hitler, who in the end led the world into war again. Thus it is seen that by studying History, Man can put an end to the self-devastating cyclical nature of History. By not repeating past mistakes, Man can then build a better present, which would lead up to an even better future. The study of empires, as how Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper did in their work "Empires of the World: Order and the Politics of Differences", can lead to people having an even greater appreciation of the current world order, with democracy and populist policies the watchwords of today's politics. But where did democracy originate from? The present time? The ancient Greeks, of course. The world today and the many political, economic and social issues of today are shaped by history, and by studying the past mistakes, Man can ensure that modern societies inherit only the past successes, and not its failures or errors. Therein lies a value of the study of History.

There are some that insist that we do not learn from history. Yet there is still something that draws some to the study of the past. An explanation, perhaps? But there is no denying the value of History in today's world. Where we are today was because of what happened long before. There is perhaps never a conclusive end to the debate about the value of History, but the study of History as humanities is true to its essence: we study why and how our lives are lived as such. Personal Grand History, it does not matter, as there is no difference. It causes people to think, it gives people an explanation, and even in some cases, allows us to stop repeating mistakes past and buried. History cannot be studied in isolation. It has to work hand-in-hand with Science and Technology for us to understand the past and to create the future for all of Mankind.

Teacher's comments: A compelling argument on the value of studying History. I am impressed that you have all the relevant quotations at your fingertips. It would be a more balanced essay if you had considered more counter-arguments. A reference to more current events would have made your arguments more relevant.

Kaleidoscope

economics

plural noun [often treated as sing.]

1 the branch of knowledge concerned with the production, consumption, and transfer of wealth.

2 the condition of a region or group as regards material prosperity: *he is responsible for the island's modest economics.*

‘We need more greed, not less, if we want to develop.’ Do you agree?

Deng Renhui 13S63

When one considers the USA as a dominant economic powerhouse, a strong political player in the international political arena and an indispensable leading figure in the realm of science research, one will naturally think of how all these achievements are inextricably linked to greed, the desire to achieve more. As nations prioritise economic progress as key to prosperity and further development, greed is now considered sweet to the nation, redefined as an appropriate and legitimate virtue rather than evil. However, this assertion dangerously overlooks the fact that greed is subtly but constantly undermining the environmental sustainability, political justice and ultimately the virtues we share as a human race. Therefore, to achieve further development, greed should be cautiously reduced, not perpetually amplified.

The supporters of the idea that more greed is needed for further development of nations often emphasise the importance of greed to economic prosperity. Greed drives individuals to put in more effort in their work, prompting companies to search and innovate, and encourage nations to undergo economic reform and rigorous development. The best story that demonstrates this concept is how the Americans developed at a startling pace during the Roaring Years. The greed for monetary returns, political power and scientific breakthroughs encouraged American businessmen, politicians and scientists to aspire to achieve more and not be contented with the status quo. As a result, the nation progressed and emerged as a powerhouse. Therefore, when we salute the USA as an outstanding nation in various aspects, we are in many ways paying tribute to the wonders created by greed and hence, it is only natural for us to think that more greed is needed if we want to emulate such great development.

However, it would be naïve at best and dangerous at worst for us to assume that greed is the single pillar that supports further development. Instead, we should see how greed is causing environmental degradation, which will have adverse implications to not only our future developments but also our survival. China, a nation which abounds with human and natural resources, has created several economic wonders and is now hailed as the new economic powerhouse. Learning from the Americans, the Chinese focused on industrialisation, particularly the manufacturing industry, as the cornerstone for development. In order to maximise monetary returns and minimize costs, the dumping of chemical waste, release of poisonous chemical fumes and unstoppable deforestation are carried out without proper regulation. Only when environmental deterioration manifested in pollution and dramatic climatic change did the Chinese then realise the danger of being inordinately greedy. Certainly, China is not the only nation that aspires to achieve economic progress in the fastest way. When developing countries prioritise economic progress and relegate environmental concerns to the backseat, they are ignoring the fact that sustainable development is inextricably linked to environmental conservation.

Besides environmental sustainability, political justice which is essential to further development is another area infected by greed. An uncorrupted and efficient government is indispensable to the future progress of a nation, since correct policies need to be made and implemented. One of the best examples is the Singapore government, which has remained farsighted and just in creating and implementing various policies that keep her economy strong and vibrant. However, when greed worms its way into political systems, the decisions made by politicians no longer serve the common good but individual gains. Transparency International reports that one of the major obstacles standing in the way of the economic development of countries in Africa and South America is corruption. Ethiopia is constantly receiving international financial aid from the UN, but its economy remains weak and fragile despite help from foreign experts. One key problem identified is how the politicians misappropriate the country's monetary resources for their personal gains. If greed is defined as the desire to achieve more, then it will be natural for the greedy politicians to think of achievements as personal wealth instead of the wealth shared by the people. Such corrupted political systems not only impede the conduct of local economic activities, but

also thwart international trade as potential partners will perceive that their rights and interests are not protected by the corrupted politicians. Therefore if politicians are the helmsmen of the nation, they must eliminate greed in policy-making for the further progress of the nation.

When greed is redefined as the new virtue, it undermines the qualities of honesty and sense of conscience which are essential parts of humanity. Many conglomerates nowadays have put greed and profits before social responsibilities and the basic principles of honesty and integrity. The notorious horsemeat scandal in European countries such as the UK reveals how nations with long-standing reputations of having honest and sound ethos have become victims of greed. The collapse of the Bangladeshi garment factory Rana Plaza and the fact that only one out of twenty implicated companies stood out and admitted its responsibility shows how the virtues of humanity, the ability to care and empathise, the will to be honest and the courage to take responsibility, have been eroded by the pursuit of lowest production cost, highest monetary returns and the unscrupulous manipulation of our fellow brothers and sisters. In the process, greed also victimises individuals, as both the powerful and the powerless become desensitised. The ones in power will consider such inhumane behaviour as the new norm of economic activities, while the powerless and suppressed will consider it as their inescapable fate rather than an injustice that needs to be eradicated. The development of mankind should and must not be limited to the economic realm. The development of humanity and virtues shared by us is more important since mankind is distinguished, identified and defined by our humanity, not cold hard cash.

In the illuminating book, "The Great Gatsby", the protagonist achieved prosperity and success by being greedy and insatiable, only to be consumed by a sense of emptiness in the end. Ostensibly, greed is needed for our development. However, we need to discern the detriment it causes to our environment, political systems and our value system, and find a way to reduce it and its repercussions, or in the end, what we have is not a host of developments, but an overwhelming sense of hollowness.

Teacher's comments: You present convincing arguments that carry insights. Examples are also wide-varying and appropriate. Just note your occasional grammatical and expression errors, and use more linking devices to ensure smoother transition between paragraphs.

Should developed countries do more to help developing countries alleviate poverty?

Zelia Seeto 14S42

Poverty is a pertinent issue that many developing countries throughout the world are struggling with. This has been recognised by the United Nations, and one of the millennium goals is to halve the number of people living in poverty from 1990 to 2015. The most obvious way to do so is to tap on the wealth and resources of developed countries to provide aid to lift developing countries out of their dire economic situation. Despite their good intentions, developed countries should not do more to help them as aid is often not efficiently used as a result of corrupt governments. Furthermore, some of these countries are devastated by political instability and there is little that international powers can help with. Granted, some of these developing countries are poor as a result of their physical landscape and geographical location. In this aspect, developed countries should do more to help developing countries. However, developed countries should not do more to help developing countries as they cannot tackle the root cause of suffering in developing nations, and help is also often wasted.

A significant proportion of developing countries around the world are ruled by corrupt governments, and monetary aid given to them by developed nations is often squandered or kept by political leaders. This gives developed countries little reason to do more to help them as aid fails to reach the general population. The reason why monetary aid is inefficient dates back to the Cold War. At that time, the developed Western nations generously provided aid to developing countries to secure their alliance in the ideological war against the Soviet Union. In Indonesia, large sums of money were provided to them for the building of roads and infrastructure, but the corrupt Suharto government stored a large proportion of this money in Swiss banks. This is also observed in Africa, the world's most under-developed continent, where aid given to Namibia during the Cold War was siphoned away by the corrupt government. As monetary aid is unfortunately regarded as the most direct and convenient way of providing help to developing countries, developed countries should not do more to help them. The inefficient governments in developing countries are beyond the control of the wealthier nations, as it is not appropriate for them to meddle in the internal affairs of sovereign developing nations. Instead of feeding the wealth of corrupt leaders, this aid can be more meaningfully utilised when channeled to social welfare needs within the developed countries.

Another reason why developed countries should not provide more help to developing countries is because of the political strife that is rampant in developing countries. Interfering with the complicated political climate will only endanger the lives of those from the developed nations, and given the deep-rooted historical animosities behind political conflict, there is not much developed countries can do to help them. This is seen in Pakistan, where the Taliban is fighting a protracted war with the government. International Western powers stepped in when Malala, a female education rights activist was shot, only to receive threats from the Taliban. Similarly, in Nigeria, despite America's earnest efforts in trying to resolve the issue of the Boko Haram kidnappings, they are unable to do much given the volatile political situation between the Nigerian government and the radical Islamic group. It is, therefore, illogical for developed countries to continuously provide aid in an attempt to resolve the political issue, thereby pulling these countries out from their third world country status. Ultimately, this job is the responsibility of the governments in developing countries. Notably, most of the developed countries throughout the world are politically stable democracies. Due to international rules on intervention and jurisdiction in other countries' domestic affairs, developed countries are unable to alter this and reverse the situation in backward nations. They should not do more to help them as the crux of the problem will still remain unresolved, and help is unsustainable, or even dangerous.

Inefficient economic structure in developing countries is yet another reason why they are mired in poverty. Again, developed countries should not do more to help them as this aid cannot be used productively. An example is the socialist government in Cuba under Castro. Despite receiving aid from developed nations,

this aid could not be maximized due to the inefficient methods of production, which is beyond the control of developed nations. Similarly, in Laos, aid given to the socialist government has not been efficiently utilised, and Laos remains one of the most under-developed countries in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, the desire to provide more help to developing countries is often rejected by the socialist governments, who refuse to allow people from developed countries to invest in their state. This greatly limits the amount of help that they can receive, and from the point of view of the developed countries, there is little justification to insist on providing more help when it is unappreciated. Modifications that have to take place to improve the situation must first be effected by the governments of developing nations, as seen in how China under Deng Xiaoping overhauled the traditional communist policy of self-sufficiency and isolation, and eventually lifted China out of poverty, transforming it into a more mature economy.

However, some of the developing countries around the world are poor because of their geographical location and climate. In this aspect, developed countries should do more to help them as it is one of the only ways they can be lifted from abject poverty. Many of these developing countries are landlocked, and lack access to major sea and trade routes. Statistics have shown that it costs seven times more to transport cargo by land than by sea. This means that these countries are essentially cut off from trade, and due to their economic situation, they are unable to build physical infrastructure such as roads and railways that will help to connect them to the rest of the world. Developed countries should step in to provide help in this area, as in the case of Africa, which has fifteen landlocked nations with no access to sea trade routes for hundreds of miles except for the River Nile. By helping them to develop their infrastructure, developed countries also stand to benefit as well, as the developing nations have the capabilities to contribute to the global economy. Many of these developing countries also face problems such as prolonged droughts and infertile soil, thus affecting their income. Developed countries should provide more help in such instances, as they possess the technology to alleviate the situation. This is seen from how the introduction of fertiliser microdosing in Mozambique has helped to increase fertiliser efficiency during droughts. The Maize for Africa project launched by non-governmental organisations in developed countries has also enabled farmers to generate more revenue through the growing of drought resistant maize. These projects are however, usually short term in nature, and more has to be done by the developed countries to help them and to ensure that they are sustainable in the long run. It is instrumental for developed countries to provide more help to developing countries when the vicious cycle of poverty as a result of their geographical landscape makes it impossible for them to solve their own problems.

It is necessary for developed nations to shed their age-old perception that providing more help for developing countries will be beneficial. A critical examination of the situation of the developing countries is important for them to determine whether the notion corresponds with reality. The majority of the developed countries around the world are more focused on the international attention that they receive when they do more to help, but taking a closer look at the issue often shows that there is little justification for them to do more.

Teacher's comments: A well-argued and nicely presented argument with pertinent ideas and examples. Ignore historical examples if these are not germane to the question. Consider more the humanitarian reasons. They rise above inefficient government and effectiveness. Help is not investment. Weighing could be better. Language is fine but flair can be improved.

Kaleidoscope

noun [mass noun]

the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment: *the world of science and technology.*

• a particular area of science: veterinary science | [count noun] : *the agricultural sciences.*

• a systematically organized body of knowledge on a particular subject: *the science of criminology.*

• [archaic] knowledge of any kind. his rare science and his practical skill.

science & technology

noun (pl. technologies) [mass noun]

the application of scientific knowledge for practical purposes, especially in industry: advances in computer technology | [count noun] : recycling technologies.

• machinery and devices developed from scientific knowledge. it will reduce the industry's ability to spend money on new technology.

• the branch of knowledge dealing with engineering or applied sciences.

Legends have it that when Prometheus stole fire from the gods and gifted it to humans, it was when mankind truly began their journey towards dominating the Earth. With fire as a stepping stone, mankind then began innovating; creating new tools that would ensure their survival. As mankind moved from the Bronze Age to the Medieval Era to today’s modern world, scientific research was at the helm of ensuring our survival. Today, however, the world is being plagued by numerous problems which threaten our existence; with scientists pondering about how the world would inevitably end and the common man enthralled by doomsday movies such as 2012, many begin to wonder if we are indeed cursed to die out like the dinosaurs, or if scientific research will be the key to our continued existence on Earth.

Early man feared the plague which brought chaos and anarchy to society, as evidenced by the situation in Europe in the Dark Ages. Today, thanks to advancements in medical technology, mankind has built up their immunity to such worldwide epidemics. Vaccination has rid the world of smallpox and improvements in medicine and surgical techniques have helped the world fend off tuberculosis and numerous other diseases. As such, continued scientific research in the field of medicine will be crucial in warding off any new diseases in the future. However, pessimistic critics assume that there will eventually be some undefeatable superbug that appears, one that will be immune to virtually all medication and treatment plans. Indeed, such fears of a superbug are not unfounded as reputed biologists worldwide have indicated their concern over certain strains of virus mutating into ones immune to current medication. This can be compared to a high stakes race, where the pace of mutation seeks to outrun the rate of creating new and better medicine, with humanity’s survival at stake. Therefore, as long as scientific research does not fall behind, such threats will be put on hold. Henceforth, scientific research is the key to mankind’s survival in terms of disease management.

Another problem humanity faces today is the declining ability of planet Earth to sustain life, a result of the rapid industrialisation that has occurred these past few centuries. One could argue that scientific research, which brought about the steam engine that catalysed the progression into the Industrialisation Era, is to be blamed for today’s problems. However, a more optimistic view is that scientific research also offers the solutions to the environmental issues we face today. Today, one of the more pressing issues is how to obtain energy in a clean manner, one that minimizes or even eliminates carbon-producing sources like coal or natural gas. Due to the increased awareness of the environment, scientists, industrialists and entrepreneurs worldwide have concentrated on resources to develop new solutions. For example, Bill Gates recently invested in thorium nuclear reactors, a safer version of the nuclear plants in use today that generate fuel in a safer, simpler and cheaper way than traditional nuclear plants. As scientific research continues to make headway into discovering new technology, one technology to look out for would be nuclear fusion reactors. These will generate energy that is more efficient and works the same as in the Sun’s core, that many have claimed will solve our energy crisis forever due to its sustainability. Therefore, in terms of preserving the environment for mankind’s long-term use, though scientific research has admittedly accelerated its decline, scientific research is still the key to saving the Earth.

Critics say that humanity had no hope in the first place. They point towards the blood-thirsty men who waged war in order to obtain glory and wealth. They point towards the omnipresent threat of a nuclear winter, a consequent result of nuclear warheads born as a by-product of researching the atomic theory. Such pessimists point their fingers towards scientific research as the fuel for war as warlords derive new weapons. Some even argue that the vile nature of mankind will eventually bring about doom to the entire species regardless of what we do. It is undeniable that mankind can be a cruel species capable of many barbaric acts but it is also valid that there are individuals who are responsible and genuinely concerned about the fate of humankind. Perhaps in collaboration with scientific research, culture may also be a key

Science & Technology

to our long-term survival. Looking towards the animal kingdom, we see no species with as extensive a cultural system as ours. Culture is, to our knowledge, what differentiates us from beasts. Through culture, we will be able to calm the hearts of our bloodthirsty brethren, to unite all of humanity. The world's shift from a war-torn autocratic past to a more peaceful democratic present is perhaps a good indicator of the importance of culture, one of the driving forces behind this transition to a more harmonious tomorrow. Hence, though scientific research is important to our survival, our culture is yet another key to ensuring mankind's survival.

However, is our fate inevitable? Theoretical physicists have predicted that the world will eventually end as our sun dies out and the universe either collapses in on itself or continues expanding such that the world ends in a "Big Freeze". Stephen Hawking said in 2001, that space colonisation will offer us a solution to this former problem. By colonizing space, man adopts a tactic reminiscent of "don't put all your eggs in one basket". Should the Earth meet some disaster such as a nuclear winter, humanity can "reverse colonise" in the future by sending settlers back to Earth, an idea seen in films such as Wall-E. Today, astronomers have already identified several planets in other galaxies that seem hospitable to life and it is not a far-fetched idea that humanity may one day colonise such planets. In response to the latter problem, Professor Michio Kaku, one of the leading researchers in String Theory which advocates the theory of multiple universes, says that one day, mankind may be able to travel through dimensions to avoid the inevitable end of the universe and to start anew elsewhere. Through scientific research, we will be able to understand the laws that govern the world we live in. Understanding such laws will open the doors to our survival in the long run. Hence, scientific research is the key to mankind's survival.

Though scientific research may be able to save Earth from the problems discussed above, it will not be able to halt the inevitable end of Earth if it is engulfed in flames from the supernova of a dying sun. Fire, which began it all, will eventually destroy the planet. However, its legacy of starting mankind's forage into the realms of innovation and research may still continue, as mankind eventually steps into the final frontier to ensure his survival. Scientific research has been, and will continue to be, one of the vital keys to mankind's survival.

Teacher's comments: You demonstrate a lot of knowledge about science and how it is related to our survival. However, you could do a better job with an evaluation on whether science research is the key to our survival, despite its limitations, and other crucial factors as well.

History has shown us the scarring effects of nuclear technology -- whether in the form of a weapon, like the devastating bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan by the United States at the end of World War II, or whether in the event of failures or accidents at nuclear power plants. The vast destructive abilities that such technologies possess has caused the world to pause and think if nuclear technology is really necessary in today's world, and whether we would be better off without it. Although the world can, undoubtedly, survive without nuclear technology, as there are other alternative energy sources available, and nuclear weapons would no longer be problematic if all nations were to destroy their existing stockpiles and commit to not producing more weapons, the international community has a lot more to gain than to lose from these technologies, and I would hence argue that we cannot, and should not, go without them.

The most common argument put forth by anti-nuclear advocates is that all nuclear weapons should be eradicated because of the destructive power of these weapons, as well as the lasting effects of radiation. The haunting faces of children born deformed for generations to come in affected regions in the aftermath of the Japan bombings come to mind – innocent children who played no part in the war. Most advanced nations have developed non-nuclear weapons with similar destructive capabilities that do not have the same toxic effects of radiation. Since there are viable alternatives to nuclear weapons with comparable firepower and hence, can also serve as deterrence to other nations with the added bonus of not leaving lasting effects of radiation on the innocent, the world can go without nuclear technology.

However, buying into such arrangements without considering how this can be achieved is completely blind. Building a 'nuclear-free world' requires worldwide cooperation where competing nations have varying opinions on such matters. The failure of the BARUCH plan in the past attests to this. While there are alternative weapons, nuclear weapons still remain one of the most destructive today and numerous countries still cling to their stockpiles in the face of new threats today. Consider Russia's annexation of Crimea – this would arguably have not been possible if Ukraine had not chosen to give up its nuclear stockpile in the aftermath of the Cold War, and hence had little to deter the much larger and powerfully equipped Russia. Furthermore, even if we were to press the world to go nuclear free, it would almost be impossible to ensure that nations are not secretly building weapons, especially considering the ease with which a nuclear power station, using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, could also produce high-grade radioactive substances that could be used for bombs. International compliance is difficult to ensure, and the world does not want a situation to arise where rogue states like North Korea and Iran are equipped with nuclear weapons while the rest of the world helplessly look on.

Another case against the propagation of nuclear technologies would be the growing number of alternative clean energy sources available, which would make nuclear power unnecessary. Harnessing solar energy with the use of silicone panels and the building of hydroelectric power stations are just two of the ways, and scientists and researchers are continually improving the energy yields and lowering the costs of harnessing the alternative energies, such that what was once prohibitively expensive can be afforded by the average household in the developing world. This is where the area of debate centres on as the building of nuclear power stations is expensive and falls mostly in the domain of rich nations. These alternative energies are much safer compared to the risks of nuclear power stations, where failures can result in devastating consequences, such as the disastrous meltdown at Chernobyl in Ukraine and the more recent failure at the Fukushima nuclear energy reactor after the tsunami in Japan. This has led national leaders to rethink their country's level of dependence on nuclear technology. In Germany, the government has considered closing the remaining nuclear power stations should they manage to generate sufficient energy to meet their country's needs from other clean sources.

While it is important to transit towards cleaner energy for the collective good of the world environment,

the implementation of the alternative technologies may not always be feasible, not just for cost reasons but due to other geographical constraints. For example, countries without large fast-moving bodies of water cannot build hydroelectric power dams, and nations located near the poles the Earth would think it pointless to place solar panels on rooftops since they do not receive much sunlight for most of the year. In Singapore, whose small land size makes harnessing wind energy and hydroelectric power unfeasible, other than solar energy, nuclear energy has been considered seriously as a viable alternative energy source for the future. Singapore plans to train one hundred experts to equip them with knowledge of nuclear technology as well as risk assessment, and in the near future, experiment with the feasibility of building a nuclear power station. In such cases, while we desire that countries who can afford it shift away from non-renewable energy sources like fossil fuels and coal, nuclear energy may be a crucial form of alternative energy, and hence we cannot go without it.

One last area where we have to consider the importance of nuclear technology, and hence, whether we can go without it, is the area of health and science. Currently, nuclear technologies and the use of radioactive substances have proved immensely beneficial to research scientists. Nuclear fission and fusion has allowed scientists to better understand the structure of atomic particles and hence gain insight into the chemistry of things on the sub-atomic level, allowing scientists to discover smaller particles and examine how they interact. Hence, to go without such technology would be to take a step backwards, against the direction of scientific advancement. Furthermore, progress in the development of technology has allowed for the use of radioactive substances to be more finely controlled than ever before – the precise manipulation of nuclear substances has vast potential applications. For example, technology has allowed for radioactive substances to be inserted into a cancer patient's body to target only cancerous cells when in the past, these substances would have attacked both malignant and healthy cells. This shows that the proper application of nuclear technologies can lead to vast potential benefits, and in areas such as health and science where any development that can treat or cure a disease, it plays a crucial role. Arguably then, we cannot go without nuclear technology, as it would mean closing off one potential avenue from which crucial medical advancements can be made.

In conclusion, the world can survive without nuclear technology, but the drawbacks of such a decision vastly outweigh its benefits and as an international community, it would be more helpful if we take greater measures towards regulating the use of nuclear technology and facilitating better communication and sharing of knowledge of nuclear technology capabilities. Nuclear technology has vast potential, both in the service and disservice of humanity. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that such technologies are meaningfully used, since ultimately, we cannot go without it.

Teacher's comments: A very measured and sophisticated essay. Good work!

The twenty-first century, to cite Professor Stanislav Grof, is characterised by human's internecine symbiosis with the world of machines. In today's context, technology has become second nature to us and we are increasingly dependent on it. Since the advent of the Internet, technology has promised that our daily processes would change for the better. Indeed, the multi-faceted nature of technology such as medical technology, has provided solutions to many diseases plaguing society. Yet, new media, another form of technology, has disrupted our thought processes and the way we interact with one another. Furthermore, disruptive technology, characterised by the removal of sunset industries has posed problems such as structural unemployment for the less skilled. Hence, I agree to a large extent that technology has disrupted our lives.

In order to study the nuances of technology, it would be prudent to examine its nature. Technology paves the way for greater collective wisdom in society. It does so by introducing multitudinous platforms online to search for information. As a result, our thought processes have been disrupted by what experts coin as digital bulimia. 'A wealth of information leads to a poverty of attention.' This statement was made by Herbert Simon who predicted the insidious effects of technology. With one click, the Internet presents a never-ending rabbit hole of websites and articles so much so that people are only taking cursory glances at these articles. No longer are people spending time to meditate upon the information they receive. Instead, articles online are written cheaply just as to attract one's attention. Industries are using the attention economy to generate revenue as Internet users are easily distracted by attractive thumbnails and sensational headlines, only to find out that they have been led to an online advertisement. Playwright Richard Foreman too, warned about this occurrence a long time ago. He feared that we would turn into 'pancake people' – spread wide and thin as we indulge in a large pool of information. This has detrimental effects on the way we think and sustain conversations. People today have shorter attention spans and it is increasingly difficult trying to sit down and finish a novel, for example. Therefore, it is clear that technology has disrupted the way we process information.

Technology also has profound effects on the way we form relationships. Ironically, it has disrupted the way we communicate. Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp were created to help us foster stronger ties with one another. However, the process of making friends and even dating has been grossly simplified to the pressing buttons on our phones. For example, it is increasingly popular for people to measure their popularity based on their Klout score which quantifies their level of influence and fame. This downplays the notion of making friends and disrupts the way we used to form genuine relationships. Another prominent example to cite is the rise of online dating applications such as Tinder which reduces the significance of dating and disrupted many marriages because it only takes a mere swipe to find another partner. With all these reasons, there is no doubt that technology has disrupted many of our cherished relationships.

The demise of many industries can also be attributed to the rise of technology and this has disrupted the lives of the less skilled. Sunrise industries such as cloud computing and smartphones have largely changed our economy. Industries such as the paging industry or the entertainment industry face intense competition. For instance, with new and improved manufacturing methods of production, workers without the relevant occupational mobility and skills suffer from unemployment. This is because the sunset industries are deemed irrelevant due to the fast pace of technology which forces companies to innovate quickly to pander to the demands of consumers. This problem is most felt by developed countries like Singapore where the less skilled are unable to join the labour force due to its large dependence on technology. Governments therefore spend large amounts of money on retraining programmes such as the Skills Future programme, recently introduced in Singapore, to enable workers to quickly move up the value chain, to counter the

Science & Technology

disruptions of technology on the economy.

On the other hand, some may argue that technology is not all but problems. Developments in medical technology have managed to treat worldwide pandemics like the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome by developing vaccines. Technology has also been able to provide help to victims of natural disasters. During the Haiti earthquake, drones were deployed to send supplies to victims in dire need of help, reducing the need to send people into the area. Another reason why some may claim that technology has not disrupted our lives is because it has the potential to cure many diseases. For instance, there are more than ten types of Panadol available at pharmacies catered to different health problem. However, this may in fact not be a healthy sign. Research by the World Health Organisation shows that humans are developing antibiotic resistance rapidly and that by 2050, most medication would have been deemed ineffective. Therefore, I feel that technology may pose more disruptions in our lives in the long run as we seek to find stronger and more potent medicines to treat diseases.

In conclusion, it is easy to blame technology for all our problems. Technology and all its capabilities have in one way or another brought about disruptions to our lives. It has also made many question if we are advancing too quickly. Ultimately, whether we get to see a promising future hinges upon the way we use (or abuse) technology.

Teacher's comments: Thoughtful response, well-illustrated with details. Fluently presented.

Science, as it is commonly known to Man, is a wide and plentiful field of knowledge from which we have much to learn and many things to discover. In this complex world of the 21st century, Science, coupled with advancements in areas such as technology, has provided for humanity a plethora of new possibilities and developments in the medical scene as well as the military, just to name a few. While it seems as though all these new opportunities created are beneficial and progressive for our humanity, many have failed to consider some features of science and its various manifestations that are in fact posing a threat to our “humanity” and qualities that define us as humans. Often, our forays into the future experimentation of science have blurred the lines between what is morally acceptable and what is not, and the same goes for our handling of Science to manipulate weapons of tremendous danger. All these factors have contributed to the image that in reality, Science and its progress might actually be causing us to become less human in the process.

To begin with, Science, in its most basic and early forms, has allowed for us to become “more human” – so to speak – in a very literal way in that it has bequeathed us with the means to cure illness and overcome disabilities that had previously rendered us vulnerable and in a way made us less human by shortening our lifespan or making us physiologically handicapped. Yet today, life-threatening diseases such as polio and smallpox have been eradicated in most developing countries owing to the advancement in modern science and the discovery of the vaccine. Furthermore, bionic limbs have allowed for double-amputee athletes such as Oscar Pistorius to compete against his able-bodied counterparts in events such as the 2012 London Olympics, made possible by his carbon-fibre prosthetic limbs invented by researchers in Rice University. As such, it can be seen that Science can often restore and enhance the qualities and characteristics that make us more “human”.

However, scientists these days are increasingly dabbling in the realms of artificial intelligence as well as genetic engineering that could very likely threaten the definition of what it means to be human and they are taking irreversible steps towards changing our human form in the pursuit of greater knowledge and superiority. In April 2015, a team of Chinese scientists genetically modified human embryos for the first time, in a bid to alter the genes responsible for β -thalassaemia, a potentially fatal blood disorder. They used a gene-editing technique known as CRISPR discovered by scientists at MIT. In this case, we are beginning to see hints of mankind becoming increasingly daring in our attempts to use Science to challenge the moral and ethical boundaries of our nature, and these unforeseen pitfalls are what may bring mankind to the brink of his existence by threatening the integrity of his nature and form, not to mention making us significantly less human in the process.

Additionally, critics of Science and its developments have gone on to argue that the processes of scientific experimentation employed by many single-minded researchers, with the goals of testing and perfecting their trade, have resulted in our moral consciences and humane traits being largely overridden or dismissed, making us less human as we are no longer able to exemplify these defining qualities of ours in our actions. Such is the case of animal testing, when it was reported by the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in 2011, that over 1 million animals, most of them rodents and mice, had been used in scientific testing; some were even bred specifically for their tissues and discarded thereafter. Such depreciation in our senses of right and wrong can be observed in its application on humans too; the CIA Project MK-Ultra, which ran from 1953 to 1973 involved horrific procedures such as brain manipulation and hypnosis that were performed on unwitting American and Canadian citizens involving radiological and biological agents, all in the government’s bid to increase its scientific and biological weapons arsenal. Hence, we can see that the power that Science has gifted us with can very often be used in immoral practices that ultimately serve to rid us of our innate moral and perhaps even rational thinking that is making more of the world less human as each day passes.

Science & Technology

Lastly, it is important to note that even as Science has played an indispensable role in helping to create the bottomless pit of weaponry and military devices, ranging from the atomic bomb developed during World War II to the unmanned air vehicles that dominate the skies today, these machines when left to the unsupervised control of man, can result in Science becoming an accessory to dangerous and wrongful situations that can bring harm to people. When this happens, mankind tragically becomes less of the humans they once were as their selfish instincts take over and they begin to use the weapons created by science to fulfill their own corrupted agendas. Such was the case of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 that was shot down by surface-to-air missiles operated by pro-Russian separatists who “thought that it was another aircraft”. The plane crashed in Eastern Ukraine and killed all 298 passengers on board, including 80 children. Similarly, in the Middle East, the terrorist group ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq & Syria) has caused the deaths of over 26,000 people since the launch of their military offensive in early 2014. The abovementioned incidents are clear examples of situations in which the powers of Science, creatively harnessed by technology, have been bestowed upon Man. But rather than being employed for the good of the masses and society, they have been critically exploited by self-oriented individuals and groups that are increasingly losing touch with their sense of right or wrong and hence, become not only less of a human but more of monsters instead.

Mustapha Mond, the leader of the fictional Brave New World written by Aldous Huxley once said, “Science is dangerous; it must be kept most carefully chained and muzzled”. I have to disagree with him. From what we have seen so far, Science in itself is a completely neutral entity with endless possibilities, but it is when the enormous capabilities of Science are exposed to and left to the disposal of mankind that it can become a serious danger, ebbing away the characteristics that define our human nature and make us who we are. Thus, to ensure that for a long time to come we are able to see the effects of Science making us more human than less of it, it is important to implement checks and balances in the global community to prevent Science from being used for the wrong reasons. Even as we venture into the field of further knowledge, we should use Science with prudence and responsibility, so that human nature will not be compromised as just another piece of collateral damage along the way.

Teacher's comments: Rachael, the bulk of your essay is highly relevant, but the focus on the verb 'has made us more human' is not always there, and your interpretation of 'more' or 'less' human in your first content paragraph is not accurate. Scope is a bit narrow – mostly on ethics/morality. However, fluently written, and flair and sophistication are evident.

Kaleidoscope

religion

noun [mass noun]

the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods: *ideas about the relationship between science and religion.*

- [count noun] a particular system of faith and worship: *the world's great religions.*

- [count noun] a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion: *consumerism is the new religion.*

Religion can be defined as a set of beliefs or a philosophy that influences an individual's way of life and acts as an ethical framework to guide behaviour. In a recent global survey, it has been reported that 75% of the world's population is religious. This shows the pervasiveness of religion and indicates that religion is indeed an integral part of modern society. Religion shapes an individual's identity and worldview, and this influence can be either positive or negative: opponents of religion might argue that religious extremism can breed dogmatism and hatred, leading to organized violence; also, religion can be said to hamper scientific advancement, thus opponents of religion adopt the perspective that the world would be a more peaceful and advanced place if it were absent. However, I strongly believe that religion is an irreplaceable component of an individual's psyche and a nation's identity. It imparts moral values that give people a form of salvation from their torturous lives, and affords them a sense of tolerance and empathy, all of which are needed for a cohesive society. Despite the potential repercussions, I believe that religion is needed for a functional society, and the world would not be a better place without it.

Firstly, opponents of religion might argue that religious extremism can lead to intense feelings of hostility amongst religious fanatics, thus causing global strife and organized violence. Religion is an intrinsic part of an individual's personal philosophy and identity; it represents what an individual stands for and gives his existence purpose. Therefore, if an individual perceives something to be threatening his most cherished beliefs and convictions, it could lead to intolerance, and could breed strong sentiments of hatred and hostility. Most of the longest and bloodiest conflicts have religious differences as their root causes. Consider the Israel-Palestinian conflict, which remains unresolved and continues to be an issue that the United Nations is struggling to manage. Amongst the many factors that precipitated this conflict, religious differences have been cited as the most prominent and significant one by historians. Since the two national religions, Judaism and Islam are at odds, neither side agrees to concede or attempt to rectify diplomatic relations, as it would symbolize a surrender, signifying the inferiority of their religion. Many other conflicts, like the Syrian civil war, and the clash between the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland were also precipitated by religious differences. Thus, religion can inadvertently breed intolerance and hostility, and lead to widespread strife and terrorism. Therefore the world would be a more peaceful and harmonious place if organized religion were absent.

In addition, religion can be said to hamper the progress of scientific advancement. Many powerful religious factions can lobby to protest against certain research or experiments because they are perceived to go against their teachings and moral convictions. This is because science is built on empiricism, which implies that all knowledge can only be obtained by rational thinking and observation, whereas religion is built upon faith in the supernatural in the absence of compelling evidence. Also, certain religious groups may find human experimentation to be immoral and unjustified, and may protest against it. For example, many religious groups in the United States are using their political power and clout to prohibit research into stem cells, embryonic cloning, and artificial life, because it is perceived to be an act of blasphemy against God. This could be detrimental to society as it hampers the advancement of medical technology. Currently, stem cell research and cloning hold the immense potential to save more lives, as they explore new methods of treating leukaemia and harvesting artificial organs that could be transplanted into patients in critical condition. In retrospect, by protesting against research into such medical technology that could be immensely beneficial to humankind, such religious organizations are doing more harm than good to society. The rate of medical research and advancement could have increased tenfold in the absence of religion, and hypothetically, the standard of living of mankind would have increased accordingly as more lives can be saved. Thus, the world would indeed be a more advanced place if religion were not there to deter the progress of science and medicine.

However, despite my earlier arguments, I ultimately believe that religion is an irreplaceable part of modern society, and humankind cannot do without it. Religion is important to an individual as it provides hope and salvation for those who are disillusioned by life. By encouraging an individual to put his faith and trust in a higher being, religion gives individuals a reason and conviction to live. For example, in Christianity, kind souls are believed to ascend to Heaven upon death. Such a belief imparts hope and comfort to those who have suffered in life. Belief in the afterlife gives individuals a reason to stay strong and live on. A recent 2014 research by a neuropsychological institute discovered that teens with religious convictions were less likely to experience depression and have suicidal tendencies. Religion can be said to be a coping mechanism for people to deal with the pain and suffering they have experienced, and gives individuals who have been disenchanted a form of healing and solace; thus, society cannot do without it. Religion is a fundamental necessity for the emotional and psychological well-being of individuals and an indispensable part of society, and the world would be a bleak and hopeless place without it.

Secondly, religion is important for a functional and cohesive society, as it can impart moral values and shape the ethical framework of citizens. In schools, biblical quotes and references are often used to educate adolescents on the importance of loving one's neighbour and having care and empathy for the unfortunate. Religious teachings shape the philosophy and worldview of impressionable young children, and ensure that future society would be led by tolerant and sensible leaders with a strong sense of moral justice. Religion is also important in combating poverty and starvation. For example, religions like Buddhism place emphasis on the importance of "karma", which is the accumulation of good deeds, and having goodwill and empathy for others, and this will encourage chivalrous behaviour and charity for the impoverished. Christian missionaries also frequently organize overseas trips to countries plagued by political strife and starvation, to give aid to the people there. Thus religion also ensures that a more loving global community can be constructed, and this is important not only for developed societies, but impoverished nations as well as it ensures that life there can be improved too. Furthermore, religion acts as a deterrent to crime, as many religions preach that taking a life and intentionally inflicting harm on other fellow humans is a blasphemy against God. A research paper published in 2010 reports that, upon psychological examination, religious individuals are less likely to resort to violent crime. Religious theocracies (with the exception of Islamic nations) like Vatican City also show low crime rates, and thus it can be reasonably inferred that religion helps in the creation of a more functional and tolerant society. Religion is of utmost importance to both the cohesiveness of a society and the progress of the global community. If it were absent in many people's lives, many other unforeseen problems might plague society.

In conclusion, I strongly believe that while religion can lead to potential repercussions like extremism, organized violence, and the deterrence to scientific advancement, it is an irreplaceable part of modern day society, and acts as a moral framework and a form of salvation for individuals. Therefore, in retrospect, the world would not be a better place if religion were absent, as many more problems might result from its absence.

Teacher's comments: A decent discussion with some relevant issues brought up, covering both scope and depth. Links to the question could have been clearer for some parts.

Religion has always come across as a concept that is a paradox in itself. It unites people in the singular belief of a supernatural entity above us all and yet, can cause terrible fissures between various sections of society. Religion may be defined as an organized set of beliefs and ethos that propagates a certain way of life through its books and writings as well as the aforementioned idea of a 'God' – something inherently subjective to each religion. It is something palpable in every nook and cranny of the world around us, from footballers pointing to the heavens above in celebration, to the malevolent workings of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Naturally, the question of religion's necessity in the world arises and with regard to that, I do not agree with the view that the world will be a better place without religion to a large extent, because of the hope and moral compass it provides us with.

However, there are a number of people who are of the strong belief that the world will be a better place sans religion. For one, it would certainly reduce the hassle involved in the process of lawmaking. A majority of nations across the world – the very multi-religious Singapore obviously included – need to always bear the implications of laws on the various religious groups in their country. For example, the Indian constitution allows Muslims to legally indulge in polygamy while it is not allowed for Hindus. This is because polygamy is permitted in Islam – it is even encouraged as a wealthy man can provide a good life and ensure happiness for more than one woman in terms of the family's financial sustainability. In Hinduism, monogamy is preached and the idea of 'one man for one woman' is considered ideal, but just because India has 81% of its population practising Hinduism does not mean it is right to blanket the minorities under these laws. Religion is an extremely important factor in many of today's issues, from education for women to Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) rights. This was seen in Singapore when the recent pro-LGBT Pink Dot Movement was vehemently opposed by religious leaders whereas in a largely atheist country such as the Netherlands, gay marriage is legally permitted. Thus, many people contend that the world can ensure more equal rights for minorities and greatly quicken the process of lawmaking without the presence of religion, which would make the world a better place.

Moreover, people raise the issue of terrorism and religion-based conflicts and violence as a reason for why the world will be a better place without religion. This is not an undocumented issue by any means as the world has seen many inter-religious conflicts, such as the 1992 Babri Masjid clash in India between Muslims and Hindus. They were fighting over a temple in Ayodhya which was apparently the birthplace of Hindu god Ram – as Hindus claimed – but a Muslim ruler called Babar built a mosque over the site in the 16th century when he invaded India. This conflict resulted in deaths of many people and could not be handled well by the government due to the sheer sensitivity of the issue. Ultimately, the temple/mosque itself was demolished, causing the loss of a site which represented a very unique cultural confluence. Intra-religious conflicts are present too, such as the Protestant-Catholic issue in Northern Ireland where two sub-groups of the same religion go at each other's throats. This has resulted in the deaths of thousands of people from the 1970's till date and is a reason quoted by many with regard to why the world will benefit and be a better place without religion. Terrorism is another issue, as – largely due to American propaganda – most terrorists seem to be blanketed as Muslims on the back of 9/11. They cause violence and mass destruction in the name of God and the supremacy of their religion, highlighted by various incidents from the 9/11 Al Qaeda attacks on the World Trade Center to the 26/11 Lashkar-e-Toiba attacks in Mumbai. Undoubtedly, this is a reason why people believe that the world would be better off without religion as a lot of violence could be prevented and avoided.

However, I do believe that the point above with regard to terrorism and violence is more of a few groups tarnishing the name of the entire religion in a delusional fight for religious supremacy as well as a host of misunderstandings than the fault being in religion itself. Religion is based primarily on a foundation of

leading a righteous life. I believe the world will not be a better place without religion because on the larger scale, religion offers something very unique and distinctive: an unparalleled sense of hope. The Bible has a verse which reads, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" and this is a belief that is universal across all religions; the feeling that one is never alone in one's journey of life and can always lean on God for support when sailing tumultuous seas. This, as well as the idea of destiny or fate – again universal to most religions – provides people with an intangible motivation to keep persevering even when the odds are stacked against them. This may seem farcical but in reality, it has rejuvenated millions of people around the world. The belief that there is always light at the end of the tunnel helps people in times of despair, which is why religious sermons and addresses are given at drug rehabilitation centres in America. The miners who were trapped underground recently in Colombia stayed hopeful of a rescue because of their faith in God and many Christian missionaries partake in providing aid for disaster-struck people such as the survivors of the Haiyan typhoon simply because religion has the power to renew the spirit like little else in the world. Without this source of hope to endure the terrible bleakness of reality, many people in general would give up easily and the world would not be where it is now. Thus, I believe the world will not be a better place without religion, since it is a beacon of light in dark times for people.

In addition to that, I do not agree with the view that the world will be a better place without religion because religion provides people with a moral compass in life. The word 'religion' in Sanskrit is called 'dharma', which means the act of doing what is 'right' and fair. The expectation of divine reward and 'karma' in life as well as in the afterlife, keeps many people across the world from committing sin. It keeps them aware that their actions will be culpable and they will be reprimanded for unjust acts one way or the other and consequently, it is unsurprising that religion has a negative correlation with crime rate in Europe as well as the United States of America. Moreover, the concept of a supernatural power above us keeps man humble and modest in his achievements. It ensures that we do not get too full of ourselves and bask in pride as well as reminds us that we do not have control over other lives and that we cannot play the role of 'God'. Man inherently has his flaws and the absence of a God-like entity would inflate man's ego to an extent that it might end up being more pernicious than beneficial. Hence, I do not agree with the view that the world will be a better place without religion as it serves as a reminder for us to do good in life and keeps us grounded.

"And what remains when disbelief has gone? is a line from Philip Larkin's 'Church Going' – a poem that deals with the erosion and possible extinction of religion. Ultimately, what Larkin is trying to establish is that if religion is gone, so will atheism and beliefs that oppose religion, such that if belief perishes, so will disbelief. I believe that humans – as humans do – will never run out of things to believe in and consequently form groups of people that believe in the same thing, even if it is not religion. Terrorism will ensue in some way or the other when people feel the need to radicalise their beliefs through the medium of destruction and violence. Religion is definitely a way of self-identification and provides people with a sense of belonging – as any other mass cultural group might do – but it has the ability to influence our lives for the better unlike any other type of group, insofar that it is an integral ingredient to our identities, including the way we perceive ourselves. It gives us a path to an altruistic life; a life of good, which is fundamentally what we should desire to lead. Thus, I disagree with the view that the world will be a better place without religion, to a large extent.

Teacher's comments: Fluently written with some good insights shown. A decent attempt.

Since time immemorial, politics and religion have been two of the greatest forces of unity and division among people. Religion has been used as a political tool while politics infiltrate the upper echelons of religious offices. From the cardinal corruption of Rodrigo Borgia, who went on to become the Pope in the Middle Ages, to the religion-based discrimination of Jews that led to the most destructive genocide humanity has ever seen, in the Holocaust, religion and politics have definitely mixed before. Religion is defined as a set of organised beliefs, linked to spirituality, human morality as well as values, usually with the presence of a supernatural deity. Politics, on the other hand, has to do with power and governance of any group of people and the subsequent fight for this power. In my opinion, politics and religion should not mix to a great extent as the interplay can have serious detrimental effects for the purposes of both.

Firstly, I believe politics and religion should not mix because in a political sense, when a party that is based on the ideals of one religion comes to power, it may overlook other religions in the process of policy-making in the government. For example, the last general election in India saw the primarily Hindu, right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) sweep the majority in emphatic fashion. Its aims are more Hindu-centric than its predecessor, the secular Congress government, and it even has affiliations to the militant Hindu nationalist group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The Prime Minister, Mr Narendra Modi, himself started out in the RSS and has been accused of condoning the 2001 massacre of Muslims in Gujarat, while he was the Chief Minister of the State. Recently, the BJP-controlled state of Maharashtra imposed a ban on the sale and consumption of beef as it is forbidden for Hindus, who revere domestic animals such as cows and bulls. This has put the state's numerous Muslim butchers out of a livelihood, unable to cater for their basic survival needs; this culminated in a public demonstration by 250 such Muslims outside the district commissioner's office. As reported in the magazine *Foreign Policy*, a reasonable majority of Muslims felt alienated and overlooked by the BJP's policies and voted for local Muslim parties like All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) instead. This rising Hindu nationalism is a worrying trend as India houses the second largest population of Muslims, only behind Indonesia. This is an example of how political parties that use religion as a tool end up leaving minority religions out of the process, which could lead to hostility between religious groups and in worst case scenarios, even radicalisation and violent massacres. The overlooked may even emigrate out of the country, diminishing the workforce and putting further pressure on the government. Hence, I believe politics and religion should not mix as a religion-centred approach to politics often ends up with the ostracisation of certain religions whose needs are overlooked and this leads to the unfavourable consequence of tension.

Moreover, I believe politics should not mix with religion because it can lead to the stereotyping of religions and countries, usually in negative light. Especially with the advent of new media, which many politicians have used to their advantage, opinions and statements reach far and wide and quickly too. Political statements are often — in today's world of speed — not poured over or analysed for content, and most of the time, people glance at headlines and find it sufficient to formulate their own views. This can be very detrimental in a scenario where religion is used as a political tool. There is no example more pertinent here than the mass negative stereotyping in America of Muslims as terrorists and Islam as a violence-preaching religion — which could actually not be further away from the truth. Neither Islam nor the Holy Quran are at fault for radicals like Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) who spread destruction, yet the portrayal of them as such leads masses into believing falsified information. George Bush Junior was able to use this sentiment especially post-9/11 by making Iraq the 'enemy' to win himself a second term; to probably a lesser extent, Barack Obama was able to tap into the situation in Syria in 2012 and propagate — inadvertently or not — a view of America being in the right and harbingers of hope to end the violence and unrest of an Islamic state. This has infiltrated the American mindset to the point that people with Muslim-sounding names are often checked more thoroughly (and sometimes disrespectfully) at American airports: even Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan and the esteemed rocket scientist and former Indian

President, Dr APJ Abdul Kalam were not exempt. This has also been worsened in Europe by political magazines such as Charlie Hebdo, albeit for the purpose of satire, painting the archetype terrorist to be a Muslim. With rising anti-Islam tensions and stereotypes in Europe, in 2009, the University of Groningen actually found that such stereotypes can lead to young Muslims using the stereotype to legitimise radical behaviour. Hence, it is not favourable for religion and politics to mix as it leads to stereotyping of religions, which can have dire consequences.

Furthermore, politics and religion should not mix as the best judgment of a political process in the government must not be clouded by religious sentiments. As much as religious texts contain aphorisms and important lessons, it is worth reminding ourselves that such books have not been 'updated' or altered for content for an extremely long period of time, which does render some of their stances outdated. For example, the issue of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) rights has acquired increasing levels of attention in the last few years. Personal acceptance of such people is subjective and a crucial social factor but their right to be legally recognised in marriage — or lack thereof — is a political decision to be taken by the government. For example, in Singapore, the legislature does have Section 377 which criminalises homosexual acts; however, at a dialogue session in 2015, Minister for Social and Family Development Mr Tan Chuan-Jin acknowledged that there are even homosexual civil servants, so it is not a matter of ostracisation. It is understandable for the government to consider this decision since Singapore is based on a Confucian core of family-centred society and the pure, serious anti-gay sentiments lie with external groups such as the Wear White propagators. However, typically Christian governments such as those of Honduras and Guatemala who condemn LGBT rights, also do so on the basis of religious preaching, which is somewhat anachronistic in the 21st century and yet seems to have an overbearing effect on the decision-making processes. Hence, politics and religion should not mix as religion should not cloud the best judgment of a political party in power.

However, politics and religion can mix to a certain extent and it is inevitable that they will in certain ways. In some countries, religion is inextricably linked to the fabric of the countries, such that it forms an extremely prominent part of the population's way of life and thus, politics must also be based on the needs of that religion. For example, in Middle Eastern countries, the fraction of non-Muslims is minuscule in the population and the region is historically bound to the religion. Hence, political parties in these countries will have to imbue religion into their process. Religion itself has adopted the ideals of fair politics in the selection of leaders for top religious offices. An example of this is the democratic Conclave voting process to select the new Pope in Vatican City. Hence, politics and religion can mix as long as there is no misdeed or injustice perpetrated in the process and it suits the demographics of the country.

In conclusion, I echo the words of John Mayer in saying, "Belief is a beautiful armour/ but makes for the heaviest sword". Religion and religious belief must not be taken advantage of as a political tool to gain peer and proselytisation must not proliferate. However, I do find it reasonable for politics and religion to mix, to a small, safe extent where the true purpose of both is ensured.

Teacher's comments: Fluently written, demonstrating sound command of language. Valid arguments with largely sound supporting evidence. Decent work!

Politics ought to be a sound, reasonable and fair way of governance to protect its civilians while religion is something diverse and sensitive which its believers feel very strongly for. When both of these are mixed together, they cause the fundamental idea of fair politics to be a murky one as religion can dilute politics negatively, which may in turn breed radicalism and consequently, subjugate other religions politically. While the mixture of politics and religion can sometimes bring about unity in a country, the reach is often limited and can have detrimental impacts. Hence, the statement that “Politics and religion should not mix” is largely true and should be heeded.

With the introduction of religion into politics, it can often culminate into radicalism as people will feel extremely compelled to protect their religious identity at all costs. If people perceive their religious identity to be under siege, they may take a radical spin onto things and use the dominant, law-governing politics to shield and defend their religious pride. One of the most prevalent cases in modern times would be the Islamic fundamentalist group, ISIS. Seeking to overthrow the governments where the group members are residing in to establish an Islamic caliphate, the group has already mixed politics and religion as a whole. In a bid to protect their Islamic identity from the domineering Christian West as well as to spread their beliefs, the ISIS formed, taking an extremist method to achieve their goals of an Islamic caliphate. The group actively engages in terrorist-like behavior that ranges from the mass kidnapping of Assyrian Christians to beheading those hostages they have kidnapped publicly and posting the recorded videos on YouTube, claiming these savage actions as perfectly justifiable in their pursuit of an Islamic state for “religious cleansing”. With the horror and terror this threatening group brings along with its global spread just to establish a theocratic state to ensure the power of their own religion, one can only imagine the sheer chaos and mass destruction that will ensue if ISIS succeeds in their quest to rule the politics with Islamic beliefs that they have distorted to a whole new extreme.

In fact, Britain would be a fine example to clearly support exactly why politics and religion should never mix. In the past, Britain used to be a theocratic state, where their politics was governed by the Christian Church. However, the way of politics was totally undermined when opportunistic aggressors accused innocent civilians of being witches, resulting in the witch-hunts that spread throughout the entire nation. The witch-hunts saw countless people being burnt on the stake for supposedly practising witchcraft, an action condoned by the Church in Medieval times. Tragedies that we often now read in popular culture such as the renowned play by Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*, and *Joan of Arc*, ensued. By mixing religion into politics, the line in between sensibility and logic is blurred as authorities who assert their religious beliefs in governance can be blind to rationality.

Furthermore, with radicalism, it will be unsurprising to see believers of other religions be subjugated by the law. When political goals are intertwined with religious beliefs, politics of the state or organization are almost always intolerant of other religions, perhaps out of fear from being potentially undermined or perhaps out of arrogance of wanting to be the most legitimate religion. An example is the existence of Islamic and Hindu fundamentalism that currently still ravage the South Asia region. Notably in Kashmir, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism that saw several groups wanting to be an Islamic state in the 1980s create calamity in the serene princely state. Hindus in Kashmir were attacked by the Islamic groups like Lashkar-e-Toiba simply because of their religion, and atrocities like gang rape, torturing and killing were performed on the Hindus. Worst of all was that Pakistan provided support to these groups while India backed the rise of Hindu fundamentalist groups, causing these occurrences to be widespread and yet few were persecuted under the law because politics were geared and leaned towards protecting their own religious identity and pride.

Similarly in the volatile Middle East region, growing Jewish fundamentalism posed a dangerous threat. The Gulf Emunim regularly attacked non-Jewish believers, namely the Muslim Arabs and yet, came under the

protection of the government under the Iron-Fist policy. Upon seeing that the government under Rabin was establishing a peace framework with the Muslim Palestinians, a Jewish fanatic swiftly assassinated him. This really highlights the reason why politics and religion should not mix at all as it will lead to pressing violence and chaos while the religious aggressors will be shielded by authorities. Meanwhile, the biggest victims would be the people belonging to a different religion as they receive no form of protection under the biased law and can only silently bear the brutal treatment, thus completely undermining politics, the aim of which is to protect the interests of the common people. This is also reflected in Ireland in 2013 when the predominantly Roman Catholic land denied an Indian migrant from aborting her baby though she suffered from a miscarriage likely due to bacterial infection that eventually resulted in her passing. Despite not being a Catholic, she was forced to abide by the law she did not even have to be subjected to in other country and that took her life away in the end. This shows that mandatory religious laws sometimes get involved in the private matters of another person who belonged to another religion.

However, it would be good to recognize a possible benefit of politics and religion being clumped together- it can unite a group of people greatly as they share the same set of beliefs and values. Additionally, their religious identity would be enhanced, causing them to feel a greater sense of belonging to the country or organization that really preserves the essence of their beliefs, such in the case of Myanmar. Under the military government leader, Ne Win, who advocated Buddhism as the state religion as it was the religion of the majority Burmans. These Buddhist values were weaved into education too and the sense of belonging and camaraderie among the Burmans had made them rooted to their country as their religion was so revered and highly regarded. It definitely is seen to work better for more homogenous areas too as it acts as a common code of conduct for the majority to agree on.

Yet, such an outreach does have its limitations as other religious groups are undermined and feel even more detached from the country where its politics discriminate their own rights in favour of another religion. In Myanmar, religions like Christianity and Islam are heavily discriminated as extreme Buddhists burned down churches and exploited the Muslims harshly. There are no provisions in the law to protect the victims and the law itself dallied in providing religious institutions that the other religious groups requested for. With the politics so blatantly against the basic interests of the minority religion, it inevitably culminates in these religious groups fighting to gain independence and break away from the discriminatory state as seen from the actions of the Karens in Burma particularly as their struggle continues to this day. The divide between the religious groups is more than evident as the subjugated groups are totally sidelined in politics. While the bonds fostered within the dominant religion may be strong, it will exacerbate existing religious tensions and magnify the problem even further if other religious groups are not even taken care of by the law or receive adequate political representation that will ensure them equal rights.

Therefore, politics and religion should not mix as it can breed radicalism and discrimination against non-believers that do not come under the political umbrella of protection. In addition, the possible benefits are also undermined severely by its finite outreach. Coupled with the fact that most theocratic states and political religious organizations often create terror and chaos while secular states are largely more stable and peaceful, it thus enhances the legitimacy of the statement. Politics is meant to be sensible and reasonable in order to safeguard the interests of all and provide everyone with equal safety and justice. If religion, a highly sensitive and easily agitated element undermines the very basic purpose of politics, then clearly both elements should remain mutually exclusive.

Teacher's comments: An extremely fluent and persuasive piece. You should select current examples besides those from SEA!

Kaleidoscope

environment

noun

1 the surroundings or conditions in which a person, animal, or plant lives or operates: *survival in an often hostile environment.*

- [usu. with modifier] the setting or conditions in which a particular activity is carried on: *a good learning environment.*

- [with modifier] Computing the overall structure within which a user, computer, or program operates: *a desktop development environment.*

2 (the environment) the natural world, as a whole or in a particular geographical area, especially as affected by human activity. the impact of pesticides on the environment. [as modifier] : *a parliamentary environment committee.*

‘The solution to our environmental problems lies with the people, not with governments.’ Do you agree?

Zachary Goh 14S32

As our environmental problems begin to compound and scientists proclaim the start of Earth's 6th mass extinction, politicians, environmentalists and common folk alike have begun to broach the most important question of the century: how do we solve our environmental problems? The result is a pushing of responsibility from one party to another, with the masses reasoning that the government should be the one to solve these problems given that they wield a large amount of power, and the government bemoaning their lack of progress environmentally and blaming the masses for their profligate wasting of resources instead. My stand is that the solution to our environmental problems lies neither with the people nor the government, but rather with the big business conglomerates around the world, for their profit motive causes them to use up Mother Earth's resources at an enormous rate, and the fact that they have many bases of operation around the world means government policies have little impact on their actions.

However, the people still have a role to play in solving our environmental problems. The masses contribute to environmental problems today by wasting resources through their day to day actions, such as refusing to turn off lights and fans when not using a room in their house, turning the air conditioner to the lowest temperature possible, and wasting food and water. A brief example to show this wastage of resources is how in Singapore, the National Environmental Agency found that Singaporeans wasted close to 800 000 tonnes of food in 2014, and considering the fact that Singapore is a small country, the scale of food wastage in bigger nations like China and America would undoubtedly be proportionally bigger. Were societal habits to be changed, and the power of the masses harnessed, our environmental problems could be ameliorated, since the effect of nearly 7 billion people in the world cutting down their wastage of resources and doing eco-friendly activities like recycling would be massive indeed. Therefore, *prima facie*, the argument that the solution to our environmental problems lies with the people may hold.

Nonetheless, this is not necessarily the case. As Leonardo DiCaprio, an environmental activist, mentioned in a recent United Nations Summit, the solution to our environmental problems has “moved beyond the actions of the people”. Instead, it has moved to governments and businesses around the world. The scale and impact of our current environmental problems is so great that changing societal habits of the masses is no longer sufficient to counter environmental degradation if they can even be changed in the first place, given man's natural tendency to be resistant to change which is evident in how we choose to shape our environment to fit us rather than adapt our habits to fit nature. At this stage, only action at the government and conglomerate level will suffice to make a huge enough impact in solving environmental problems, given that these two parties are the major parties responsible for the massive amount of pollution in the world. Hence, the solution to our environmental problems does not just lie with the people.

Governments potentially wield a significant amount of power in solving environmental problems. They control their country's usage of resources, and thus have the power to cut down on this usage. Additionally, governments of different countries can cooperate with one another and meet at different environmental summits to discuss policies to save the Earth. For example, in the 2009 Copenhagen Summit, USA and China met and pledged to prevent the world temperature from increasing by 2°C. In the USA, President Obama also pledged to cut down on carbon emission by 17% by 2020. Therefore, the actions of the government may be a promising solution to our environmental problems.

However, the truth is far from it. While governments do have the power to make a huge change and cut down on their energy usage, it is unlikely they will do so. Politically, they maintain a front by appearing to strive towards solving the Earth's environmental problems. Realistically, they do not, because of a few

Environment

reasons. Firstly, there is a power struggle between the USA and China. China is a rising superpower, and in order to overtake the USA economically, it has to continue and even increase its usage of resources to generate more energy for factories and other industrial developments. Secondly, developing countries themselves are in the midst of achieving a better standard of living for their people and breaking out of the poverty cycle. There is thus no incentive for their governments to cut down or even remain at their current level of pollution and resource usage, resulting in even more greenhouse gases being continuously emitted. Even agreements made at the inter-state levels and domestic targets set by governments are largely a farce. In the earlier examples, while President Obama did pledge to cut down on carbon emissions by 17% by 2020, the reality is that the USA has an annual increase of 0.3% in its carbon emissions, according to a survey conducted by a US energy watchdog. And while the pledge by USA and China to prevent the world temperature from increasing by 2°C may seem promising, the agreement is firstly non-binding, meaning that the countries need not stay true to their end of the bargain, and secondly, an increase of 2°C in the world temperature is literally a death sentence for low-lying coastal states and the sub-Saharan nations. Finally, while governments may also implement policies to limit the massive usage (and wastage) of resources by big private conglomerates, the fact is that the conglomerates themselves have bases of operations in many other countries, and can shift their base of operation to avoid being under such government policies. Hence, while the government does have the power to solve our environmental problems, it is unlikely that they will do so.

Rather, the solution to our environmental problems lies with the conglomerates. Big private conglomerates use a lot of resources, some even more than the governments of small countries. If they can change, and cut down on their energy usage while still gaining profits from their businesses, their actions would have a big impact on solving environmental problems, and this has been proven to be achievable. For example, an Indonesian tycoon who owns one of the biggest logging companies in Indonesia recently partnered with global environmental organisation Greenpeace, pledging to cut down 50% of the logging activities of his company, with Greenpeace present to ensure that he held true to the pledge. These big private conglomerates also do not face the problem of political inertia or the risk of being voted out in elections due to unpopular environmental policies, two major problems which governments face. Instead, these conglomerates have only one key concern: profit. As long as profit is attained, they will be willing to go forward with environmental policies. In addition, implementing such policies is a good marketing strategy as well, since environmentalism is gaining traction among the masses as people begin to realise the dire state that their world is in. By implementing eco-friendly policies, such conglomerates show themselves to be the 'good guys' and have a better public image. Hence, conglomerates are the solution to our environmental problems since they are able to make as big an impact as governments, and face fewer obstacles in doing so.

In conclusion, while people have a part to play in solving our environmental problems, the situation has degenerated to a state where individual actions are no longer sufficient and the actions of governments and conglomerates are more crucial. However, the governments have proven themselves incapable of achieving tangible advancements in solving the environmental problems, and so, the solution lies not with the people or governments, but the conglomerates that are able to make as big an impact as the government would, and yet not face as many obstacles.

Teacher's comments: Sound knowledge of the issue demonstrated, with some convincing arguments put forth. However, the flow and development of the points could have been better. At times, it felt like a narrative rather than a structured GP essay. Take note.

'The solution to our environmental problems lies with the people, not with governments.' Do you agree?

Dennis Ooi Jun Wei 14S32

One can no longer repudiate the fact that our world is facing an ever-increasing number of environmental problems. While the masses may disagree on the sources and causes of these problems, such as whether they should be attributed to man's exploitation of their surrounding world, or to natural causes that come with the Earth's life cycle, the reality we can all agree on is that these environmental issues are pressing and need to be solved. These environmental problems refer to the worrying, and to some extent, threatening issues that affect the natural surrounding world, such as pollution and global warming. These issues not only cause degradation of the environment and health hazards to humans, but also contribute to unsustainable development and suppression of future living standards. For example, excessive deforestation causes loss of biodiversity in the ecosystem and the reduction in the fertility of the soil, leading to reduced amount of natural resources needed for future development. Such consequences have given rise to the awareness of the need to alleviate our environmental problems. However, who should be the one leading the way? Some suggest that it should be the governments and leaders of our countries, while some argue that it should be the general people. In my opinion, both parties play a role in solving our environmental problems, with the government playing the larger role.

First of all, the public should definitely play a role in solving environmental problems by adopting an environmentally friendly culture. The people should step up and play their part because the practice of individuals protecting the environment can influence others' mindsets and help in reducing the severity of environmental problems. For example, a society that emphasises the need to reuse old materials or to recycle unwanted junk can pass on their practices to future generations, thus sowing the seeds for an environmentally-aware community. It is also important for the people to reduce their consumerist culture, as it is the excessive demand and purchase of goods that lead to the over-exploitation of our environment. For instance, the rising demand for paper products has led to firms' clearing of large areas of forests, in which statistics have shown that around four billions trees are cut down annually for the global paper industry. This has resulted in a drastic increase in carbon dioxide emissions, thus accelerating global warming. Hence, environmental problems can be solved when the people correct their negative consumerist cultures to one that is more environmentally friendly. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." By cutting down on consumption of goods that have deleterious impacts on our natural surroundings, the people can play an instrumental role in reducing environmental problems. It can even be said that in this aspect, governments cannot solve environmental problems due to their focus on international trade and economic progress. Hence, it may not be in the governments' favour to reduce consumption of goods as it may stifle development of the economy and country. Therefore, it is the people who are key in solving our environmental problems.

However, I also agree that governments may need to take the first step in dealing with our world's environmental problems. It is inevitable that the governments have a greater amount of resources at their disposal, compared to their citizens. Hence, the governments can strive to solve environmental problems by channeling some of their resources towards this cause. Specifically, governments have the means to elucidate the true sources of environmental issues. This is important in coming up with effective measures that directly target the root causes of our environmental issues. For example, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an organisation funded by many governments of the United Nations, has devoted research and development to discovering the sources of global warming, and the extent of its consequences on global temperature. The IPCC recently published their Fifth Assessment Report, showing that world temperatures are expected to rise between 2 to 5 degrees Celsius by 2100. The report also details the sources of global warming, such as agricultural practices releasing nitrous oxides into the air, and carbon emissions from vehicles in cities. This is important in enabling governments to find out the main causes of global warming in their respective countries, so that they can come up with targeted solutions to effectively reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. For instance, much of the greenhouse gases emissions in urbanised countries are due to increasing industrial activity and number of road vehicles. Government such as regional powers in urban China can then target these root causes by placing a quota

Environment

on industrial production or cars on the road. Hence, the solution to our environmental problems lies with the governments since they have the resources and means to carry out research and find out the root causes of such problems, subsequently allowing effective action to be taken.

In addition, governments also play a key role in solving environmental problems because the enacting of legislation has a far-reaching impact on the practices of a whole country. It may not be very effective to just rely on the people to change their consumerist ways because they are not obligated by law to actually reduce consumption of environmentally harmful products. Hence, the governments can enforce legislation that can push and motivate the people to be more environmentally friendly. For example, the government can put in place a basic education plan that emphasises the need to take care of our environment. Such a solution is effective in the long run because an entire generation of young students can be brought up knowing that they must and can play a role in keeping the environment clean and healthy. The governments can also enact laws that disallow people from consuming goods that are harmful to the environment. A good example is the Penang state government in Malaysia, which has been lauded for implementing a 'No Plastic Bag' rule for all supermarkets, mandating that shoppers bring their own shopping bags. This encourages the public to reuse old paper or plastic bags, thus helping to reduce excessive usage of non-biodegradable plastic products. Governments can also enact legislature that punishes people for littering or for improper disposal of their waste, thus helping to alleviate water pollution. For instance, the Singapore government imposes fines on violators who litter, leading to the reputation of Singapore as a clean city with low levels of pollution. In this aspect, the solution to our environmental problems is in the hands of the governments since the enacting and enforcement of laws can help to regulate the people's practices, thus helping to control and reduce environmental problems.

Lastly, governments can solve our environmental problems through international cooperation. The discussions and negotiations about global environmental practices should involve the governments of countries, not just the individuals of the public. With increased cooperation between nations, the governments can see the larger picture in solving the problems that afflict the world as a whole, and not just the individual countries. For example, the Espoo Convention was signed in 1991 by a number of countries in Europe, Asia and America who reviewed the importance of consulting each other on national projects that may have transboundary environmental impacts. This is important as environmental damage is far-reaching and often affects more than one country. Clear evidence can be drawn from smog and air pollution in north-eastern China blowing over to Japan, causing the Japanese air quality index to worsen. Cooperation on a global scale through the Kyoto Protocol, which served to review the importance of reducing the impact of global warming, was also important because it enabled member countries to collectively decide on how much total carbon emissions should be reduced to ensure a substantial impact on reducing global warming. With this, the larger and more industrialised countries such as the USA and Japan were tasked to ensure greater scale of reducing greenhouse gases emission in their countries. Evidently, such treaties can give rise to more effective management of the global environment. Since our environmental problems should not be seen as national problems, but rather as international issues, the solution to environmental degradation then lies in the governments working together.

In conclusion, governments play a very important role in targeting the causes and consequences of our world's environmental problems. The people do not have the kind of resources or power that governments yield, and hence it can be said that the governments, not the people, are key to solving our environmental issues. However, the people must also aid the governments in carrying out the measures to alleviate environmental problems. While the governments are needed to kickstart the movement to save the environment, it is the people who are needed to maintain such environmental practices in the long run, through lifelong practices that are beneficial to the environment. It is of utmost importance that both parties take a bigger stand in targeting the root causes of these problems, as preventive measures are definitely more effective and more hopeful than palliative measures.

Teacher's comments: Rather fluently written with sound arguments supported by relevant evidence. Decent effort!

Climate change appears to be a recent problem for the world, having been surfaced less than half a century ago and only gaining traction in the last two decades. Yet the roots of many of the environmental problems that plague us today can be found in actions of the past and in the irresponsible activities of our ancestors. How can we blame today's generation if our forefathers were the ones who did the damage? Even in today's contexts, developing countries are often exploited by large corporations from developed countries, resulting in environmental damage in regions where the people may not have been responsible for it. Ultimately, this essay contests who constitutes the 'we' that has caused environmental damage and hence deserves it, and argues that in terms of both our ancestors versus the current generation, as well as in pitting the developed world against the developing world, the blame cannot be distributed equally. The people that suffer the most are often those that deserve it the least.

It is unfair to say that we deserve the environmental problems we have when many of the problems took root decades ago when a different generation of people did not fully understand the consequences of their actions. A large proportion of carbon emission that contributed to global warming was a result of the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rise of consumerism also led to many disposable items such as plastics and styrofoam which are often non-biodegradable and may sometimes release Chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) emissions when broken down, contributing to the depletion of the ozone layer. Yet, though we know their harms now, the technology and research at that time could not have possibly predicted these negative externalities that would arise out of otherwise beneficial activities that were vital in the progress of mankind. Hence, because they lacked this piece of information, the decisions that older generation made were rational at the time, but inevitably led to the problem that we face now. Thus, it is unfair to say that we deserve the environmental problems we have.

Despite this, it could be argued that the current generation of people still holds some blame for the continuation of environmentally damaging activities, as the new found knowledge of the environmental harm and consequences has not had a significant impact in changing these activities. For instance, despite now being aware of the dangers of carbon emission and the havoc it can wreak on our environment, many still continue with their industrial practice without much thought. Even attempts at global cooperation have failed, evinced by the failed Kyoto protocol and Doha talks which showed how promises and pledges may exist in name, but little action has been taken in meeting these goals. Hence, our inaction, despite the added knowledge of our environmental crimes, can contribute to the argument that we deserve the problems that we have.

However, this may not necessarily stand as at least some effort has been taken, and the difficulty in reforming old practices must be accounted for. Old habits die hard, and this is certainly true in industries that fuel the manufacturing sector where the reforming of industrial practices would require an entire overhaul of the system, including completely replacing machines and equipment that would cost an exorbitant amount. It is also difficult to reduce the usage of non-renewable fuels such as oil and coal, which both contribute to emissions and also cause harm during the extraction process. In general, the world is still over reliant on these sources of energy, and alternative sources such as solar and wind energy have not yet been stable or affordable enough to be used on a wide scale. At the very least, capital and technology have been invested in these fledgling renewable energy industries in hopes of it becoming a viable alternative in the future. Moreover, there is at least a consensus and willingness to address environmental degradation by world leaders, as seen in the 2010 Cancun Agreement where 76 countries voluntarily pledged to reduce carbon emissions. Even if the targets are not fully met, at least there has been some effort made to mitigate environmental harm done. Therefore, the current generation is still not as responsible for the environmental problems they face as compared to their predecessors, and hence cannot be said to fully deserve the problem they are burdened with.

Environment

Even within the current generation that is facing environmental problems, this group of people are not homogeneously affected or responsible as well. Corporations from developed nations that have both the financial capacity and the political clout in the form of lobby groups often 'outsource' their environmentally damaging activities to the Third World, resulting in many developing countries suffering the consequences of damage that they did not cause. For instance, corporations in the USA often outsource their heavy manufacturing to countries such as China, which in turn outsource their demand for raw materials and resources to Africa, resulting in a chain of exploitation and the active shirking of responsibility. This makes it difficult for authorities to clamp down to even regulate such activities as they are often trans-national, moving beyond the boundaries of jurisdiction of individual governments. Another example would be the BP oil spill in 2010 where British Petroleum (BP) caused extensive environment damage in the Gulf of Mexico when its oil transportation pipelines ended up gushing oil for months. This ended up damaging the marine life and environment in the region, though Mexico had had no part in creating the disaster. In a similar vein, the largest contributors to carbon emissions are from developed countries such as the USA, yet the brunt of the damage is in the form of rising sea levels that affect coastal settlements and islands the most. The result is that countries such as the Maldives face the danger of being completely submerged by rising sea levels that they have had little part in contributing to. Thus, it is unfair to say that these developing countries who suffer the most from environmental damage deserve it.

Even though some may argue that these developing countries could still have taken measures against environmentally damaging activities in their country, this is unfair and unrealistic for these countries as well. Many of these countries are poorer and hence do not have both the economic and political clout to turn away the misbehaving companies that would otherwise bring in investments and development to the country. For instance, much of the environment damage done in Africa is done with the reluctant permission of the African nations as they have no choice but to accept the degradation of their homeland in exchange for an income. The short-term gain and lure of money often outweigh the longer term environmental damage in the decision-making of their locals, especially when they may not even be fully aware of the consequences due to a lack of education and information. Corporations hence exploit this weakness and knowingly force locals into such dilemma as they know that the economic incentive would win in the end. Hence, developing countries cannot be expected to regulate against the irresponsible behavior of corporations in these countries, and the blame is instead on the developed countries that knowingly and deliberately perpetuate these crimes.

In conclusion, environmental problems often have the causes and the consequences far removed. The people that suffer the most generally do so not due to their own action, but rather due to the deeds of others, whether it is their forefathers or those in more developed countries. Hence, these people often do not deserve the environmental problems they struggle with, making their suffering all the more unfair and necessitating a solution or reforms to be developed soon that can alleviate the injustice that has been done to them.

Teacher's comments: Clear line of argument with cogent reasoning that shows good understanding of the key word "deserve". "We" in the question is fully examined, looking at different contexts and groups of people involved.

Kaleidoscope

society

noun (pl.societies)

- 1 [mass noun] the aggregate of people living together in a more or less ordered community: *drugs, crime, and other dangers to society.*
- the community of people living in a particular country or region and having shared customs, laws, and organizations: *the ethnic diversity of British society* | [count noun] : *modern industrial societies.*
 - [with adj.] a specified section of society: no one in polite society uttered the word.
- (also high society) the aggregate of people who are fashionable, wealthy, and influential, regarded as forming a distinct group in a community: [as modifier] : *a society wedding.*
- [count noun] a plant or animal community: *the analogy between insect society and human city is not new.*
- 2 an organization or club formed for a particular purpose or activity: [in names] : *the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.*
- 3 [mass noun] the situation of being in the company of other people: *she shunned the society of others.*

The world witnessed two of the largest humanitarian crises in 2015, namely the Mediterranean Migrant Crisis and the tragedy of the homeless Rohingya refugees. On one side, we saw the European countries collaborating in an unprecedentedly active way to try to accommodate these refugees from conflict-ridden Africa; on the other side, the Southeast Asian countries played a ‘ping-pong’ game of pushing the boat people around. This sheer contrast sheds some light on the broader issue of how societies are divided in their reactions towards groups of people who are different from the mainstream. On one end of the spectrum, propelled by intense feeling of nationalism, indoctrination by political groups or long-lasting societal prejudice, some societies choose to be extremely exclusive. On the opposite end, more liberal societies founded on egalitarian principles are making strides in building more inclusive societies. People living in these societies are confident that despite their different beliefs, ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations, they are entitled equal right to pursue happiness and success in life. It is my staunch belief that human beings have made great progress in building more inclusive societies, especially in comparison to the past, as societies nowadays better recognise the benefit of integration and harm of segregation.

Upon cursory examination of this topic, proponents may rush to the conclusion that societies today are not inclusive at all. Certain global trends do seem to support them. Nations that are driven by a strong sense of rising nationalism or indoctrinated by extreme political ideas are still taking harsh and even violent measures against those who are different. One good example would be the harsh treatment against the Rohingya people by the Myanmar government. The Rohingyas are not given any national identity and welfare in Myanmar and are treated with discrimination and humiliation. This desperate group of people were forced to leave their society, where they felt no sense of belonging, into a fatal trip of seeking a better life in other countries. Similar discrimination happens when people in the Middle East are indoctrinated by the extreme Islamic ideals into thinking that all Westerners are evil. In the extremely brutal attacks in Tunis, terrorists intentionally singled out western tourists as their targets. The rising nationalism and political and religious superiority, when in extreme, lead to the majority of the society attacking the minority.

Moreover, deep-rooted societal prejudice such as racism and sexism can influence the behaviour of the people in a society into systematically disadvantaging a particular group. In Japan, it is a traditional belief that women should stay at home, looking after their children and husbands. As a result, 70% of Japanese women quit their jobs once their first baby was born. Their experience bears testimony to my statement. In the United States, it is almost a tacit understanding among police corps that more violence can be used against African-American people. These long-lasting prejudices are so pervasive and persistent in societies that they continue to call for discrimination and exclusion.

That being said, the proponents of this claim fail to incorporate the time factor in discussing this topic. Societies today have evolved from what they used to be decades ago. The almost universal understanding that we are equal as human beings, coupled with the growing acceptance of diversity and the consistent work of human-rights activists, has transformed most societies into more inclusive ones.

First of all, the culture in many societies has evolved from conforming to the unanimity into celebrating the diversity. Our generation is entitled to a diverse range of perspectives and unprecedented freedom in the decision-making process. We express our opposing views through the media and hence learn to appreciate each other’s merits. A new culture of acceptance is cultivated as a result. For example, in Singapore, stay-at-home dads are less of a societal taboo as they are given plenty of platforms to explain to the public about the reasons, benefits and restrictions behind their hard decisions, so that the rest can understand them better and support them with open arms. A society grows more inclusive when its people no longer see difference as an obstacle, but as a cause for celebration.

Secondly, there are more non-governmental or international human rights organisations contributing towards more equitable societies. Volunteers and activists from these organisations work selflessly for the benefits of the marginalised and the disadvantaged. The United Nations Convoy for Education has started a plea under the name of Malala Yousafzai to call for education for all children in the world. In many developed countries, activists of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) group celebrated their triumph when gay-sex marriage was legalised in Ireland and the United States. Societies are becoming more liberal and inclusive; much of this progress can be attributed to the work of the human-rights activist groups.

Thirdly, people living in advanced countries, influenced by modern media and activist groups, are becoming more supportive of the egalitarian ideal that as human beings, we are fundamentally the same and should be treated equally in an inclusive society. At the acme of the Mediterranean Migrant Crisis, 25 out of 28 members of the Europe Union pledged to take in 60,000 migrants from Africa and the Middle East on a voluntary basis. On the grassroots level, ordinary Europeans are opening their doors to provide care and accommodation for the migrants, especially the poor and the ill. Their actions uphold the principle of universal human rights. A more integrated society is forged as a result of the wealthier and more fortunate ones going the extra mile to pave a level playing field for others caught up in more difficult circumstances.

In conclusion, despite the fact that prejudice and discrimination are still fueling segregation in some societies, the history of mankind has demonstrated that only greater grievance and more rifts will ensue. In contrast, the path to integration promises greater mutual understanding, more inclusiveness and co-prosperity. On that basis, societies as a whole have made leaps and bounds in creating an inclusive environment that benefits all.

Teacher's comments: This is an intelligent response to the question. While you could have been a bit more analytical in some parts or show 'less inclusive' more strongly, this is still a sophisticated answer with a good grasp of global issues and examples. Language is fluent and shows flair and a good range of vocabulary.

Despite the panoply of problems that plagued our shores when we – Singapore – first became an independent state, we managed to overcome many of the trials and tribulations we faced. Singapore is now regarded as a first-world city with a vibrant economy. As we continue to progress, we have managed to solve many of our social problems, one of which is gender inequality. Singapore recognises the importance of gender equality – where there are equal opportunities for both men and women – and this is evident in the policies crafted and implemented by the local government. In terms of education and workforce participation, more opportunities have also been provided for men and women. Hence, I believe that gender equality is a realistic goal in my society.

Singaporeans are given equal opportunities to education, regardless of gender. In many societies, education has been regarded as a panacea to all societal ills and allows people to break free from the shackles of poverty. It is a beacon of hope for the disadvantaged and underprivileged, bestowing upon them a chance to lead a better life. Singapore is definitely one of the societies that fervently believe in the benefits of education. The cornerstone of our education system is meritocracy: as long as people are willing to work hard, they will be duly rewarded regardless of gender. For instance, the “Edusave Award Bursary” is given to students who perform well academically and almost every year, there is a high proportion of female students receiving the awards. Unlike certain societies, Singapore recognises the importance of providing equal education opportunities for both men and women; we understand that for a country to continue progressing, education must be accessible to all. The female literacy rate of close to 99% is also a testament to Singapore’s stance on “education for all” regardless of gender. Hence, this affirms my stand that gender equality is a realistic goal in my society.

Besides having access to education, women in Singapore are also presented with more opportunities and benefits in the workforce as compared to women in less progressive societies. Since the 1980s, non-governmental associations like AWARE (Association of Women for Action & Research) have helped to champion women’s rights. As a result, there are more opportunities given to women in the workforce than ever before. For instance, the workforce participation rate for women has increased from a mere 15% in the 1970s to a staggering 45% today. Women in many professions in Singapore no longer have a “glass ceiling” imposed on them, and they are provided with equal opportunities to progress and advance in their careers. Most notably, Singapore has removed the quota on female students admitted into medical school, allowing a greater number of females to become doctors. Politically, female MPs (members of parliament) make up close to 23% of the parliament, which is higher than the world’s average of 20%. Our first speaker in the government, Halimah Yacob, also mentioned that women are playing a more pertinent role in the workforce today. With more and more opportunities presented to women in their careers, it has become increasingly possible to achieve greater parity with men. Moreover, Singapore is facing a huge labour crunch as a result of an aging population and we need more women to take on greater roles and responsibilities in the workforce. Hence, more resources have also been invested in women. Thus, I believe that gender equality is a realistic goal in our society.

Lastly, with increased influence of Western culture, Singaporeans are becoming more liberal and open. A paradigm shift is happening, and more families see the importance of having both parents being actively involved in their household. In the past, societal expectations forced people to conform to gender stereotypes – women being the sole caretakers of families and men bringing the bacon home. However, fathers today are playing a more active role in the family. It is no longer uncommon to see men doing household chores like washing and cleaning, and there is also a significant rise in SAHDs (stay-at-home dads) in Singapore. The notion of a traditional family has been eroded by an increasingly open and liberal

mindset of the people. Expecting men and women to conform to specific gender roles is a very parochial and naïve view today. Hence, I believe that gender equality is a realistic goal in my society.

However, for certain groups of Singaporeans, gender equality remains a distant dream. Certain religious groups like the Muslims devotedly follow the teachings of Islam. Families who faithfully adhere to the Qur'an tend to be more traditional and patriarchal. According to Islamic laws, women are expected to be subservient to men and men are regarded as "superior" to women. Religions can have a vice-like grip on their devotees and people will fervently believe and adhere to their religions. However, this only applies to a small group of Muslims and many local Muslim families are more open to modern ideas with many modern Malays according equal respect to men and women.

In conclusion, I feel that gender equality is a realistic goal in my society. More opportunities are given to women, be it in the workforce or in our education system. Singaporeans also recognise the importance of gender equality and we are receptive to efforts made to protect women's rights. The ageing population in Singapore has further underscored the importance of women in the workforce and their contributions to the economy are increasingly recognised and valued. Hence, in the near future, I believe that women will eventually be able to achieve gender parity with men in my society.

Teacher's comments: An insightful essay and an enjoyable read! Be careful of sweeping statements – but other than that, good work!

How far do you agree that in the modern world, the definition of the family has to be broadened?

Cristel Chong Kar Yee 15A12

A family is one in which a person can find warmth and comfort and experience a true sense of belonging. Traditionally, a family is seen as having one male and one female parent with children, with the male serving as the sole breadwinner and the female as the homemaker. However, I do not believe that this definition can continue to hold true in the modern world that has welcomed changing perceptions of many. The rapid economic growth in recent years has also inevitably resulted in a change of lifestyle and in turn, the nature of the family has changed in one way or another. Still, the definition of the family might not necessarily have to be broadened it is a concept that people in the society are accustomed to and comfortable with. Thus, I agree to a large extent that the definition of the family has to be broadened but not completely changed to cater to the minority in changing times.

With the fast paced economic growth in the modern world, especially in countries such as Singapore and China, there have been changing views on people's perception of a family. For example, in the USA, in the past, women were often confined to gender stereotypes which have resulted in them being denied education and career opportunities, having to stay at home as a wife and mother. However, in the modern world, both male and female are now given the education opportunities and compete on equal footing to get jobs. This has inevitably resulted in their changing roles and responsibilities within the family given that oftentimes, both parents choose to pursue a career and take on the role of raising their children, which goes against the traditional definition of a family. Furthermore, given that women are becoming increasingly career driven, many may choose not to have children as it could hinder their career opportunities. Besides this, alternative models of the family have emerged. Some couples choose to cohabit, and may even have children out of wedlock. Some women choose to have children without getting married. If the definition of a family is not broadened to include these models, these families may not be accepted in society and the family members, especially the offspring may suffer from the stigma. This could unintentionally lead to a regression in society given that the government and its people are unable to adapt to changing times and values. Therefore, it is necessary for the definition of the family to be broadened to be more relevant to the modern world.

The traditional definition of the family is one that only caters to the needs of the majority but denies the minority equal recognition. In light of the recent Pink Dot Sg movement in Singapore which advocates the freedom to love, and the legalisation of gay marriages in the United States, it is evident that there have been sincere efforts to cater to the minority groups. Previously, lesbians and gays were denied the chance to marry legally as the state did not approve of their marriage and even if they did have a child, their family would not be acknowledged by society, simply because they went against the societal norms and were viewed as "different". These changes in legislation are extremely heartening as they also provide previously marginalised people with a chance to express themselves and be accepted in society, such that they no longer have to be afraid of being viewed differently and can find comfort in the fact that their family is accepted in society. It is only when the definition of the family is broadened that the minority groups will also feel accepted in society and even if it is two male parents instead of one male and female parent, they will still be loved nonetheless. When those in the minority group feel that what they have as a family is accepted, they will feel a sense of belonging that is derived simply from the joy of being accepted. Therefore, the traditional definition of the family indeed should be broadened to ensure inclusiveness in society such that no one is outcast even when their family is "different" from others.

Although I do believe that the definition of the family has to be broadened, I do realise that opponents to this argument do have reasons to uphold only the traditional definition of the family as it is one which many societies are comfortable with and accustomed to. This is especially true for the more conservative

societies, for example Singapore, whose Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long once said in a news article that “traditional family is still key” for Singapore society. There is a degree of truth to his words as a traditional family does maintain a certain order and organisation in the society by conforming to social norms. There have also been active efforts by the government to try to promote the traditional family through government policies such as the ‘Five Day Work Week’ and the ‘Three or more if you can afford it’ policies aimed at encouraging child birth and giving incentives for it. In a way, the government can ensure stability in the home and by extension, in society when everyone conforms to a certain set of values associated with the traditional definition of the family. Furthermore, with a male and a female parent, the family experience of the offspring will differ greatly from that of a single parent household or a same sex parent household. Oftentimes, it is children of the single parent or same sex parents that will lose out being denied of a normal upbringing. Thus, there are benefits to a traditional family that would not continue to hold true if the definition is broadened.

All in all, I do agree to a large extent that the definition of the family has to be broadened as a result of changing attitudes. Furthermore, the ushering in of the new does not always have to erase the old. The traditional definition can still continue to hold true and be regarded as the preferred model, but to keep up with changing times and changing values, the definition of the family should be broadened so that families who were once not acknowledged by society can now be accepted and find a true sense of belonging with their loved ones by their side.

Teacher's comments: Mature understanding of the various relevant issues and I like the substantiation in the paragraphs, especially 3 and 4. You have strong potential in language but do avoid overly long sentences.

Why is it that we feel a sense of pity when we hear that someone has yet to step beyond the borders of the country that they were born and raised in? Why do we feel a swell of happiness for a stranger that we have known for less than five minutes when she mentions to us, at the airport, that this trip of hers will be the first time she flies out of the country? Today, travel is increasingly being seen as a luxury that every individual should be able to acquire at some point of their life regardless of the destination. The benefits of travel are endless – from gaining new experiences to learning more about oneself. However, perhaps the greatest benefit is its remarkable ability to reduce prejudice and encourage understanding among people of completely different backgrounds and mindsets. Through cultural immersion which travel brings about, people are often able to overcome their prejudice and poor opinions directed towards different ethnic, religious, racial or social groups. Therefore, I agree to a large extent that travel can reduce prejudice.

Travel can open individuals' eyes to beliefs and practices or people that they once mocked at or violently disapproved of. The ability to physically visit a place and interact with people directly involved in certain practices and beliefs often allows them to truly understand things they could not understand by sitting comfortably on their sofa at home, watching a documentary or simply surfing the net. Actual experiences trump these methods as individuals not only digest information thrown at them but also view ideas from different angles and form their own opinions. The experience forces individuals to think and appreciate what is happening before their very eyes. The value of travel has been widely accepted across the world to the extent that some education systems see it as a necessity for students to gain insights through travel, which enables them to see the world through different lenses and overcome possible prejudices they may have or even develop, unfortunately, later in life. A prime example would be the requirement for students to attend an overseas trip or take part in an exchange programme as part of their education. In Singapore, many schools send their students overseas, especially to less developed countries such as those in Southeast Asia, to learn about the culture and practices of the people in these countries. Upon their return, these students are to write reflections of their experiences, and over 60% of students admit to having overcome some sort of prejudice. Some used to regard people from third world countries as lazy and lacking motivation in many areas of life such as in work and education, but upon seeing first-hand the real situation in these countries, they begin to understand that in some countries, people do not receive opportunities like they do in Singapore. As a result, the prejudice harboured by these students was significantly reduced after the trip which served as an eye-opener, giving them a better understanding and insights of the countries they visited. This idea does not only apply to students in the education system, however. Regular travelers are often enlightened by visiting other countries as well. In countries such as Spain, a festival is held once every year that encourages people to have a mass, playful fight that involves throwing tomatoes at one another, similar to the festival of colours that takes place in India which involves the use of coloured powder and water. While many people from other countries may harbour prejudice against people in these countries for engaging in what they deem as pointless activities, it is not uncommon to see them undergo a mindset change when they attend the festivals themselves. Through experiencing the process and understanding the rationale of fostering greater bonds and appreciating loved ones through festivals, prejudice against these people and their beliefs can be greatly overcome. Thus, I agree to a large extent that travel can greatly reduce prejudice as individuals are able to gain new experiences to understand the rationale behind many beliefs and practices and learn to appreciate them as well.

By visiting foreign countries, one is able to formulate their own opinions that reduce prejudice, especially if such prejudice was brought about by external influences. For example, prejudice against many racial groups is commonly seen to be cultivated due to the poor portrayal of such racial groups by the media. In Hollywood productions for example, racial groups such as Indians are portrayed as stingy and selfish. This is rampant in many productions such as 'The Big Bang Theory' where Indian parents are depicted in this negative light. Negative portrayals foster a poor understanding of Indians amongst viewers. However, opinions and beliefs are often changed and altered after individuals visit these countries. This is easily seen through high profile figures in the American media as well. Famous artists such as Justin Bieber and

Avril Lavigne reflect the opinions of individuals influenced by the media but after visiting these countries and interacting with locals, both artists agreed that the locals were different from what they had expected, proving that a mindset change has occurred. In fact, the artists even mentioned that they were pleasantly surprised at the hospitality and generosity they experienced of the Indians they encountered, which went completely against the stereotype of Indians being stingy and selfish. A National Geographic documentary produced in 2012 also highlighted a similar idea, indicating that interaction with locals often allows individuals to realize that although people are from different parts of the world, they may not be very different from one another. People influenced by the media with prejudices formed against racial groups can have their preconceptions overcome through interaction with people from these racial backgrounds. Thus, I agree to a large extent that travel can reduce prejudice.

Many people argue that travel may not reduce prejudice but in fact, has the opposite effect. They argue that if people were to travel without an open mind and a willingness to learn, their prejudice may actually be reinforced. For example, when tourists already have preconceived notions of the people of a particular country, their interactions with them while visiting their country, if unfavourable, may cement their prejudice. For example, Singaporeans tend to be prejudiced against foreign workers from China due to their limited interaction with them and possibly also their resentment of their presence which they see as competition for jobs and adding to the overcrowding of their city. When they visit China and happen to have unpleasant encounters with a few locals, they may feel even more strongly prejudiced against them. While this argument does indeed contain some truth, such prejudices more often than not have high chances of being overcome, especially when travelers interact with people in the service industry who are often hospitable and gracious. In demanding situations where travelers run into problems, there is an extremely high chance that regardless of race or nationality, there will be local people who will render them assistance. Prejudices such as the generalization of Chinese nationals are thus easily overcome as people are forced to change their way of thinking despite their initial mental barriers. Even if such a situation does not present itself, simple daily interactions with locals will generally allow individuals who do not fit into the perceived stereotypes to surface and their acts of kindness will surely be displayed in one way or another to the traveler, for example, when tourists interact with the locals as they explore the country or purchase products from local shops or markets. Simple and basic interactions between buyer and seller may reveal much about the local people through their actions, words and overall conduct which may force the traveler to reflect and realize that some stereotypes are in the end just stereotypes. Prejudice can be reduced as people realize that stereotypes and generalizations do not apply to every individual. Thus, it is my firm belief that through travel, prejudice can be reduced.

In conclusion, despite limitations such as closed mindset, short duration of stay in host countries and lack of interaction with local people, I believe that travel can reduce prejudice to a large extent. By being physically present in a foreign land, travelers will be able to enjoy first-hand foreign culture, see for themselves how local people go about their daily life and understand how and why certain beliefs and practices come about. It is also through travel that one can interact with people of different countries, which can bring about awareness and a better understanding of the people. The reduction of prejudice is often not considered where the notion of travel is concerned, yet it constitutes a vital part of an individual's experience in a foreign land and results in a beneficial outcome of a more understanding and accepting society. Thus, I agree to a large extent that travel is able to reduce prejudice.

Teacher's comments: Your arguments are mostly well substantiated and it is good that you considered how prejudice notions came about so that you can examine whether travel solves the root cause of this prejudice. Nonetheless, your counter-argument to reinforce the stand can be even better developed. Your writing is sound and organized but could do with more sophistication as well.

Kal eidoscope

education

noun [mass noun]

1 the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction, especially at a school or university: *a course of education*.

• the theory and practice of teaching: *colleges of education*.

• [count noun] a body of knowledge acquired while being educated: *his education is encyclopedic and eclectic*.

• information about or training in a particular subject: *health education*.

2 (an education) an enlightening experience: *Petrus is a good workman—it is an education to watch him*.

‘The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.’ Discuss with reference to your society.

Mindy Low 15A15

The role of formal education in a society is indisputable and fundamentally important. Formal education, in Singapore’s context, refers to the compulsory education system that students have to undergo for a minimum of 6 years. Education is a powerful and propelling force of social mobility as it empowers individuals with the knowledge and capability to climb up the social status ladder through formal employment. Hence, it cannot be denied that one of education’s noble goals is to provide individuals with employment opportunities. While some may feel that gaining employment is the main function, I believe that such an aspiration is not and should not be viewed as education’s totality. More importantly, I believe that formal education has the potential to nurture one’s passion for lifelong learning while at the same time, mould and shape the moral values of an individual. This ultimately builds the moral landscape of our society. Furthermore, individuals are invested with the social responsibility to lend their voices to the minorities in our society, striving to achieve changes that will build a brighter future for all.

One of the most empowering and truly invaluable assets that education freely provides for all is the passion for lifelong learning. The motivational force behind one’s burning passion and thirst for knowledge is the sustainable fuel that encourages learning even into old age. This is, however, not merely restricted to the act of studying through formal education, but instead encompasses all forms of learning including sports, music and the arts. The innate value of education is that it broadens the landscape of our brains and allows us a glimpse of the outside world. Exposure to the vastness and expanse of the world has an effect of humbling our nature and increasing our receptivity to learn. The curriculum of our formal education includes both the Sciences and the Humanities. When students develop an inclination towards a particular subject, they will realize that the more they learn, the more they realize they do not know. Indeed, it is such an attitude that taps into the passion one has and brings one to greater heights. It is encouraging to see many Presidents’ scholars maximize their potential for a subject armed not only with their knowledge and aptitude, but more importantly, their passion for it. This has transcended beyond the realms of academic studies. At the recent SEA games that concluded in Singapore, there were more than 50 participating athletes who were students juggling school work and intensive training regimes. Taekwondo champion Chelsea Sim from Singapore revealed that for many young athletes, the balancing act between schoolwork and training is extremely challenging but their passion and love for the sport are sufficient to keep them going. Hence, it is my view that the value of formal education should not be undermined or reduced to merely a means of survival by securing employment in the future. Education imparts to us a lifelong attitude and perspective that not only pushes and challenges our boundaries; it is also our fuel to achieving success in the continuing pursuit of our interests and passions.

Apart from that, formal education is also chiefly responsible for the moral landscape of Singapore. It is capable of moulding and shaping the desirable moral values in our students. Singapore’s Ministry of Education has pivoted the country’s education system towards a more holistic, moral education and value-centric course heading into the future. It recognizes that in the 21st century, while knowledge and skills will continue to be highly valued in our knowledge-based economy and will continue to gear Singapore strategically into the global community, the increasing prominence of an anchored set of values is being acknowledged. The Ministry has introduced several overhauls in its system and has centered moral education as the core goal and purpose for every student. Not only is there an increase in the number of civics lessons weekly, students benefit from more lessons and workshops on issues such as sexual education, cyber wellness and even personality tests. In an increasingly volatile global community, it is important for Singaporeans to remain morally anchored with a distinguished set of values. This is especially so for our students as they will be the future leaders of Singapore. Hence, it is certainly untrue that the main function of education is simply to provide a through-train ticket to employment in the future. Education has far-reaching implications that create a ripple effect which influences not only the current generation of leaders

Education

and citizens, but also the country's future generations. If one were to consciously reflect on education's sphere of influence on an individual and the society, it is clear that the economic gains and advantages pale in comparison when one considers how it is fundamental in the construction of society's pillars of moral support.

Lastly, I believe that the most encouraging and truly heartening value that education provides for Singapore is the building of a more gracious and civilized society. Education is the cornerstone in the foundations of a society that thrives on globalization, much like Singapore. It is invested with the power to empower individuals to give a voice to the minorities and the disadvantaged in our society. It stirs within the people a growing sense of civic-mindedness that eventually culminates in an acute realization of one's social responsibility. This is especially significant for Singapore; being a highly globalized country, it becomes convenient for our society to achieve progress and advancements at the expense of the minority groups. Some may conveniently push the culpability to these marginalized groups for failing to speak up and help themselves. However, we must not be quick in doing so as it reflects poorly on ourselves as selfish and irresponsible members of society. Over the past 5 years, the rising number of community projects, in particular youth-initiated ones, is a reassuring sign that our society is beginning to view education as a powerful and influential agent of change. A couple of months ago, PinkDot organized their second annual rally at Hong Lim Park, advocating the rights of the sexual minority group in Singapore. Education has provided us with the skills, be it knowledge, communication skills or even emotional development such as empathy and compassion. We need to use what education has blessed us with to initiate social changes for the betterment of our community. Therefore, it is my firm belief that education should never be viewed merely as a stepping stone for individuals to serve themselves and achieve astounding career results in the future if it does not inculcate in them a social responsibility to serve our community.

On the other hand, one cannot refute the truth that education does play a significant role in propelling us towards our future career paths and choices. In our increasingly competitive society, the success one enjoys does seem to be closely related to the level and quality of education received. With a tight labour force and limited leadership positions, it is no wonder why many view education as a means of survival. In fact, it can also be said that employment is a source of contribution to not only the workplace, but to the familial unit as well. A working adult is an active and contributing member of society simply because he is part of the workplace and is working to support his family. However, it is important that students and parents alike do not hold such microscopic views of education. Families need to inculcate, from a young age, a level of understanding and appreciation towards education that is befitting of an individual with the intrinsic desire and civic-mindedness to better our society. Education should never be a self-serving deed and students need to align their attitude towards education with the community-centric focus of it, beyond the mindless pursuit of career advancements that gratifies only one's selfish soul. We must all realize that education, ultimately, serves the society. While short-term aspirations may seem appealing, the true loss and regret would be to stop one short of fulfilling and realizing the endless possibilities and enriching value education provides for each one of us.

In conclusion, it is my view that the main function of education is certainly not to simply provide employment in the future. As individuals, we must discover how each and every one of us can contribute by tapping into our specific set of skills and knowledge. If we are able to look beyond the superficial face value of education, surely, the future of Singapore will be one of great possibilities and hope.

Teacher's comments: Somewhat unbalanced. You need to explore further the reasons why the main function of education should be to gain employment, especially so for jobs needing concrete training and qualifications. Still, a strong discussion that looks at other aspects of education in a meaningful way.

'The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.' Discuss with reference to your society.

Desiree Chan 15S45

In our society today, formal education, which is instruction carried out in formal institutions such as schools, is undoubtedly important in the development of young minds and hence, made compulsory in Singapore by the Ministry of Education (MOE). This ensures that all are able to receive education and eventually go on to pursue the career of their choice. Thus, many feel that the main function of formal education is to enable people to gain employment. However, I feel that this is only one of the many functions of formal education and there are equally or even more important functions, such as the inculcating of moral values and the increasing of students' global awareness. Furthermore, another factor for consideration is education for employability – the capability of holding a job or staying employed, which depends greatly on a person's holistic development.

The main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment as it is through jobs that people are able to make contributions to society. As Singapore provides a well-structured education system of high standards to Singaporeans, Singaporeans are obliged to give back to the society through their jobs which help further economic progress, especially in this small nation where the labour force is more vital due to the lack of natural resources. Hence, the main function of formal education should be to aid Singaporeans to become contributing members of the society by enabling them to gain employment. In Singapore, different education paths students can take according to their individual aptitudes are available to enable them to choose appropriate careers. For example, after the Ordinary (O)-level Examinations, students would receive booklets that include roadmaps which illustrate the different paths that they can take – these range from tertiary institutions such as Junior Colleges (JC), polytechnics, the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) and even to specialized arts schools such as the School of the Arts (SOTA) and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA), so that students can pick up the necessary skills to gain employment depending on the field they intend to pursue in the future. Hence, it can be argued that gaining employment is the main function of formal education.

Another reason why gaining employment is often regarded as the main function of formal education is the nation-wide examinations that provide academic qualifications crucial for people to attain their desired jobs. The Primary School Leaving Examinations, O-level and A-level examinations that students have to take in the final year of each level of schooling are the main source of motivation for students to study, as achieving satisfactory grades and paper qualifications proves their academic strengths and skills, making them more attractive for employment. Furthermore, as education also expands students' knowledge and intellectual abilities, those who are educated have better access to a wider array of jobs which the less educated are denied of due to their lack of special vocational training. Such occupations include doctors, lawyers and researchers in specialised areas who are highly sought after in this competitive society of Singapore. Therefore, the main function of formal education should be to enable people to gain employment.

On the other hand, as gaining employment does not necessarily mean that people are able to stay employed, the main function of education should not be to enable people to gain employment but rather, hold on to the jobs, which is more crucial and difficult. Getting employed is only the first step to a successful career and employers would continue to keep track of their employees' ability to contribute to the company. In Singapore, if an employee is not on par with the rest, he or she can be retrenched or fired and this emphasizes the need for employees to possess qualities for sustained employment. Hence, formal education should aim to aid people in acquiring desirable skills and qualities which ensure employability rather than to land specific jobs, which is merely a stepping stone in a person's career. The Singapore education system helps

Education

to develop students' critical thinking skills through examination questions as well as inter-personal skills through social interaction with classmates, group work and class discussions and Project Work (PW), an A-level subject compulsory for all JC students. In addition, teachers also nurture students' attitude towards lifelong learning; having to face challenges in schools and learning to overcome problems would help them develop important qualities which allow them to constantly upgrade their skills, remain adaptable and relevant, and therefore be ensured of job security. Therefore, the main function of formal education should be the acquiring of useful skills rather than just gaining employment.

Furthermore, although career is an important part of a person's life, there are many other areas of concern such as character development. I feel that in our society, if the main function of formal education is merely to gain employment, education would be no different from mere vocational training and lessons would mainly consist of lessons teaching students how to write testimonials, polish up their interview skills and share tips on presenting themselves well in front of potential employers. However, such lessons usually come in the form of additional workshops provided by schools during post-examination periods and are not the main focus of education. In reality, the school curriculum is targeted on increasing students' knowledge and global mindedness so that they are able to develop into mature citizens, capable of making a difference to the world. Civics education inculcates in students moral values underscoring the importance of ethics, and Values-in-Action (VIA) activities which imbue students with empathy and allow them to experience the joy of serving others and helping the minority or the less fortunate groups such as the poor, needy and the handicapped. Hence, as values and character development are equally as important as success in one's career, the main function of formal education should not be to enable people to gain employment but also to impart the right values and expand their knowledge of the world around them.

Formal education serves many functions apart from gaining employment, such as inculcating moral values and grooming students holistically. Despite employment being a large focus for young adults pursuing their careers, I feel that character development and individual skills are what employers would more likely look out for in terms of employability and hence are just as important. Therefore, it is important that formal education also help students to develop personal qualities rather than to focus mainly on enabling them to gain employment.

Teacher's comments: It is insightful to distinguish between 'gaining employment' and 'staying employed' (employability over time). Some ideas could have been better analysed and explained but overall, this is quite commendable. Language is fluent but vocabulary can be richer.

‘The main function of formal education should be enable people to gain employment.’ Discuss with reference to your society.

Liu Zifei 15S49

In modern society, formal education is broadly defined as the normal schooling in organized institutions that most of us are experiencing right now, starting from primary school at a tender age to university before our first foray into the world of adulthood. In our increasingly competitive society, it is a pervasive phenomenon that university degrees and certification have become an indispensable passport for us to embark on future employment. However, does it necessarily imply that the main function of formal education is to enable us to gain employment? My answer is a resounding “NO”. Preparing us for future employment is just one of a myriad of functions and roles played by formal education, but indubitably not the main and the most significant one. Instead, the socialisation of students that comprises moral development, character building and communication with others should be the pivotal and main function of formal education.

With the number of dual-income families in Singapore on the rise due to the ever spiraling cost of living, the quality time that many parents are left with to spend with their young charges is increasingly limited. Many teenagers also agree that most of their time is spent within the walls of their schools. Nobody is therefore in a more privileged position to inculcate right and sound moral values than schools and teachers. In Singapore, it has been made compulsory for schools to add civics education into the current curriculum, enabling students to imbibe upright values through open and vibrant discussion with their teachers and peers. This is a very fundamental and critical aspect of formal education as it prevents potential corruption when students graduate from mere school compounds and start their careers in a much more complex social environment. On the other hand, unlike civics education, preparation for the work force alone does not preempt students for the corrupting forces they may encounter at the workplace.

Apart from moral development, character building is also a key and crucial process to instill various desirable and positive character traits in students. After all, what truly makes a person shine is neither the brilliant academic records, nor the highly esteemed degree from the top universities, but rather, the character speaking silently inside a person. For example, community work is incorporated into the current education system and students are given the precious opportunity to step beyond the confines of classrooms into their surrounding communities to do voluntary work as a class or individuals. Through the hardship and joy that community service experience entails, students are able to gain insights into the spirit of community service and the priceless value of extending a helping hand to others in need. All these shining character traits, such as helpfulness and unwavering determination will definitely stand students in good stead, not only in their future career but in their future life.

As humans, it is our innate and natural ability to socialize through interacting with other people in various types of social groups, be it the class we spend most time with, the co-curricular activity group of like-minded peers, or even the project work group where both cooperation and conflict take place. When students take active steps to participate in class outings, trips and excursions, interpersonal skills are honed; in their interaction with other people they learn conflict management and friendship building which are often accompanied by more interlinked relationships. Thus, formal education also augments interpersonal skills which are of paramount importance to every one of us.

However, it is undeniable that formal education shoulders the imperative responsibility of equipping students with relevant and related knowledge and skills in order for them to secure gainful employment in the future. Under the harsh and biting reality, we have to admit that preparing us for a job and a way of making a living is the main aim and function of formal education. After all, university is indeed the

Education

penultimate stop for us to acquire multifarious skills which are required by the dream job we hanker after. Without basic and concrete knowledge and skills in place, we will be probably lose our bread and butter.

Moreover, formal education should prepare us for future employment by exposing us to a multifaceted curriculum which gives rise to a myriad of possible choices for the future jobs. In secondary schools in Singapore, students are initially exposed to both science and arts subjects. This allows students to explore and realize their interests and passions in different domains before they make the final informed decision to major in certain courses in university which are tightly related to their future employment. In this way, formal education enables students to explore what they like to do and hopefully do what they want to.

Weighing the various functions of formal education in today's world, it is palpable that preparing students for future employment should not be the main function of formal education. This is not only applicable to Singapore but the whole world. Formal education is supposed and expected to be holistic in nature and develop well-rounded students who possess academic knowledge, upright moral values, outstanding character traits and relevant interpersonal skills. All these will benefit students in one way or another and the desirable effects will last throughout their whole life not just during their career.

In conclusion, it has been a deeply entrenched belief that formal education is the only and best conduit to a prosperous and illustrious career life. This is an indisputably sad truth in our knowledge-based society where degrees and certifications prevail. However, this definitely does not mean that the main function of formal education is the entitlement to employment. We spend so much time within the premises of schools, not just to grab a job and a decent pay, but more importantly to become a better person and to lead a meaningful life that extends far beyond working life.

Teacher's comments: Much thought has been given to the purpose of education and the attempt at evaluating/ weighing the importance of various objectives is quite well executed, more so towards the end of the essay than the start. Your writing is sophisticated with a good use of vocabulary and connectors for smooth transition.

‘University education is no longer necessary in today’s world.’

How realistic is this position?

Athena Ng 14S33

“Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” This famous quote demonstrates the importance of education; however, today’s world seems to have problematised the relevance of education itself. Conventionally, education has always been viewed as a social mobiliser, capable of lifting people out of poverty; now, with increasing educational levels worldwide, basic education no longer suffices and many will choose to obtain higher education to give themselves a competitive edge in the job market. For many people, university education is necessary as the new determinant of employability and social mobility in today’s increasingly educated – and therefore, competitive – workforce. It would also be necessary to confer skills and competencies that non-graduates do not have. However, in today’s increasingly globalized and technologically advanced era, such a thought will have to be re-evaluated. Personally, I feel that to a larger extent, university education is no longer necessary in today’s world, especially in boosting employability.

Firstly, on the basis of employability itself, I feel that it is realistic to claim that university education is no longer necessary in today’s world. This is because in today’s hyper-competitive world, a university degree is no longer the social mobiliser it was once exalted as. It is a well-known fact that our modern world is facing a surplus of graduates – China’s universities produce five million graduates per year, and in Singapore, almost twenty-three percent of the existing workforce have a degree. Therefore, it is no longer realistic to think that getting a degree guarantees a high paying job, or in some cases, landing a job at all. In many parts of Southeast Asia, Hong Kong and South Korea – all countries and regions with high education and graduate rates – youth unemployment rates are in double digits. Former South Korean president said that such “reckless university enrolment” is the cause of a surplus of educated labour that has depressed average wages by about eight percent. Evidently, even if one has university education, it can no longer promise jobs, as many people of the past would have believed. Furthermore, even if graduates do land a job, the prevalent problem of underemployment is rampant. Underemployment means that graduates end up in jobs that do not even require a degree. In America, forty-six percent of university graduates are currently underemployed, and in Singapore, the figure stands at around ten percent. For such underemployed graduates, their university education has not given them an edge at all as eventually, they end up in jobs that any other non-graduate could have undertaken. Therefore, if we are arguing on the basis that university education can give a competitive edge in employment, it is a bitter but established fact that a graduate degree is no longer necessary, due to the prevalent unemployment and underemployment situation.

In addition, it would be realistic to argue that higher education is no longer relevant today as high educational levels are no longer the only quality that employers look for. Although it remains an important factor, today’s employers have shifted towards a more skills-based approach, so in this respect, a university degree is no longer sufficient to differentiate between a graduate and non-graduate. According to a survey by Times Magazine, about seventy percent of employers stated that 21st century competencies and skills are as important as educational qualifications when they screen potential employees. Some examples of valuable skills are teamwork, problem solving and effective communication, and these are skills that are not exclusively taught in universities, but rather, something that an individual develops from experience. In many countries, governments have also realized the growing importance of transferable skills in today’s workplace. For example, in Singapore, the government pumps in millions of dollars into workforce training schemes like the SkillsFuture Council, the Workfare Training Support Scheme (WTS), as well as gives employers grants to incentivise them to send existing workers for skills upgrading. In Germany, the Dual Vocational Training System combines apprenticeships in a company and vocational education to ensure students learn to apply the skills they learn in school in a real-world context, as well as supplementary skills like critical thinking and teamwork, boosting attractiveness to employers. In light of all this, it would

Education

be a fair judgement to assert that the binary divide between those with and without a university graduate degree is no longer a picture recognized by today's employers, as the growing importance of transferable skills is set to slowly overshadow the traditional imperative of having a graduate degree. Therefore, it is true to state that university education is no longer important now because today's economy is more interested in 21st century skills rather than mere paper qualifications.

However, some people may insist that university education is still indispensable in today's world because it confers unique knowledge and skill sets that are necessary in certain fields. These are otherwise unattainable by those who do not have a university education. This would definitely be the case in highly-skilled industries like medicine, engineering and pharmaceuticals. For people aspiring to enter such fields it is an irrefutable must that they get a place in university and attain the relevant degree. Doctors have to spend up to a decade in university studying the complexities of human anatomy, before specialising in their final years; then they can practise as a medical practitioner. Given the high entry requirements to enter such knowledge-based industries, it is evident that they have to receive a unique form of education that people from no other fields – especially non-graduates – will possess, and it is the knowledge that they gain from their university education that makes them irreplaceable by those who do not share similar educational qualifications. As a result, it is unrealistic to dismiss completely the necessity of a university education in today's world, on the basis that relevant education is a must in knowledge-based industries that depend largely on a highly intellectual workforce to thrive.

Although there is value in such a counter-argument, I personally feel that in today's technologically-advanced world, technology will seek to replace jobs that require even the highest level of intellectual capability. Ray Kurzweil asserted that by 2025, a thousand-dollar laptop will have the equivalent capacity of a human brain; another supporting statistic claims that by the same time, half of the world's jobs will be replaced by automation. This means that many knowledge-intensive jobs – jobs that can differentiate university degree holders and non-holders – are becoming obsolete as machinery proves to be a viable, if not better, substitute for their intelligence. Statisticians and mathematicians have their mental processing abilities undermined by supercomputers and quantum computers that can calculate to up to thousands of times faster than the human brain. This automated process also entails a much narrower margin for error. Therefore, on the basis of the sustainability of a university education to continually secure employment, it would be a realistic argument to state that it is no longer relevant as rapid technological progress continues to displace workers in even the most skilled industries.

In conclusion, today's highly-competitive and technologically advanced world has rapidly begun to undermine the status that people of the past once associated with a university education and degree. It is a sad truth that university education is no longer necessary as automation continually replaces labour and unemployment continues to remain high. Therefore, people should seek to upgrade transferable skills and competencies that are both in demand by today's job market, and cannot be replaced by machinery, as these would be more reliable in preserving employability and viability in a modern context.

Teacher's comments: Sound knowledge shown and clear analysis and elaboration of points. The choice of supporting evidence could have been better with greater variety. Nevertheless, a decent effort.

Kaleidoscope

mass media

noun

1 (the mass media) [treated as sing. or pl.] the main means of mass communication (television, radio, and newspapers) regarded collectively: *their demands were publicised by the mass media.*

“A dead man can only go along with the stream, but a living man can go against it.” Those were the words of Chesterton, a British political thinker, on the power of the individual to freely express dissent. Indeed, with the proliferation of social media, bolstered by exploding Internet penetration rates the world over, it does seem like man has been endowed with a versatile mouthpiece to air his innermost views. Defined to be any form of online communication that enables users to share content and to likewise delve into what others have divulged, social media sites have been hailed for enabling anyone, from the comfort of their own homes, to post whatever they wish. And yet, such platforms have been mired in controversy as to whether they really promote diversity. Despite unlocking access to an array of perspectives, networking platforms tend to reinforce what people are already comfortable with; self-serving governments have also disabled their true capacity to give voice to the suppressed; lastly, these channels have fallen prey to users’ herd mentality. It is precisely for these reasons that social media have failed to truly encourage variety in opinions.

To start, detractors argue that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit have opened, to the common man, the doors to a legion of varying opinions. They cite Facebook’s bountiful availability of discussion pages, ranging from Food, Science, Art, Music, to even Politics and Religion, facilitating the exchange of opposing viewpoints across geographical constraints. Closer to home, amid concerns on the favoritism of mainstream media towards the incumbent People’s Action Political Party (PAP), political websites offer citizens an avenue to see the bigger picture. The Online Citizen, for example, uploaded live blogging sessions of various rallies that might not have been featured by the press; consequently, awareness of and discussion about these alternative political parties burgeoned, especially among youths. If social media can avail to all a multitude of angles on the same bones of contention, what can go wrong?

In reality, even though there undeniably has been unparalleled propagation of counterpoints, users have mostly chosen to reside within familiar territory. Dubbed “Confirmation Bias”, this theory posits that opinionated individuals have a tendency to pursue and support arguments that reinforce their preexisting beliefs. For example, a Louisiana State University study pored over the online behaviour of a few million Twitter users, categorising their tweets by political slant, from conservative to liberal. Unsurprisingly, the professors discerned an underlying pattern of interaction: friendly exchanges - including “re-tweeting” and “following” - occurred much more frequently between those harbouring similar ideologies, the effect more pronounced during times of elections. The same is observed among climate change deniers who continue to selectively frequent sites that agree with their ideals even when Science has already toppled them. Another Pew Study report revealed that it was less likely for a user to share his views on a subject if his online friends held opposing opinions. Thus, it is evident how, in spite of the availability of so many views, individuals tend to retreat deeper into their own partisan camps, building walls around their entrenched ideals rather than seeking out differing opinions.

Then again, opponents claim that at least, social media has equipped the marginalised with a say on issues that matter to them, ensuring that they are not left behind. Granted, there have been numerous cases of how citizens’ anger at governments that have neglected their duties was relayed by these channels. To illustrate, when the world was alerted of the dire lack of democracy in Hong Kong through the Umbrella Movement last year, students took not only to their streets but also sites like Instagram to disseminate word of the campaign. This culminated in a piling of international pressure on the Chinese government to relent to cries for democracy by granting universal suffrage. To critics, such is the power of social media to allow those with a suppressed voice offline to lobby for support online, preventing the tyranny of both the majority, and the powerful. With the voice of the minority and the disadvantaged amplified, the diversity

of opinions does seem to be enhanced.

Yet, even when such times of hardship call for extreme measures, the governments have already long recognised the deadly potential of cyberspace. As such, nationwide censorships have been imposed by dictators, military rulers, rogue states and the like to paralyse the online media. Harking back to the state of affairs in China, it is no wonder the government has gotten away without ceding much ground to the protestors. Owing to the Great Firewall of China, citizens within China were unable to gather sufficient momentum for the democratic cause. For instance, Liu Xiao Bo, an ardent political critic, uploaded the Charter 08 - detailing a revolutionary vision of Western democracy - onto Weibo, only to be swiftly incarcerated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Not only that, within hours, the CCP's Cyber "Security" Team had expunged all traces of the document from the fabric of the Internet. In another situation, Mr Vladimir Putin's troll army continually besieges German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Instagram account - among others including news agencies' Facebook pages - with pro-Russian rhetoric, undermining her political influence. When greed to solidify power overwhelms human conscience, states have disconnected content from their own people or instead resorted to flooding the cyberspace with propaganda to sway public sentiments. Such is how social media falls short of the empowerment of real diversity.

Lastly, individuals themselves - even when free from the authorities' control - have not effectively utilised social media due to their propensity to follow the "crowd". Humans have a psychological inclination to join an act blindly without exercising individual judgement, especially when their ability to reason is clouded by anger. Propped up by anonymity that distances the user from his actions' repercussions, it is incredibly easy for users to simply jump onto the bandwagon and coalesce into "lynch mobs". To illustrate, such a mob was triggered when The Real Singapore laid unfounded accusations that it was a Filipino family's police report that urged the police to intervene in the Thaipusam procession last year (it is illegal to play loud instruments at certain sections of the event). This had the domino effect of inciting xenophobic attitudes as one Singaporean after another leapt to the defence of the Indian devotees, inundating the comments section with emotionally-charged labels, like "Filipinos: FT for Foreign Trash". The dominance of these toxic views over others questioning the accuracy of facts or those asking for calm in these sagas goes to show how certain remarks are encouraged more by the crowd, hindering the flourishing of various perspectives.

In a nutshell, the claim of the question is, regrettably, far from being realised. Though I concede that social networking sites have made available a rich vein of varying ideas for all to explore and be exposed to, users have not clutched the opportunity to venture into uncharted areas. Furthermore, the all too encompassing ability of some undemocratic governments - precisely the context that demands freedom of expression - to paralyse the populace from empowering themselves, as well as the susceptibility of those cowering behind a veil of anonymity to herd mentality, prove the statement wrong. However, all hope is not lost, for social networking giants have pledged to empower politically-exploited citizens in the fight for democracy, and thus, true diversity of opinions. Coupled with growing education levels, the day when humanity is able to "go against the stream" online might soon be in sight.

Teacher's comments: Very mature piece of work with consistent use of well-elaborated examples as support. Could do better with a wider range of examples. Language flair is also evident

Do social media truly promote the diversity of opinions?

Alexander Gan 15S64

In the 21st century, the dominance of traditional media in acting as the main repository for information has been overshadowed by the advent of social media. A ubiquitous feature in the modern world, this interactive technology, which may take on many shapes such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, has not only allowed users to receive information in a fast and efficient manner, but also enabled them to input information of their own. This has opened a whole new can of worms in the sense that people's opinions could be heard throughout the world. It also gives rise to an interesting conundrum on whether social media actually increases the range of views available, or limits them. Looking beyond the superficial arguments surrounding the issue, I believe that social media does truly promote the diversity of opinions, although its ability to do so might be impaired at times.

Social media, through its function to inform individuals, can promote the diversity of opinions by broadening the scope of information that one has access to. Various types of information could be disseminated through social media, ranging from the trivial, such as when a friend's birthday is, to the complex, like a breaking news story. With the help of the Internet, social media is a quick and accessible source of information for many people, and often the primary outlet where most people receive their information. The ability to educate people more effectively through the use of social media has helped people gain a clearer picture of the situation they are looking at, allowing them to see through the lens of other people and coming to justifiable conclusions. Depending on the nature of information one receives, social media could even alter or completely change one's long-held beliefs. An interesting example would be the seismic shift, particularly in the West, on the issue of LGBT rights and same-sex marriage. Traditionally, homosexuality was believed to be sinful and an affront to prevailing social norms at the time. Most views on the matter were heavily influenced by close relatives, the religious community and traditional media outlets. However, the introduction of the Internet and, by extension, social media led to an onslaught of new scientific evidence and personal experience from the LGBT community, which challenged these long-standing views. Campaigns using social media to raise awareness of marriage equality and persuasive arguments by supporters of the movement have changed public opinion. A record high of 74% of Americans believe same-sex marriage should be legal, approximately 40% higher than it was thirty years ago. With more countries pushing for LGBT rights and legalising same-sex marriage, the most recent being the United States in a historic Supreme Court ruling in June 2015, the success of social media in informing the populace and giving rise to dissenting views is a testament to its ability to promote differences in opinion.

Social media also truly promotes the diversity of opinions by allowing users to share their own comments and express their own views, usually without the interference or intervention by external forces such as the government. To engender discussion and create healthy debate, many websites feature a 'Comments' section that users could utilise. Major websites such as Facebook and YouTube boost this capability. Some websites have even been established for the sole purpose of debate, such as *debate.org*. Crucially, the open nature of the Internet has inhibited the ability of most governments in controlling what people say online. This allows for more transparent and liberal political discourse, and gives rise to opposing viewpoints, and sometimes dissent. Historically, the government of Singapore had a major role in the media, often intervening when content was deemed offensive or detrimental to society's stability. This resulted in a public consensus on most matters and a lack of opposition to many policies. However, growing popularity of the Internet has given dissidents and opponents an outlet to express their views and reach a wider audience than ever before. Many such individuals have harnessed social media to propagate and advertise their ideologies and beliefs, such as Roy Ngerng, Alfian Sa'at and, most recently, Amos Yee. Consequently, discussions over various issues were sparked, ranging from the necessity of contribution to the Central Provident Fund, to the transparency in Singapore's government. With the rise of social media, prevailing views are challenged and political discourse runs freely. Thus, social media, as a medium of communication, has facilitated the expression of differing views and diversification of opinions.

Yet another way that social media plays a helping hand in the diversification of opinions is the presence of organisations and news outlets from all over the world, thus giving rise to the availability of different perspectives on world issues. From country to country and region to region, there are tangible differences in culture and ideologies, which lead to differing views on various issues. Social media connects countries

and regions, allowing users located in a certain locality to view content from those in another country. This proliferates a diversity of views expressed online and opens up new perspectives. Many discussions on global affairs exemplify this trait. On the Ukrainian Civil War, news organisations, governments and individuals located in the European Union and Ukraine were sympathetic to the Ukrainians' plight. News articles shared on social media by Europeans shed a negative light on Russian rebels and Russia's actions in Ukraine. Conversely, in Russia, there is greater support for the Russian forces and rebels. Russian news organisations on social media, like Russia Today, adopt a pro-Russia stance to the same events. In another major issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, similar characteristics can be observed. The Arab States, and sometimes Russia, are supportive of the Palestinians and draw attention to their suffering, while condemning Israeli actions. On the other hand, Israel and the West defend the actions of the Israeli military and emphasise Israel's right to self-determination. Different terms are used to describe the Israelis – 'invaders' is frequently used by the Arabs, while 'defenders' is used more prevalently by the West. Hence, the existence of such stark contrasts in opinions online due to asymmetric cultures does indeed show that social media promotes the diversity of opinions.

Nonetheless, whether social media genuinely promotes diversity in opinion comes into question when considering its limitations. Governments, particularly in authoritarian countries such as Russia and China, may inhibit the freedom of expression by practising censorship. Social media is strictly regulated and dissenting views censored, so as to paint positive pictures of the government. In Russia, several journalists have been arrested for going against the government. In China, popular social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are banned, and remaining social media sites heavily monitored to remove traces of government opposition. However, such measures are often futile when considering the open nature of the Internet. Its ubiquitous characteristics make it exceptionally difficult for government oversight. Various content could fall through the cracks and sometimes even gain popularity due to its rarity. In China, Virtual Proxy Networks (VPNs) are gaining popularity as they enable access to banned social media sites and open up new frontiers. A video highlighting the extent of pollution in major Chinese cities gained traction in China. Although the government eventually removed the video, it had already gained a whopping 200 million views and sparked widespread anger over the lack of environmental regulations in China. Therefore, despite the limitation of social media in disseminating different views at times, it can be easily overcome, ensuring that social media still does promote diversity in opinions.

Another argument discrediting social media's ability to promote the diversity of opinions is that it is not accessible to a large proportion of the world's population, hence limiting its effectiveness. Social media could only be accessed with the use of the Internet, but many countries lack the necessary infrastructure or technologies to make it readily available. Only 23% of the world's population can access the Internet according to a Pew Research Centre study published in 2010. Thus, there is a lack of information available to many developing countries, leading to prevailing opinions going unchallenged. In West African nations, many females undergo female genital mutilation despite many articles asserting that it is harmful because such information is not readily available. However, cheaper technologies are being developed which have made the Internet and social media more accessible to these developing nations. New projects such as "One Laptop per Child" and "universal Wi-Fi" have been launched in such less developed countries to extend Internet connection to far-flung regions. Although still in the early stages of execution, the results are promising: there is regular growth in Internet penetration rate among Third World countries, proving that the projects' main aim, to allow the poor there to access the Internet, is successful. Thus, although the diversity of opinions is currently limited by the lack of necessary infrastructure, it will not remain so for long.

Social media does promote the diversity of opinions, but it still has many barriers to be overcome. There continues to be a lack of access or excessive regulations that limits its effectiveness. Thus, it is necessary to take more actions in order to ameliorate these barriers and create transparency in the Internet. Only then can social media truly promote such diversity in opinions.

Teacher's comments: An impressive engagement with a wide range of cogent arguments and insightful examples! You certainly have a confident mastery and sophisticated understanding of issues related to social media. Excellent command of language, as evident in the felicitous expressions and good choice of words here! A rousing read overall! Well done, Alexander!

In 2014, there was an uproar in Singapore regarding the deceitful shop-owner Jover Chew who reportedly scammed a Vietnamese tourist when the latter wanted to purchase a mobile phone at Chew's store in Sim Lim Square. With the aid of social media, the incident blew up and attracted much attention. Subsequently, Chew's address, telephone number and other personal details were leaked after Internet sleuths launched a witch hunt for him. The information went viral on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Many members of the public have argued that had these details been made known to broadsheet journalists, they would have censored it and the information would not have gone viral. The advent and proliferation of social media have indeed negated some effects of censorship, but it would not be valid to argue that as a result, censorship is rendered pointless.

It must first be acknowledged that social media are accessible to many, giving them the opportunity to express themselves with great freedom. Citizen journalists have been on the rise, many of whom disregard censorship when spreading information. According to a 2015 report by advertising agency We Are Social, Singapore is ranked first in the world with the highest social media usage at 66%, which is measured by the number of active accounts on the top social network in the country against the country's population. This suggests that most locals are familiar with social media. Local citizen journalism website STOMP has encouraged citizen journalism by rewarding writers of popular articles with sums of money. This incentive has allegedly sparked a trend in Singapore where many citizens compete to publish exclusive information on all platforms, including social media. More often than not, the "exclusive" information shared by these citizen journalists would include uncensored content as they are too blinded by the possibility of the information going viral and thus, gaining them popularity, to be concerned about holding back objectionable details. This is seen as in the aforementioned case of Jover Chew, who was lynch-mobbed after his personal details were spread around the local social media. Given the great proliferation of social media and users who are inadvertently encouraged to not practise censorship, censorship does seem pointless.

On the other hand, censorship still remains very much relevant as information published online can result in harm to others. Indeed, users of social media ought to be guided by the "harm principle" introduced by John Stuart Mill in his work "On Liberty". The harm principle holds that the actions of individuals should only be limited to prevent harm to other individuals. Mill argued that, "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." It is essential that social media abide by the rule of limitation of harm as well. Consider this: in August 2014, graphic photos of Hollywood celebrities, some of them in the nude, were leaked on social media sites 4chan and Reddit. After the leak, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was alerted and together with various social media sites, clamped down and banned the spread of these photos. Had the leak of the explicit photos not been contained, it would have detrimental effects on unsuitable audience, such as impressionable young children who ought not be exposed to pictures of nudity. In contrast, social media platform Twitter has an option of not displaying sexually explicit graphic images to cater to younger users. It is evident that much harm can be done online and ought to be limited through the restriction of information that can be shared.

Social media cannot render censorship pointless as globally, social media garners much less readership and viewership than traditional media, which can be, and ought to be controlled. In developing countries such as Myanmar, local people have greater access to traditional media than social media. In 2014, the American Press Institute reported that 60% of Americans surveyed preferred to obtain their news from the news organizations directly via traditional media, while only 4% of them preferred obtaining news from social media. This can partly be attributed to the widely perceived low credibility of social media

compared to other traditional media such as broadsheets. Journalists working for press or broadcast media are professionally trained and would thus practise censorship when necessary. For instance, the graphic videos and images of terrorist group Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIS) beheading hostages such as James Foley were not shown in newspapers or on televised news. Personal details of the victims were not revealed and photos of their family members or friends were blurred. In this case, censorship by the traditional media is clearly warranted given their large reach, and the fact that it would have been deeply disrespectful to the dead hostages to broadcast the videos of their execution. Censorship is therefore not pointless even in this age of social media, as the traditional media have a much wider reach, and must still be controlled.

Censorship is also crucial as it helps to maintain stability in a country. In Singapore, the Sedition Act is in place to ensure that racial and religious harmony is not being undermined. For instance, the three major Internet service providers (ISP) in the city-state are regulated by the Media Development Authority (MDA), and offensive remarks made on social media will be investigated and usually taken down. In China, censorship is used heavily by the government to ensure political stability. Its internet firewall, more commonly known as the Great Firewall of China, is famed for blocking numerous international social media sites including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Their local media is also heavily regulated. This regulation is a cornerstone in preserving the power of the Chinese Communist Party as it minimises possibilities of civil rebellions organised via social media. Hence, censorship is still very useful in these modern days with social media.

In conclusion, the advent of social media does not necessarily mean that censorship is pointless. Though citizen journalists have often ignored the need for censorship, it remains relevant due to the possibility of harm and the need to maintain social and political stability. In fact, traditional media still has a larger audience than social media, and this suggests that the rise of social media would not affect society to a large extent at least for the time being. Although there have been more problems arising from the publication of uncensored content on social media, it would be disastrous to abandon censorship completely. Undoubtedly, it would be ideal if social media and censorship can work together in the future to further promote the benefits of censorship. Social media users or citizen journalists can be educated about journalism and the benefits of censorship so that the society can benefit as a whole from the more educated use of media as a tool to disseminate and receive information.

Teacher's comments: A couple of good insights. The harm principle could have been better developed. Good use of language.

'In this age of social media, censorship is pointless.' Is this argument valid?

Lim Kai Zhi 14A14

With the advent of social media in the 21st century that has permeated all aspects of modern life, access to information becomes increasingly convenient with the simple click of a button. To some individuals, availability to such a wealth of knowledge may lead to a whole host of problems such as social tensions and self-radicalisation. However, I contend that censorship is an unfeasible end goal and poses no inherent value or benefits to various societies around the world in this social media age.

Proponents of censorship argue that it can serve as a vital tool for preventing discourse and tensions and maintaining the tenuous social fabric, which is especially crucial in countries where inter-racial or religious conflicts are likely to happen. An example would be Singapore, a nation where different races can interact with each other and live together harmoniously. However, such peace is threatened when bloggers such as Amy Cheong and Amos Yee make crass remarks about Muslims and Christians, which subsequently went viral on popular social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube, resulting in immediate reactions from enraged netizens. Censorship laws such as the Sedition Act or OB(Out-of-Bound) markers can thus help to decrease the propensity of such incidents which may have dangerous repercussions and lead to social disorder if occurring on a more frequent basis. This is further exemplified in the recent light of terrorist groups like ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) propagating their extremist ideologies through the use of videos and posters that circulated quickly on social media platforms. The recent case of two teens in Singapore who were self radicalised by ISIS brought new discussion on the need for censorship laws so as to prevent more individuals in Singapore from suffering the same fate and possibly causing tensions among different racial groups, especially because the aforementioned terrorist groups have a tendency to target certain races in their propaganda. Therefore, it may be argued that censorship helps to stabilise and maintain social order and is thus not pointless as it possesses an inherent value and importance in today's society.

I contend with that argument however, as I believe censorship in this age of social media is unfeasible to begin with. Due to the global proliferation of social media platforms especially amongst our youth, it is difficult and near impossible, to restrict access to information. The convenience of 'sharing' a particular viewpoint, or 'following' a particular figure or group, allows such laws to be easily circumvented and curtailed. For example, although Singapore places restrictions on various pornography sites to prevent impressionable young teens or children from being influenced, videos containing nudity can easily be shared on social media sites such as Facebook, and is thus accessible by all individuals. This is strikingly similar to information regarding contentious issues such as LGBT (Lesbian Gay Transsexual Transgender) rights, or racist propaganda, all of which can be found easily social media sites. Censorship laws on such sites thus become a herculean task because of the convenience of creating new accounts of pages even after it has been banned, or simply prolonging the lifespan of these accounts by remaining anonymous. Critics to this viewpoint would argue that we should not limit censorship just because it is impossible to achieve its effects fully, as censorship still imposes certain limitations to the access of contentious information. However, I believe that the most effective way to prevent potential harm or damage to society should instead be to utilise social media sites to our advantage, such as using social media platform as educational tools to spread reliable and credible information, for its extensive reach can target large audiences and can tackle such problems in an effective manner. Therefore, censorship is pointless as it is not a feasible option to solve pertinent issues in today's society.

Moreover, censorship is pointless and does not hold any intrinsic value as it stifles the benefits which could be achieved by unregulated social media sites. Such platforms can serve as a pedestal and a microphone for individuals to voice their views and allow greater discussion and critical analysis amongst the general

population, even possibly enacting social change. This can be seen when social media sites such as Facebook are used to constantly galvanise support for certain causes and bond people with a common goal together. Occupy Central in Hong Kong or the People's Climate March are notable examples of social media being used to effectively gather crowds championing similar causes towards social progress, providing pressure and garnering attention for the implementation of policies to address these issues. The Pink Dot Movement in Singapore championing LGBT views also gathered 28,000 people through the use of social media sites. Although opponents argue for the use of censorship on such issues due to their conflicts with Singapore's Christian and Muslim population, I contend that such censorship will only limit Singapore's progress and hinder efforts to help Singapore remain relevant in a rapidly modernizing world that sees the need to uphold basic human rights. Therefore, censorship is in fact detrimental and is thus pointless as it stymies any efforts led by social media meant for advancement and progression.

Lastly, many would believe that censorship in fact infringes upon the inalienable rights of individuals access free information, especially when this is one of the primary goals of media outlets. Censorship can commonly be used to restrict access to important information, such as in China with the infamous 'Great Firewall' a mass censorship programme that filters important information about China's history such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Concerns regarding domestic censorship also arise when individuals are not exposed to a variety of viewpoints and thus unable to engage in proper discussions or discourse regarding pertinent issues, especially in a technologically advanced global landscape where the usage of social media increases every year. For example, Twitter, a social media network, implemented a system in 2012 that would withhold particular 'tweets' or opinions that might break local laws. The massive backlash and criticisms from netizens all around the globe proved that various individuals view the right to unrestricted information and expression as one that is absolute, and efforts at censorship would result in adverse reactions from citizens, particularly with regards to censorship on social media, as these platforms allow the common man to express his views freely to a large global audience. Therefore, censorship efforts are thus pointless as they face massive retaliation and are sometimes seen as a tool to conceal important information.

All in all, although massive censorship laws like those in China are the only ways in which social order and peace can be ensured and maintained at the highest level, such overtly draconian practices are still undesirable as they infringe on the rights to information, repress efforts for progressive change, and are thus ultimately pointless. However, the concerns arising from an unregulated social media landscape are not invalid, and I personally believe that the way to resolve such issues, as mentioned earlier, would be to utilise social media and free information inflow to our advantage by promoting positive and educational materials online, allowing us to effectively tackle the issues associated with this digital age.

Teacher's comments: Some valid arguments raised with some sound insights. There is appropriate use of supporting evidence as well.

‘In this age of social media, censorship is pointless.’ Is this argument valid?

Tan Yi Qin Celia 14S30

With the rise of China's largest social media platform, SinaWeibo, many Chinese citizens feel liberated. Despite the heavy handed methods the Chinese Government often uses to mute criticisms and controversial postings, the rise of social media has indeed empowered the Chinese with more freedom of expression. Social media is a great platform for the quick dissemination of views, ideas and news content. I strongly believe that a plurality of views is very important for society, as it allows the individual to be well informed of the situation around them. Social media now serves as that valuable tool which allows people to hear different sides of the story. Nonetheless, despite the benefits of free expression, I am of the view that social media should not go unregulated.

The first and most practical argument against the censorship of social media is that there is simply too much content online to be regulated. Users can make a limitless number of postings at any time of the day on their favourite social media sites; hence, billions of postings are uploaded each day. To exercise absolute control over social media platforms would require the government to employ many regulators to constantly monitor and vet content, deleting the posts which the government deems as harmful to the masses. This is often practised in China in order for the government to minimise dissent and gain full control over the media consumption patterns of their citizens. However, the “Great Firewall of China” is not fool proof. Japanese manga and anime content, which the Chinese government often finds racy and unsuitable for the young, can be found on Chinese social media sites. Users who are interested in Death Note, an anime series banned in various Chinese cities, can still find the content through social media with enough digging. The authorities also often clamp down on posts relating to the Tiananmen Square Protests which occurred on 4th June 1989. Key words such as “June 4th”, “six four” or “protests” are blocked from search catalogues. Nonetheless, Chinese netizens often seek to commemorate the event on 4th June with oblique references and images, such as “1-9-8-9” or “25 years have passed.” Occasionally, some of the postings go undetected. With the sheer volume of postings, it is impossible for the government to keep a strict censorship policy in place.

However, there is definitely some value in the censorship of social media. With the novel empowerment of individuals with the tool of social media, many people can make postings online without thinking twice about the harm that their posts can bring. The popular American social media site, Reddit, is often considered a bastion of free speech. The site prides itself for its anti-censorship policy and allows people to post whatever they want. This is dangerous as it can become a platform for inflammatory remarks to be made. For instance, subreddits (threads) can often be found criticizing the African-American community while glorifying white supremacy, thus gaining the site the title of the “most violently racist content” on the Internet. These pages continue to worsen the culture of hate which is divided along racial lines. Many speculated that the recent Charleston Shootings in America was partially caused by this online culture of hate. The criminal, Dylan Roof, had previously searched the internet on “Black on white crimes” and felt an urge to take matters into his own hands as he felt the online conversation had to be translated into action. He eventually took the lives of 9 African Americans on 17 June 2015. The internet and social media definitely played a part in his radicalisation. Cyber bullying is another way in which free speech translates into great harm. The suicide of Amanda Todd, a teen who was blackmailed and bullied online, serves as a reminder that mental toll resulting from seemingly harmless words on a computer screen can have a great impact on another person. Clearly, social media can lead to the spread of discriminatory and inflammatory remarks which can upset the online reader or lead to action being taken at times in order to perpetuate one's hate. The need for censorship on social media has never been stronger.

The censorship of material on social media can also be regarded as a way of establishing what the society and government stand for. Different communities have differing levels of tolerance and alternative views on the freedom of speech. Although the government in Singapore does not actively censor materials

online, there is significance in post-publication censorship. Remarks made by the blogger Roy Ngerng about the Central Provident Fund were seen as inaccurate and misleading, which eventually led to a law suit against him. He eventually took down the blog posts following court orders. It is evident in this case that the Singapore government values political stability highly and hence it felt that it was important to point out the mistakes made in this post to the public. This will ensure the masses do not get the wrong idea. There is also value in the censorship of controversial material online, such as in video postings which show violence. In the past year, there have been numerous beheading videos released by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which were meant to instil fear in the public, as well as attract individuals who would like to join them in their “holy war”. There has been substantial online censorship of the videos on social media sites Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, so that these violent and gruesome videos will be censored from young eyes. It will also help to give the victims and families some respect by limiting the distribution of the video. Hence, the censorship of online media still has its value despite the difficulties of online censorship. Post-publication censorship reminds the society of the values they stand for and also communicates the government’s stand on issues. It remains important as it will help to protect the moral and ethical conduct of society, hence justifying its value.

One widely recognised benefit of social media is the plurality of views available online. Censorship can be considered rather pointless when it limits the diversity of views that social media is supposed to give to the users, where it could develop the conversation on social issues. This gamut of views and stories available online allows the netizen to be informed about a certain situation before taking a stand on the issue. The internet is essentially limitless – we can find news articles or reactionary pieces written by different authors with different backgrounds, allowing the netizen to consider different points of view. The popularization of videos has also allowed information to be passed to viewers even more quickly, as we see more and more “YouTubers” coming online to share their views much more convincingly through video. Information derived from social media is different from the mainstream print or broadcast media as the average netizen is able to give his or her true experiences on the ground, unlike mainstream media where articles are often written by journalists. For instance, the issue of gay rights has become a recent area of contention with the legalising of gay marriage in America. The multiplicity of views online from ordinary users can help to shape a netizen’s decision on whether they would condone or ignore the idea. There are many LGBT support communities which have pages online, such as the Trevor Project and the Human Rights Campaign. However, there are many people who remain neutral or keep their anti-gay religious stance, and they share these thoughts online. Effectively, social media is able to play a part in people’s decisions as there is more input from people on the ground and more people are heard. Censorship becomes pointless when it starts to limit and distort the discussion, which can actually help to develop the views of society as a whole so that people will be able to adopt more mature and weighted views. With a multiplicity of views, there will be better understanding of the LGBT community and less discrimination or more tolerance when there is controlled but adequate debate available for the online community. Having free speech will advance the understanding of an issue through having more views to consider, as long as the conversation remains respectful and controlled.

In conclusion, there is definitely value in censoring social media. The dangers of free speech can undermine the stability of communities. Some censorship will be important in upholding societal values in a social media landscape where there is unfettered media freedom. After all, we live in a community and individuals will need to cooperate in order to ensure that everyone can live in harmony, even in an online community. However there must be a balance. As long as they do not make inflammatory remarks and keep to having meaningful discussions, individuals should continue to be given the rights to free speech.

Teacher’s comments: Your essay shows maturity of thought and there are good stretches of text showing a good command of language.

Kaleidoscope

noun

1 [mass noun] the expression or application of human creative skill and imagination, typically in a visual form such as painting or sculpture, producing works to be appreciated primarily for their beauty or emotional power: *the art of the Renaissance* | *great art is concerned with moral imperfections* | *she studied art in Paris.*

• works produced by human creative skill and imagination: *his collection of modern art* | (as modifier) *an art critic.*

• creative activity resulting in the production of paintings, drawings, or sculpture: *she's good at art.*

2 (the arts) the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance: *the visual arts* | [in sing.] : *the art of photography.*

3 (arts) subjects of study primarily concerned with human creativity and social life, such as languages, literature, and history (as contrasted with scientific or technical subjects): *the belief that the arts and sciences were incompatible* | *the Faculty of Arts.*

4 a skill at doing a specified thing, typically one acquired through practice: *the art of conversation.*

art & culture

noun [mass noun]

1 the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively: *20th century popular culture.*

• a refined understanding or appreciation of culture: *men of culture.*

2 the ideas, customs, and social behaviour of a particular people or society: *Afro-Caribbean culture* | [count noun] : *people from many different cultures.*

• (as modifier) the attitudes and behaviour characteristic of a particular social group: *the emerging drug culture.*

3 Biology the cultivation of bacteria, tissue cells etc. in an artificial medium containing nutrients: *the cells proliferate readily in culture.*

4 the cultivation of plants: *this variety of lettuce is popular for its ease of culture.*

Music has always been pivotal in mankind's evolution throughout the ages, providing humans with a form of self-expression. With the advent of technology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, various genres of music have proliferated. Pop music, music that is highly popular with the masses and makes it to the top spots in billboard charts, has thrived as its influence spreads around the globe. However, pop music is often misconstrued to convey shallow, frivolous messages. Its detractors claim that this genre of music can never be considered serious, implying that it is utterly impossible for pop music to make a difference to the world, impact societal trends positively or deliver thought-provoking truths. I beg to differ as I am of the opinion that pop music can, on occasion, be serious.

With its vast reaching influence, pop music has the ability to highlight unhealthy social phenomena, allowing the general populace to witness the darker side of such phenomena and recognise the threat they pose. Thus, pop music can indeed be viewed as serious. Pop songs sometimes contain hard-hitting lyrics which bring to light the shortcomings present in the society one lives in. For instance, Beyonce's ballad "Pretty Hurts" was a scathing critique on her community's unattainable standards of beauty and the psychological damage it inflicted on women. Its haunting verses likening physical perfection to a disease of a nation cement her point that her country is obsessed with the pursuit of flawlessness and this very quest cuts down the self-esteem of many females, making them feel worthless and ugly. This message is extremely pertinent in America, Beyonce's homeland. "Pretty Hurts" is a pop song that made it to the forefront of countless music charts and was replayed endlessly by numerous radio stations. Yet it drove home an exceedingly sombre message about a societal trend that was spiraling out of control. Moreover, many other pop songs are able to be serious in their delivery. Foster the People's "Pumped up Kicks" – which stresses the necessity of preventing youth gun violence – and Michael Jackson's "Heal the World" – which shows how his society has ravaged planet Earth and need to do something about it – do exactly that.

Some people believe that pop music ultimately cannot be taken seriously due to their catchy tunes which take the sobriety away from the messages these songs might convey, however serious these messages might be. They think that the pulsating beats of pop songs remove whatever solemnity the lyrics of such songs contain, inspiring listeners to take to the dance floor rather than take action to reverse unhealthy societal trends. Yet this is untrue as the tunes of pop songs, while undeniably catchy, serve to reinforce their serious messages rather than undermine them. The backing melodies of pop music tend to make these songs difficult to forget due to their addictive beats. Therefore after listening to pop songs which bear grave warnings or comment on negative social trends, one remembers these dire warnings due to the tunes of the songs rather than dismissing them. Hence pop music can be serious as it sheds light on trends in society which have the potential to cause great harm.

Also, pop music can deliver empowerment as well as encouragement to marginalized groups. Selena Gomez, a pop artiste, writes in one of her famous pop compositions that one should constantly believe in oneself although naysayers may bully, taunt or belittle one. The song in question, "Who Says", is targeted towards youth at the bottom of the social hierarchies in their schools. It urges such teenagers to see their value and the immense potential within them in the face of the mockery by their peers. Taylor Swift's pop hits, too, serve to spur the underdog on and show these marginalized people that they can attain success despite the obstacles in their path. These examples clearly prove pop music can indeed be serious.

However, some may argue that pop music is merely engineered for profit, thus such music is frivolous and conveys trivial, toxic messages. They cite the pop concoctions of Britney Spears, Ke\$ha and Nicki Minaj,

Art & Culture

which advocate messages like “Having fun in is all you need in life” and “Wealth and power are everything”, to prove this point. It is true that pop music can be demeaning and frivolous. Yet not all pop songs are shallow confections designed to maximize an artiste’s earnings. Certain quality pop songs do serve to encourage and empower those who are crippled by self-doubt and beaten down by their circumstances. This clearly displays that pop music can, and should, absolutely be taken seriously.

With its widespread appeal, vast reaching influence and enormous fan base, pop music is a force to be reckoned with. Its subtle pull can change mindsets and broadcast messages. Sadly, its capacity to be serious is often underappreciated – a great mistake – and if used in the right way, pop music has the revolutionary power to shape the way people think and impact the world, making it a better place.

Teacher’s comments: You can raise the quality of discussion even higher by bringing in political messages in pop songs too. Organisation can be better e.g. if you had two clear halves – the first covering the reasons why pop music is not viewed with seriousness and the second, the reasons it can be. More examples needed. Fluent language but can be richer with more sophisticated sentence structure and vocabulary!

"Did we become miserable after listening to pop music, or did we listen to pop music because we were miserable?" This quote was uttered by actor John Cusack in the movie 'High Fidelity' after his realisation that there were millions of pop songs which dealt with the themes of heartbreak, pain and rejection. With this in mind, there is no doubt that pop music can be serious. In addition, pop music deals with so many other important and serious issues such as social, political and economic issues. Pop music deals with these issues not just in its lyrical content, but also in its execution when the artists that create pop music have to experience these issues firsthand. Therefore I personally think that pop music can be serious.

However, we must first acknowledge that some forms of pop music can never be serious. Artists such as Weird Al Yankovic and The Lonely Island create comedic music which often is a parody of chart-topping popular music. The music that they create is purely for entertainment purposes and has no real substance. It is such artists who give the majority of society the impression that pop music can never be serious. In addition to comedy music, most of the songs that top the charts are also purely for entertainment purposes. Artists such as Katy Perry create music that most people can dance to and enjoy without being serious or dealing with issues in our society. This is something that we cannot escape from. However, there are many other forms of pop music that can be serious.

A way that pop music can be serious is when pop music deals with social issues that are prevalent in our society. These social issues are extremely diverse and can range from issues such as the increasing lack of privacy in modern society and the shooting of innocent black males by white police officers. When these important and pressing social issues are explored in pop music, pop music shows itself to be extremely serious. This is where an artist like Kendrick Lamar comes to the forefront. Kendrick Lamar is a black rapper from Compton, California who has become extremely popular for his music that deals with and explores a wide range of social issues. In his second album, *Good Kid M.a.a.d City*, the overall concept tying the whole album together is about how Kendrick grew up in an environment where drugs, gang violence and prostitution were considered normal and how he rejected all of this to grow into the person he is today. In a popular single 'The Blacker The Berry' off Kendrick's latest album called 'To Pimp a Butterfly', Kendrick raps about how some groups of black people are hypocrites when they protest against white police officers' violence towards black people. Kendrick adopts this thinking because gang violence is so common in places like Compton where black gangsters do not hesitate to kill one another.

Pop music also deals with the issue of racism. During the 1960s in Memphis, Tennessee which was rife with racial tensions, Stax Records was a high profile and popular record label which promoted integration in society. This could be seen in their house band, Booker T and the MGs which was one of the first integrated bands with both white and black musicians. Stax Records set an example for the rest of Memphis and for the rest of America to follow. These examples show how pop music then and now explores the different social issues in society. As such, pop music should be considered to be serious.

Another way that pop music can be serious is when pop music deals with the economic problems faced by the poorer groups of people in our society. Pop music gives a voice to those who have been marginalised in their efforts to change the status quo where the rich become richer and the poor become poorer. When the Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of Great Britain, thousands of workers were laid off and there was severe unemployment in the entire country. This period saw the rise of punk to become one of the most popular genres of pop music because punk bands such as The Clash and The Damned wrote songs about their dissatisfaction with the Thatcher regime in Britain and the economic problems and hardships faced by the common man on the street. Most of the people in society could

Art & Culture

identify with such economic issues so this form of pop music rose in prominence during this time period. While these bands were successful, they never forgot their working class roots and so they took up the role of being the voice of the people. This shows that pop music can be serious when it explores the economic problems and hardships faced by working class people in a society not suited to their needs.

Another way that pop music can be serious is when pop music is used as a form of protest against political decisions made by the government and politicians. In America, many of the protests against what was seen as unnecessary wars such as the Vietnam War in the 1970s and the Iraq War during the 2000s came from the world of pop music. This could be seen in how popular musicians wrote protest songs that were against the government's war campaigns and organised concerts where fans who shared their sentiments were given an opportunity to come together as one. An extremely popular song which was written as a form of protest against the Vietnam War was Bruce Springsteen's 'Born in the USA.' This song was a rallying cry for all the people who felt disillusioned with the Vietnam War and felt that too many lives were lost for an unworthy cause. Influential band Fugazi also performed at an anti-war protest near the White House in the 1990s, further reinforcing the links between pop music and political issues. As such, pop music can be serious.

Finally, pop music can also be serious when it deals with emotional issues such as heartbreak, rejection and pain. During the 1990s, singer-songwriter Elliott Smith rose to prominence as his emotional and often painful songs were extremely attractive to listeners at that time. Elliott Smith's music could even be considered to be depressing as the lyrical themes explored in his songs were extremely serious and often extremely tragic. As such, some people who were going through difficult times in their life found it easy to identify with such an artist and his music. Unfortunately, Elliott Smith's promising life came to an abrupt end. After releasing just two albums, he was discovered dead with two stab wounds in his chest. When there is such tragedy in pop music, it is impossible not to consider it as something that is very serious.

In conclusion, I can fully identify with John Cusack's remarks in the movie 'High Fidelity'. Pop music deals with emotional issues and so much more; pop music can also be the voice of the marginalised and the disillusioned. With all of this in mind, I have absolutely no doubt that pop music can be serious.

Teacher's comments: You clearly know a lot about music and its value from the wide range of examples given. However, there could have been more balance and scope. Language is fluid and clear, though there could be more sophistication and variety in your expression.

‘The appreciation of the arts is what makes us human.’ Do you agree?

Lim Shao Yu 14A11

“Science, technology, medicine, these are the things that help us live. But the arts – fine art, drama, the literary arts – these are the things we live for.” This quote from the famous “Dead Poets’ Society” encapsulates my belief that the appreciation of the arts is a central part of what defines us as human beings. Being able to appraise and critique artworks, be it fine art, theatre works, or literary works, and gaining a sense of fulfillment through deciphering the meaning behind these works are a definitive part of what makes us human. Humans are the only beings capable of expressing free will and creativity, and are the only ones with the ability to create from imagination alone. Though some may dismiss the appreciation of the arts as a frivolous pastime, or an exclusive activity within the confines of the artistic community, it is what makes us human as it celebrates the human ingenuity to create. The appreciation of the arts allows us to reflect on the human condition as it provides social commentary, and allows us to explore our individuality as well. Moreover, it creates a mass cultural identity that enables us to find common ground with one another, thus forming cultural communities through the appreciation of the arts. Hence, the appreciation of the arts is definitely what makes us human.

Some may dismiss the appreciation of the arts as mere epicurean entertainment. There is still a parochial perception that the arts are useless and the appreciation of the arts is simply a frivolous pastime that does not add value or make us explore our humanity. The appreciation of the arts can be perceived as a mere activity that provides us with leisure and entertainment, as one could argue that going to watch a Shakespearean play or attending a musical matinee does not make us any more human than those who do not engage in such activities. In fact, for works like “Water Lilies” (by Claude Monet) or “Scene by the River” (by Seurat) which depict nothing more than scenes found in everyday life, appreciating them neither helps us gain more insight to our humanity nor expresses intrinsically human qualities like individuality and free will. Thus, the appreciation of the arts does not make us human, but can be perceived as a mere frivolous pastime for some.

Moreover, some may also argue that the appreciation of the arts can only truly be done by the experts in their respective fields, thus viewing it as an exclusive activity that does not help all of us identify with what makes us human. Experts in the fine arts, literary, and dramatic spheres such as esteemed literary critic Ted Hughes or famous art critic Frank O’Hara have undergone many years of study and training, allowing them to master the skills and jargon necessary to critically appreciate various art forms. The ordinary layman is not equipped with such critical appreciation skills such as the Feldman’s Approach or the Theory of Aesthetics, and this alienates a major portion of society from ever truly “appreciating” the arts. Since it is an exclusive activity, the appreciation of the arts cannot be said to be a definite aspect of our universal humanity, as not everyone in the society can partake in this activity for experts.

However, it would be a harsh generalization to say that the appreciation of the arts is mere epicurean entertainment or an exclusive activity for experts. The appreciation of the arts is more than just a whimsical pastime, but rather a celebration of human ingenuity throughout the ages. Humans are the only beings that possess the capacity to create, and combined with our unparalleled ingenuity and imagination, humans have been responsible for beautiful creations throughout history. From Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, to Rodin’s sculptures, to Siegfried Sassoon’s heartfelt war poetry, practitioners of the arts have created many marvelous and awe-inspiring works that exemplify the intrinsically human quality of creativity. The appreciation of the arts allows the individual to celebrate the achievements of these various artists, and is an affirmation of human artistry and the human ability to create and manifest beauty in various forms. Thus, the appreciation of the arts actually acknowledges and champions human ingenuity and creativity, and is what makes us human.

In addition, the appreciation of the arts offers a reflective insight into the human condition, as the arts provide a powerful and stimulating form of social commentary. Picasso’s “Guernica” has become an

Art & Culture

acclaimed anti-war symbol, as it displays the horrors of war wrought by Man and the self-destructive nature of humans in startling monochrome. Works like this offer a reflection of the human condition, prompting one to question one's own humanity and really consider the moralistic indeterminacies that surround the human condition. It presents the good and the bad of humanity, and appreciating art like this would allow one to determine what truly constitutes a human being. Works like "Black Iris" (by Georgia O'Keefe) also highlight certain sectors of society, in this case women, and make viewers question the role of this particular group in relation to society and the human race. By comparing women to the sensuality and power represented by the Iris flower, O'Keefe empowers the female identity, and prompts viewers who appreciate it to redefine the female gender role and what exactly constitutes the female identity. Hence, the appreciation of the arts is what makes us human as it offers a reflection of the human condition through social commentary.

Furthermore, the appreciation of the arts offers one the channel to explore one's own individuality, which is an innate quality that all humans possess. The arts and the appreciation of it enables one to go on a journey of introspection and self-reflexivity, giving one the opportunity to explore aspects of one's own individual identity. For example, Christine Chia's "Law of Second Marriages" offers raw and emotionally charged poetry for readers to appreciate. By delving into these emotive stanzas on problematic human relationships, readers are able to explore the complexities of human interaction, and question how their own social interactions are like. Marc Quinn's shocking blood portrait entitled "Self" exemplifies the fragility of life and human mortality. By appreciating his work, viewers are impelled to view their own mortality and dependence on others, and this will thus deepen one's understanding of what it means to be human by exposing viewers to their own personal weakness and fragility. Therefore, the appreciation of the arts offers an introspective journey into human individuality and our own private emotions, helping one to understand what it means to be human.

The appreciation of the arts also creates a cultural identity as well, and is rather more inclusive than exclusive. By bringing people together, the appreciation of the arts promotes the intrinsically human tendency to form communities and encourage camaraderie. The arts have manifested into prominent cultural symbols, and these symbols have the ability to bring people together as they represent a common trait that members of that community share, hence prompting the creation of more cohesive communities through the appreciation of the works. A prime example would be James Rosenquist's "World Fair Mural". By combining uniquely American symbols like the Statue of Liberty and the bald eagle, Rosenquist paints a portrait of America that binds all Americans in a visually stunning portrayal of the American Dream, promoting the sense of community and camaraderie that characterizes human behavior. In Singapore, theatre company Wild Rice works with Arts Outreach to bring drama and theatre appreciation to the masses. By staging open houses and free plays, strong communities for drama enthusiasts can be formed, as people from all strata of society can come together in their appreciation and love for theatre. The tendency and ability to ignore differences in social standing or background in favor of the common appreciation for an art form is undoubtedly a uniquely human characteristic. Thus, by creating a cultural identity and allowing for the formation of communities regardless of background, the appreciation of the arts promotes the cohesion and camaraderie that makes us human.

In conclusion, the human condition is defined by individuality, free will and the ability to create and form communities, and the appreciation of the arts gives one a viable channel to do so. In fact, the appreciation of the arts is an expression of one's ability to identify and empathize with the human condition, and this very activity exemplifies and allows one to explore exactly what makes us human.

Teacher's comments: Clear and coherent piece of writing, with many appropriate examples used to support your arguments, but it could have been more consistent. Decent effort.

‘Artists are basically people who are rebelling against accepted norms
and belief.’ Discuss

Lim Shao Yu 14A11

The term “rebel” and “deviant” have often been used to describe artists as people see them as individuals who resist socially and culturally accepted norms and beliefs. But to term artists as “basically people who are rebelling” would be a rather reductive view of what artists can contribute to society. Norms and beliefs are established and accepted by one’s society, cultural context, and even the state, and to rebel against that would be deemed unruly and profane. Though some artists exhibit a flagrant disregard for accepted norms and beliefs and rebel for the pure deviant thrill of it, most artists rebel against norms and beliefs for a higher purpose. Artists rebel against these norms as a form of social commentary to challenge and redefine certain outmoded customs and beliefs, and that is more ennobling than just being a mere “rebel”. More than rebels, artists can also adhere to and even champion accepted values and beliefs as well. Artists are also people who can help one explore one’s emotions and the intangible self, and they can actually bring a community and society closer together with their work. Artists are definitely more than just delinquents and rebels, and can contribute greatly to our society with their creativity and ingenuity.

There are certain artists who rebel against accepted norms and beliefs for the pure thrill of it, and are seen as unruly deviants by the rest of society. The early 20th century Dada movement’s central idea was to rebel against everything, and to rebel for the sake of rebelling. Works from the Dada movement like the “Fountain” and the “Fur Cup” (both by Marcel Duchamp) all exhibit vulgar and crass content that is at odds with societal norms, as “Fountain” was a “filthy display” of an upturned latrine and “Fur Cup” resembled female genitalia. Thus, for a time, Dada artists were considered miscreants who planned to disrupt the public domain with their rebellious and lewd works of art. More recently in 2012, a nudist art group in Russia staged a public orgy in front of the National Museum, prompting public outcry against their indecent act. These “artists” went against what was socially acceptable and instead assaulted the public’s modesty and defiled a public space with their sexual orgy. In light of these cases, certain artists can be said to be mere rebels against accepted norms and beliefs.

However, most artists rebel against social norms and beliefs in order to challenge and redefine certain outmoded beliefs and customs. Through the social commentary that their works provide, artists aim to establish a “new normal”, or at least get people to re-evaluate and re-think certain passively accepted norms and beliefs. “Guesswho?” is a graffiti artist in India who spray-painted images of comic book characters kissing on the walls and streets of India in support of the Kiss to Love campaign, which was started to speak out against the disproportionate persecution of public displays of affection. People were getting arrested for harmless public display of affection such as kissing and hugging, and Guesswho’s artwork provided a subtle, non-confrontational avenue to discuss this issue, and get people to reassess the rather anachronistic and conservative belief that a couple cannot kiss and hug in public. In Singapore, Amanda Heng’s “Let’s Walk” installation speaks out against the need for women to doll themselves up for men. In this modern age, a woman should not have to slave over her appearance just to please men, and Heng’s work stands in stark defiance of this outmoded social norm. Hence, even when artists rebel against accepted norms and beliefs, it is with a higher and nobler purpose to try and redefine certain outdated customs and beliefs that no longer apply to modern social contexts.

More than rebels, artists are also people who can adhere to and even champion certain accepted norms and beliefs. Many artists have the important role of not only advancing, but also preserving the country’s social and cultural identity. To preserve the cultural and social identity of a community, artists have created many works that espouse and glorify the traditionally accepted norms and beliefs of the societies they reside in. An example would be Hendra Gunawan, an Indonesian artist who sought to capture the resilience of the Indonesian people, and depicts normal energetic and vivacious Indonesians who are steadfast in the face of adversity. His famous “Bride of the Revolution” depicts the usual vibrancy and dynamism of

Art & Culture

Indonesian society whilst glorifying the belief that Indonesians could be positive and resilient in times of war. Closer to home, Chua Mia Tee's paintings also help to preserve and espouse the beliefs and norms of Singaporean society. His "National Language Class" and "Workers in a Canteen" highlight the social norm of racial harmony and the peaceful co-existence of different races, and they exemplify the widely accepted belief of meritocracy and industriousness as it shows people of various races working together to achieve a common goal. From these works, it is clear that artists can adhere to and even champion accepted norms and beliefs.

Moreover, rather than just rebelling, artists also have an integral role in helping individuals explore their own emotions and come to terms with their "intangible selves". As opposed to rebels who would just spur on anarchy and negative emotions, artists can instead engage audiences on an emotional level with their work, allowing for a self-reflexive and introspective experience that allows them to question and navigate their emotional landscapes. Lang Lee's poetry collection "Lullabies" compels one to delve into a world of romance, and to reassess the romantic relationships one has experienced. It is relatable and almost conformist in the sense that it details the ups and downs of a normal romantic relationship that most in society may have experienced, such as having a crush, unrequited love, going on simple but heartwarming dates, and it taps on these common experiences to get readers to re-examine what a fulfilling relationship means to them. Antony Gormley's installation "Blind Light" allows participants to come to grips with the ephemeral nature of human life and the mutability of human identity. As participants flounder in a glass room filled with discombobulating smoke clouds, they are challenged to review their own vulnerabilities and their dependence on others. Rather than present lewd and devious subject matter or starting a controversy like a rebel would, Gormley presents an effective dialogue on human mortality and one's dependence on others, which are universal human beliefs. Art is an empathetic communicative medium that transcends language barriers, allowing artists to interact on an emotional level, and this is something that "rebels" would never even consider doing. Therefore, rather than stirring up anarchy and controversy with contentious subject matters as a rebel would, artists can present well-considered and sensible works to enable one to examine the social norms and beliefs that make up one's identity and inner self.

Furthermore, artists do not divide or disrupt a society like rebels and deviants tend to do, but bring people closer together as a community through their work. Art has served as a cultural blazon through the ages, allowing artists to encapsulate the beliefs and values of a community into works that have come to signify the unique identities of these communities. James Rosenquist's "World Fair Mural" combines uniquely American symbols such as the stars and stripes and the Statue of Liberty to form a truly American representation of the values of liberty, justice and democracy. The fact that it was a rallying symbol for Americans at the World Fair shows the values of artists in forging unique communal identity that reflects accepted beliefs and values. Nanyang artist "Liu Kang" is credited and celebrated for helping to pioneer a unique Southeast Asian and Singaporean identity. His works like "National Day Parade" and "Indian Musicians" exhibit the vibrant diversity of Singapore and help to reinforce the social beliefs of multiculturalism and racial harmony, and are effective in showing how people of different races can come together to form a cohesive society. Other initiatives such as Arts Outreach and Arts @ the Grassroots also serve to bring the community together through the appreciation of the visual and theatrical arts. Hence, artists help to strengthen a community's understanding and practice of social norms and beliefs rather than disrupting them through rebellious acts.

In conclusion, artists cannot be labelled as mere "rebels" or "delinquents" and be dismissed from general society. As opposed to rebels, artists are individuals who can champion social norms and beliefs, get one to examine how these norms and beliefs make up their own identity, and even reinforce the society's understanding and practice of the beliefs and norms that it holds so dear.

Teacher's comments: You should not only focus on the benefits of art or the contributions of artists. More discussion of how artists are not merely rebelling against accepted norms is needed. Decent effort.

Doris Lessing once opined, “Humanity’s legacy of stories and storytelling are our most precious treasures.” Since the epoch of classic Shakespearean plays, the art of storytelling has continually evolved in its mode of delivery. With the advent and development of ground-breaking technology, films have since emerged as novel conduits for self-expression and sheer entertainment. Yet, despite the fact that films have been immutable cornerstones of cultural zeitgeist, detractors of films continue to surmise that films are limited only to provide emotional respite from reality. As films can serve a multitude of useful functions, they can ineluctably offer more than just mere escapism.

Films can offer more than escapism from reality, by engendering considerable economic gains. As the film industry becomes increasingly commercialised, movie corporations and conglomerates have moved to leverage on the substantial consumer base in a bid to generate economic windfalls. In “Transformers 4”, many automobile corporations like BMW signed sponsorship deals entailing staggering sums of money with Paramount Pictures, in a bid to advertise their products to the masses for self-aggrandisement. Thus, films not only endeavour to engage the audience with compelling storylines, but also accommodate movie corporations and conglomerates as a vehicle to generate hefty profits. This is further exemplified by how Hollywood’s net earnings for 2014 amounted to US\$504 billion, which accounted for 3.4% of the Gross Domestic Product of the United States. Clearly, this bears testament to the indubitable financial clout of films, which can provide the pedestal for augmented economic boost for both firms and states alike.

In addition, films can serve to preserve the cultural zeitgeist of an era. Due to the ephemeral nature of a community’s cultural ethos, the inherent ability of films to capture shared experiences and common identity helps to safeguard against loss of cultural heritage. Anthony Chen’s “Reunion Dinner” encapsulates quintessential values of familial love and filial piety that are championed by traditional Chinese cultural creeds. Hence, films are more than capable of preserving collective experiences of a community therein, which can henceforth foster a robust sense of fraternity amongst future generations. The animated film, “Persepolis”, also underscores Iranian customs and religious mandates against the backdrop of the Iranian Revolution in a timeless fashion. This not only allows for greater insights into the predicament of Iranians, but also reinforces a common sense of belonging amongst them. Therefore, the power of cinematography transcends mere escapism, and has the potential to perform utilitarian functions that are usually overlooked.

Furthermore, the capability of films to convey powerful messages and social commentary should not be precluded to boot. Films are able to express many different nuances and undertones through skilled cinematography and the adept use of characters in the narrative. As films have an inexorable influence on the masses, some movie plots are deliberately intertwined with pertinent issues to indoctrinate or raise awareness towards issues of concern. The ground-breaking Japanese film “Ghost in a Shell” leverages on the dissonance of identities of the female cyborg protagonist to exemplify the dichotomy between sexual identity and gender – in hopes of fostering acceptance for the disenfranchised LGBT communities in society, and motivate one to seek emancipation from institutional straitjackets imposed by society. In addition, the Dark Knight trilogy is similarly thought-provoking by raising questions pertaining to fear and sense of loss throughout as Batman undertakes a journey of self-discovery. Ultimately, this film is meaningful in encouraging self-introspection, and forgiveness towards others with magnanimity.

However, it has to be acknowledged that films do allow for escapism from reality. With the development of visual effects technology, films are better placed to construct virtual realities in a vivid manner, thereby allowing the audience to be engaged and immersed in the story itself. This emotional connection between the film and audience allows individuals to undergo catharsis and relax during a respite from external

Art & Culture

stress, thereby enhancing the mood of individuals through the cinematic experience. Comedic films like “Spy” and “The Dictator” provide viewers with the platform to laugh away their worries, allowing them to be more revitalised thereafter. This is consistent with scientific findings, where test subjects record higher levels of dopamine levels concomitant with joy after viewing comedic feature films. On the other hand, blockbuster movies like “Lord of the Rings” and “Da Vinci Code” allow viewers to indulge themselves firmly in the plot by grappling with action scenes and conspiracy theories, thus providing a powerful platform for escapism. Yet, this is not the only function that a film performs, for a film without a powerful meaning underpinning it will fail to engage the audience abjectly.

Ultimately, the realm of film is filled with endless possibilities, thus its function transcends mere escapism from reality. Given the competitive nature of the film industry, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge the utilitarian benefits of films, and continually endeavour to push the frontiers of what films can achieve. With such a paradigm shift, it is certainly not impossible to revolutionise film and perhaps eliminate doubts towards films – one critic at a time.

Teacher's comments: A brilliant showcase of the inherent beauty of language. Ideas are fully relevant and supported with a range of insightful examples.

Kaleidoscope

miscellaneous

adjective

(of items or people gathered or considered together) of various types or from different sources: *he picked up the miscellaneous papers in his in tray.*

- (of a collection or group) composed of members or elements of different kinds: *a miscellaneous collection of well-known ne'er-do-wells.*

To what extent is the pursuit of perfection a desirable goal?

Leung Lok Heng 14S33

Natural selection is the process of weeding out the incapable and weaker from the strongest and fittest. This has led to Man having an innate desire to attain perfection, to be the best at whatever he does. However, in today's age, perfection is not only defined by personal standards and expectations but also, being better than others who are competing against you. Though the pursuit of perfection may be empowering for some, I largely believe that this endless pursuit has more negative consequences than benefits and is ultimately undesirable.

Perfection often entails being the best amongst the crowd and this has undeniably evoked unattainable expectations for people. In the field of Academia, students often find themselves studying not for personal fulfilment and the enrichment that learning brings but rather, to prove that they can get better grades than their peers. In Singapore alone, a country driven by excellent academic standings, official reports have shown that the leading cause for suicide amongst youth is academic pressure, be it from their teachers, parents or peers. The same report also revealed that an astounding 17% of students have contemplated suicide because of this pressure. The numbers on paper also translate to the youth culture of Singapore which views the purpose of studying as merely to attain top spots in one's respective school or institution. It is common to see students berate themselves because they got a near-perfect score but it is still not what they or their parents expect of them. Societies often place this unattainable goal and standard on students and drill into them the notion that if they are not of a certain academic standard, they are subpar. This pursuit of perfection is an everlasting conquest with an end that is simply too difficult to achieve even by the students with the highest IQs. This unnecessary pressure often crushes the hopes and dreams of youth who cannot fit into this ideal form of academic perfection and causes a degradation of self-esteem and confidence in their ability to learn, hindering further growth and development. Hence, because of this lofty and unreachable goal perfection presents, the pursuit of perfection is an undesirable goal.

The relentless endeavour for perfection has also incentivised people to use unlawful and dishonest means to attain perfection. The very desire to achieve has inspired some to adopt underhand methods to "beat the system", often resulting in serious consequences. In sports, more and more athletes who train tirelessly day by day but are still not achieving the finish they want, look to the administration of synthetic performance-enhancing drugs and steroids to boost their abilities. During the early years of the Olympic Games, a Russian team of female swimmers did astoundingly well for the event finals, smashing a world record at the point and winning the gold. However, their performance was deemed by some to be too good to be true and sure enough, urine tests proved that they did use steroids to bulk up their physique. Their gold medals were stripped from them and the Russian community looked at them with a new sense of disgrace and dishonour. This use of immoral and dishonest methods to achieve what is often heralded as perfection on the athletic stage, the gold medal, has led to the disintegration of the moral fabric that sports has for so long held strong. It undermines the efforts of the athletes who work hard and train honestly without cheating to achieve their goals. This desire for perfection fuels the relentless desire to attain perfection at the expense of morals and sportsmanship. Thus, the pursuit of perfection has caused people to go beyond moral and honest reasoning to get what they want and is definitely undesirable.

The consequences of trying to attain this perfection are also manifested physically, leading to the gargantuan problem of people abusing their bodies and health in search of perfection. The media has constantly portrayed the image of the perfect female body with ideal proportions and has prompted an increasingly large group of women to undergo surgical procedures to "enhance" their appearance. Recent surveys by magazines largely focused on women, like "Elle" or "Cosmopolitan" have shown that almost 73% of females feel that their body is not "adequate enough" for them. This has undeniably led to more cosmetic

surgeries, with doctors filling and injecting bodies with synthetic materials like silicone. It is known that all surgeries have the possibility of complications. This is definitely true for invasive surgeries, like the use of implants, leading to an increasing number of deaths arising from cosmetic surgeries, according to the latest figures from the American Medical Association. What is even more tragic is that women who cannot afford professional surgeries choose to go to unlicensed doctors and undergo back-alley surgeries, which due to the unsanitary environment and lack of professional skills of the 'doctors' cause even more deaths. When the pursuit of perfection leads not just to a singular death, but the deaths of a large group of people, it becomes time to question the necessity of perfection. This desire to fit the ideal physical form has caused so much tragedy that it is cannot be evaded anymore. The quest for perfection undeniably led countless people who lack self-esteem to feel even worse about themselves and harm their bodies willingly. Thus, the pursuit for perfection influences the way we see our own bodies and ourselves and paints a distorted, unnatural and unattainable image of how we should look like, harming people both psychologically and physically, rendering it undesirable.

However, the pursuit of perfection nonetheless has the ability to empower people to do their best. Athletes such as Oscar Pistorius, who had his legs amputated when he was a child, has frequently established that the need to achieve has often propelled him to overcome the odds. He is the first person to both compete in the Paralympic and Olympic Games in 2012, which is astounding given that those with disabilities are usually considered "weaker" than their able-bodied competitors. Even though he left the Olympics without a medal, his mere presence and participation served as a reminder and affirmation that the desire to achieve great success can be a strong compelling force for motivation. Artist Leonardo da Vinci spent years painting the portrait of Mona Lisa and despite criticism from critics who said it was good enough, refused to acknowledge them and only saw more flaws to correct. The product of his commitment to perfection has propelled his work into one that is internationally acclaimed. Indeed, the Mona Lisa is widely heralded as one of the greatest pieces of art ever produced. Both these men displayed an insatiable thirst for perfection and by following their innate desire for greatness, have indeed produced greatness. Thus, the pursuit of perfection can be an extremely effective mechanism for motivation.

When one ultimately considers and evaluates the path to perfection, one can see that it does have the ability to unlock the key to success. However, more often than not, the pursuit of perfection can also turn into a detriment to different aspects of life and cause societies to regress rather than progress. Thus, I believe that only by acknowledging both sides and finding the right balance between keeping oneself motivated and setting unreachable goals, will Man be able to pursue perfection to his advantage.

Teacher's comments: Sound arguments raised and clearly discussed, with some good insights shown. Apt use of supporting evidence as well. A decent effort.

‘We no longer have control over what we eat.’ How far do you agree with the statement?

Grace Khoo Jiamin 14S34

‘You are what you eat.’ This catchphrase has been the basis for promoting healthy and balanced diets all over the world. However, the catch is that the slogan assumes we have the power to exert total control over our eating habits, choice of food and what exactly we ingest and assimilate into our bodies. While it might have been applicable in the past, this claim has more recently been deemed to be no longer apt for healthy eating because modern society has gradually forced consumers into making food choices based on their hectic lifestyles, research findings on nutrition as well as the prevalent and unavoidable use of chemicals and hormones in food production. Thus, I concur that as members of modern society, we no longer have control over what we eat.

We no longer have control over what we eat because of our hectic lifestyles. In this increasingly competitive world, people work continuously in hopes of achieving success. From students who attend extra lessons to employees who work overtime, few are not burdened with society’s demands and expectations. Naturally, with such stressful and busy lifestyles, an increasing number of people choose not to cook, especially because the opportunity cost of cooking for themselves, which is to give up precious time that could have been spent on studies or work, is far too much to bear. It is of no surprise that restaurants, cafes and food outlets are thriving more than ever – there are simply too many people who choose to consume outside food nowadays. Furthermore, we have little control over how our food is prepared. For example, if a person chooses to have lunch at a fast food chain outlet, say McDonald’s, he can ask for fries without salt, but that is just about all the control he has. What goes into the other meals, such as additives like monosodium glutamate, or MSG, is beyond his control. The same can be said for restaurants. Unfortunately, consuming fast food seems to be the most viable option for meals when dealing with hectic lifestyles, thus there is no choice but to accept the oil that coats the dish or the seasoning that makes us thirsty. Maintaining the balance of modern life is indeed a challenge. Hence, I agree that we no longer have control over what we eat.

Another way in which consumers attempt to control their diets is by basing their food choices on scientific findings and reports on the nutritional benefits before deciding to consume more or less of a particular food. Sadly, even in this aspect, our level of control has greatly dwindled. While it seems smart to take the advice of scientists and nutritionists, the accuracy and integrity involved in the research is dubious as research findings could be presented in the best interest of the firms that fund the scientists. Despite the decreased credibility and reliability, most consumers, being unknowledgeable in the field of food science, tend to give scientists the benefit of the doubt, causing them to be swayed by the latest findings to strive towards a healthier diet. For example, research on food like eggs, chocolate and coffee is the basis for the decisions made by many consumers. While eggs used to be deemed as high in cholesterol, science now says that eggs should be more frequently consumed because the “high cholesterol” is actually “good cholesterol”. Undoubtedly, consumers who used to control their intake of eggs probably increased their consumption in order to reap the possible health benefits. Therefore, it can be said that the often conflicting findings, whether reliable or not, determine many consumers’ food choices today. Thus, I agree that we no longer have control over what we eat.

Some argue that if a person prefers home cooked food for health reasons and even always sets aside time to cook, he still has control over what he eats. Maybe it would have been possible in the past, but now it is increasingly difficult to ensure that our food is void of possible harmful substances since they are tampered with during production. For example, having growth hormones injected into chicken is actually a norm now, much less something new. Apart from frequent news reports on such activities, unbeknown

to us, there are likely to be many other firms that also tamper with food to maximise their profits. It is therefore terrifying that such production firms are the ones who, in reality, have the greatest control over food because food is produced for mass consumption. Since this is the case, it is uncertain whether home-cooked food can even be considered to be healthy at all. Even if we try to make a positive change to our diets, our efforts are likely to be in vain as the ingredients have already been blighted. Therefore, I agree that we no longer have control over what we eat.

Nevertheless, we may still be able to control what we eat to some extent, for example, by switching to alternatives like organic food or home agriculture to replace our greens. These options can alleviate the negative effects exerted by typical food and ingredients, since both are free of chemicals that may harm our body when ingested. However, organic food is pricey and cannot truly be proven to be pesticide- or herbicide-free. Home agriculture is an even greater challenge as few can afford the time, effort and land to cultivate their own crops in a small garden. Furthermore, these alternatives are only capable of replacing the fruits and vegetables in our diet since it is impossible for most to rear animals in their own compound. Hence, it is evident that we have to either consume outside food, good or bad, or accept and make do with the ingredients sold in markets. Therefore, while there are other possible options to negate the bad effects, they cannot fully replace our food and solve the conundrum.

In conclusion, various facets of modern society – lifestyle, ethics and profits have led to us losing control of what we eat; alternatives are few and limited in feasibility. Hence, having a healthy diet is becoming a greater challenge than ever before, as the obsolescence of “you are what you eat” draws closer and closer.

Teacher's comments: A very clear and well thought-out piece. Your insightful points were a delight to read. Keep it up!

“Never fear!” These two words were boldly proclaimed by our late founding father Mr Lee Kuan Yew in a speech back in 1965. Though a small country with a relatively short history, Singapore has progressed tremendously in the past 50 years. Many events of the past, such as the 1969 racial riots or the first National Day Parade are still etched in and linger in the minds of many Singaporeans today – these are all what many would coin national memories. Although some claim that national memories are a stumbling block to progress, I believe that they are critical and of much value to us in the Singaporean society today. These memories ultimately help to build up a sense of national identity, to maintain racial and religious harmony, and to strengthen cohesion within our dynamic, ever-changing society.

National memories are important as they play a huge role in the building up of a sense of identity among Singaporeans today. It is through looking back at events of the past that people come to reflect on and appreciate the present. Events such as our country’s very first National Day Parade held back in 1966 and the first Chingay procession back in the 1970s allow Singaporeans to look back and see how much Singapore has grown since its humble beginnings. This in turn fosters a sense of patriotism and pride in Singaporeans. This is especially relevant as we celebrate our nation’s 50th birthday this year, and many exhibitions and shows have been set up as part of the SG50 movement to highlight some of the more prominent events that have occurred in the past. An example would be the Chingay exhibition at the Braddell Heights Community Centre, which gives insight to the public about the origins and the progression of the parade over the years, drawing interest to a national memory that epitomizes the dynamism of Singapore’s spirited and multicultural society. Thus, I believe that national memories are important to the Singapore society as it reminds people of their shared identity as Singaporeans, in turn fostering patriotism and a love for the country.

It can also be said that national memories are critical to a country like Singapore as it helps to maintain racial and religious harmony. Singapore is a multicultural, multiracial country and it is of utmost importance that there is peace between the different races in our society. The importance of this peace is highlighted to many Singaporeans from a young age through Character and Citizenship Education lessons, where teachers teach students about the 1969 race riots and the Maria Hertogh riots, emphasizing the drastic consequences of disunity and tension within the society. National memories like these riots leave a haunting memory in the minds of many, and serve as a constant reminder of the need for peace and unity. Without such national memories, it would be hard to fathom the consequences of disunity, as there would be a lack of tangible, relevant examples. It is no wonder that all secondary schools in Singapore have implemented Social Studies lessons as an indispensable part of the curriculum, and I believe that this was done because the Ministry of Education greatly recognized the value of national memories in a child’s moral education. In light of this, I believe that national memories are critical to my society, as they serve as stern reminders for the need to maintain racial and religious harmony within the society.

National memories not only serve to build up a sense of identity and maintain harmony, but also help to strengthen cohesion amongst Singaporeans. Memories of how Singaporeans have stood together as one people to fight against epidemics encourage and build up faith in people. These memories show people how troubles can be overcome, if only everyone plays their part. The 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak is a prominent example of such a case. During this period of crisis, the government, medical staff, and the citizens worked together as one to combat this epidemic. On the part of the citizens, they consciously donned facemasks in public, in an attempt to protect themselves and control the spread of the disease. A few months after the outbreak, SARS had been completely eradicated from the Singaporean society, proving to Singaporeans that their shared efforts to fight SARS were not futile. Other

similar incidences such as the dengue fever outbreaks also showed Singaporeans the value of teamwork in the society, leading them to further appreciate the value of cohesion. Thus, it can be said that national memories are highly valued in the society, as it is through reflecting on these memories that people are reminded of the need for cohesion and teamwork.

Some may say that national memories are of little use to the Singaporean society, claiming that it is only practical to look forward to the future, and not to focus on the past. They believe that constantly advocating for Singaporeans to reflect on national memories is a stumbling block to progress. In 2015, 17-year-old blogger Samuel Tan posted a blog post criticizing the local television series "Reunions", which highlighted prominent events of the past, claiming that the series was a "waste of time" and of "little practical use". However, I believe that such people make up the minority, and many Singaporeans still greatly value such television programmes that give insights to past events. There was also much backlash to Samuel Tan's blogpost, with netizens starting a "#valueourmemories" trend on the popular social media site Twitter. Evidently, there are many who believe that national memories are important, because they allow us to learn from past failures and successes, and to move on.

I stand firm in the belief that national memories are to be highly valued. However, it is also important that we place as much emphasis on the present as we do on the past, for it is the events of today that will become the memories of tomorrow - and in the fullness of time, these national memories are what makes Singapore, Singapore.

Teacher's comments: Valid ideas with consistent use of apt examples as support. Could include more balance to your discussion. Writing is clear with evidence of variety in your vocabulary.

How important is imagination?

Rachel Wong 15A15

Imagination is the ability to form new images and sensations in the mind that are not perceived through the five senses. It helps us to visualise our thoughts, as well as form new ones. Even from young, we were taught to exercise our imagination. Together with our knowledge, imagination is able to expand our minds, allowing us to see things in a unique way. Imagination is important because it creates our future, stimulates our creativity and innovativeness, and it helps make our lives all the more interesting.

Some might say that imagination causes people to have their heads in the clouds when they should have their feet on the ground. This is true in a sense as imagination might cause us to lose focus, to be distracted and forget about what we are actually doing. Imagination might make us lose track of reality, leading us to rather live in our thoughts than face reality. Some might also say that factual information and knowledge are more important and more crucial in our day to day lives than imagination because facts are concrete and tangible while imagination is not, hence it is better to use the knowledge gained than the thoughts formed in our minds. However, what people fail to understand is that imagination is more important than it seems. By distracting us, it allows us to leave reality for a little while and enjoy ourselves. Many of the things we enjoy today came into existence because someone turned his imagination into reality, which is why our lives now are so rich and meaningful.

Imagination creates our future because we would have no future without it. Take children for example, who imagine themselves as doctors or firefighters. This imagination of what they want to be when they grow up can determine the path they will take in life. They use their imagination to create stories and goals, which they can start preparing and working hard for. The same thing happens when we grow up too. We need to use our imagination to think of things in the future, to look in terms of the long run. If all we do is focus on our current reality, all we will face are the same problems and issues. We will encounter the same challenges and problems and relive the same experiences over and over again. There is no room for growth and development, for ourselves or for bigger things such as the nation. This is why we need imagination. We want to experience the reality that we envision for ourselves, which sets us in motion on a course for change. This is true for many countries. An example is Singapore. The late Mr Lee Kuan Yew had envisioned an independent and successful nation and was instrumental in making Singapore the prosperous country it is now. We need imagination to create our future because it helps us to think of what we want to achieve and effect the change that we need. We strive for the things we envision for ourselves and we try to obtain that goal. Imagination gives us something to fight for, something to work hard for. As Albert Einstein had said before, "Imagination is everything. It is the preview for life's coming attractions."

Imagination stimulates our creativity and innovation; without it, we would be without most of our works of art as well as many of our everyday gadgets. The arts are based on our creativity, which comes from our imagination. If people did not use their imagination, we would not have the stories, music, films or dances that we have now because no one would have the ideas to create such things. Many of the things around us, like our hand phones or cars, would not exist if their inventors did not imagine them first, making their dreams become reality. Not only this, but many things would not exist if people had not exercised their imagination. Architecture would be simple, our meals would be plain and our clothes would be boring. Without imagination, there would be a lack of creative and innovative ideas, from which we obtain many things that we have today. Imagination ignites our passion, whatever they might be. Thinking outside the box allows our thoughts to evolve. It gives us the space to develop passions, to turn our thoughts and ideas into tangible, physical things. Life would be dull and boring, nowhere near the colourful and rich world we have now. Imagination is therefore necessary for growth, for expansion of our world. It gives us the chance to turn ideas in our heads into reality, to contribute to the richness of our culture and society, to make our

lives that much more interesting and meaningful.

Imagination allows us to escape from reality. Children think of boxes as cars, empty toilet rolls as telescopes and bottles as rockets. They do not care about the confines of reality, which is why they can have so much fun. Imagination makes the mundane magical. It creates joy and wonder. This works for adults too. Imagination is a way to escape the harsh truth of reality. Around the world, there are crimes, disasters and overall sadness. Imagination allows us to escape this horrible reality and go into our happier thoughts, even if only for a short while. If we choose to stay in reality, we will begin to accept that as the way the world works. If we fall into this trap, we will lose the power behind creativity and imagination. Using imagination to escape creates hope, which we will eventually turn into change, given the opportunity. Our imagination allows us to envision a better world for ourselves and motivates us to actually go out into the world and make a difference. Even if we do not want to go so far as to make a change, imagination allows us to relax and entertain ourselves, to find happiness and excitement in our normal lives. As Albert Einstein had also said, "Reality is merely an illusion, albeit a very persistent one." Reality is where we should stay, but imagination ensures that reality is as interesting as we want.

The world is but a canvas to our imagination. Imagination gives us an idea of what we want for our future; it enriches our lives and helps create a better world for everyone. Imagination expands our minds as well as our world, making our life and our experiences all the more fulfilling and enlightening. Just like what we tell our children, we must exercise our imagination in order to grow and develop. Imagination is more important than many might think, because it not only improves our lives, but also the lives of everyone around the world.

Teacher's comments: An enjoyable read, although there are parts that seem repetitive. You could have provided more illustrations.

Kaleidoscope

noun [mass noun]

1 facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education; the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject: a thirst for knowledge | *her considerable knowledge of antiques.*

- the sum of what is known: *the transmission of knowledge.*
- information held on a computer system.
- Philosophy true, justified belief; certain understanding, as opposed to opinion.

2 awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a fact or situation: the programme had been developed without his knowledge | *he denied all knowledge of the incidents.*

knowledge & inquiry

noun (pl.inquiries)

an act of asking for information: the police were making inquiries in all the neighbouring pubs | [mass noun] : *her mind was buzzing with possible lines of inquiry.*

- an official investigation.

‘Mathematical knowledge is unique in both its nature and its construction.’

Discuss this view of mathematical knowledge, referring closely to at least one other area of knowledge.

Chen Yanhua 14A11

Mathematics is unique both in terms of its dualist nature and the process of its knowledge construction that ensures a high degree of certainty. Despite sceptics questioning its connection with reality and its ability to provide absolute certainty, such doubts can nonetheless be dismissed as to the uniqueness of mathematics upon a closer examination of the subject area.

Mathematics is unique for its dualist nature. While one can quite safely qualify scientific knowledge as a form of “discovery” that reflects the reality of the natural world, and literature and arts as a form of “invention” constructed by the human mind that is independent from the physical world; the same cannot be so easily determined for Mathematics. The formalists certainly see Mathematics as more akin to the latter, whereby all knowledge derived in the subject area is a construction of the human mind and independent of reality. It is difficult to prove such a claim wrong, given the abstract nature of Mathematics and how most of the symbols, elements and theorems used in the subject do not have a direct link to the physical reality and require humans to construct that connection so that Mathematics can have practical meaning and use in the real world. In contrast, science deals directly with tangible concepts that exist in the physical world we humans can directly feel and see, such as heat, speed and light.

However, the dualist nature of Mathematics sets in when the subject area is viewed from a Platonist perspective, which sees Mathematics as an accurate and precise reflection of the physical reality that no other forms of knowledge can rival. It is also fair to assert as such, for Mathematics does equip us with powerful tools to describe, analyse, and even reconstruct the real world. Its practical uses in engineering, computer science and natural science suggest strong correlations between mathematical knowledge and truths of the physical world. In contrast, other inventions of the human mind often do not reflect the reality as much or as accurately as Mathematics does. For instance, a literary work may be entirely fantastical yet still bears great literary value, whereas the same cannot be said for mathematical theorems constructed without accurate proof. Furthermore, Mathematics enables us to predict the future as much as, or sometimes even more so than science does. For instance, with Pythagoras’ Theorem, we know for certain that all right angled triangles we encounter in the future will conform to the rule set out in the theorem. Hence, its power of prediction renders Mathematics more of a discovery of the natural world than a mere invention of the human mind. From the perspectives so far laid out, one can therefore see the uniqueness of Mathematics in terms of its dualist nature, whereby it can be seen either as a discovery or an invention, with seemingly equal validity.

Moreover, Mathematics is also unique in terms of its knowledge construction. For one, the methodology of Mathematics is very different from that of other subject areas such as natural and social sciences. As first systematically used and formalised by Euclid in the Elements, his great work in geometry, the mathematical methodology involves the use of certain axioms, or self-evident truths, from which theorems are derived through strictly deductive reasoning. The use of strict deduction in such methodology is unique since it guarantees a very high degree of certainty to the theorems we conclude from the given axioms. In contrast, other subject areas such as natural and social sciences, use significantly less deduction in their construction of knowledge. Since social sciences are more concerned with explaining and interpreting the reality, it is natural that the methodology of social sciences focuses far more on inductive reasoning, whereby evidence is provided to support but not prove a claim, than deductive reasoning. Even natural sciences which we see as providing a higher degree of certainty by describing the physical world in a decently accurate manner, uses far more induction and little deduction compared to Mathematics, since at its core, natural science assumes the uniformity of nature, and its derivation of knowledge is often based on repeated experimentation that merely supports yet does not prove a scientific theory. It is therefore quite clear that Mathematics is unique in its extensive use of, or even complete reliance on, deductive reasoning,

Knowledge & Inquiry

evident in the dismissal of experimentation in Mathematics, a subject area that utilises only the power of the intellect.

However, there is no lack of objections to the uniqueness of Mathematics, either by pointing out that its nature as a source of knowledge is not that different after all, or by undermining the seeming certainty offered by Mathematics.

On the one hand, some object that the nature of Mathematics is not dualist at all and it should be viewed merely as an elaborate chess game invented by men, thus taking on an extreme formalist view and denying the Platonist perspective of Mathematics. These sceptics claim that in Mathematics, mathematicians set the axioms of the subject area just like the inventors of the chess game have set the rules for the game. Since the rules of the game can be set arbitrarily, it undermines the view that Mathematics reflects physical reality, or even, constitutes an objective and reliable source of knowledge, since all the axioms are set “arbitrarily” by men. However, this objection is clearly built on shaky grounds. While the rules of a chess game can indeed be set arbitrarily, mathematical theorems cannot, thus defeating the analogy between chess game and Mathematics. From the Platonist perspective, mathematical axioms are chosen to better reflect the reality of the physical universe, whereas the formalists see mathematical theorems as chosen for inherent practical usefulness. Either way, axioms are clearly not chosen arbitrarily, but based on a certain standard that aids the knowledge construction of Mathematics. Hence, the dualist nature of Mathematics stands, reinforcing its uniqueness as a source of knowledge.

On the other hand, some question the perceived certainty of Mathematics, thus attempting to undermine the view that Mathematics is unique for its high degree of certainty. One has to concede the lack of absolute certainty even in a subject area so meticulously constructed as Mathematics. This is evident from Godel's Incompleteness Theorem, which proves that we can never know there are no contradictions within any mathematical system, even if we do not perceive any. Thus, this shows just how the systematic foundation of Mathematics is not guaranteed to be true, and therefore how knowledge built on such a foundation is not absolutely certain. Hence, sceptics attempt to classify Mathematics as all other sources of knowledge that offer no certainty but only justifications beyond reasonable doubt, such as natural sciences, where a theory is considerably valid if tens of thousands of times of experiments are done to prove its truth, even though the theory remains falsifiable.

However, such an objection to the uniqueness of Mathematics is not entirely fair since Mathematics does not offer an exceptionally high degree of certainty and demands an exceptionally high degree of scrutiny and deductive justification, before any claim or hypothesis can be proven to be true. This meticulous methodology can be illustrated in the distinction between a “conjecture” and a “theorem” in Mathematics. A theorem is backed up by deductive proof, whereas a conjecture is a hypothesis that cannot be shown to be false yet lacks a deductive proof, such as the Goldbach Conjecture which has been tested and undergone computational trials billions of times and cannot be shown to be false yet still lacks concrete proof. Such a distinction certainly does not stand in sciences, whereby if a theory has passed so many tests as the Goldbach Conjecture had, it would certainly be accepted as a part of scientific knowledge even if it lacks deductive proof. This is not the case with Mathematics, thus showing that a much higher degree of certainty and a stricter process are required to establish truths in Mathematics, thus defeating the sceptics and proving that Mathematics is indeed unique as a source of knowledge.

In conclusion, despite sceptics' doubts both in terms of its dubious nature and knowledge construction process that does not guarantee absolute certainty, Mathematics certainly still stands as a very unique subject area for its dualist epistemic nature and the exceptionally high standard of knowledge construction through deductive reasoning.

Teacher's comments: A very thorough and well-argued study. Perhaps what it needs is a more definite stand on the question throughout, though perhaps I'm over-fussy with this comment. Very good knowledge of the nature of Maths is shown and an excellent essay style is apparent throughout.

‘We would be wrong to consider scepticism as frustrating our attempts to construct secure knowledge. It is, in fact, an essential part of the justification process.’ Discuss.

Feng Shengxiao 15S31

There are various forms of scepticism, ranging from ordinary scepticism, namely our daily doubts, to philosophical scepticism that is on a larger scale than the former and directly challenges the more fundamental assumptions pertinent to knowledge claims that we have more often than not taken for granted. A sceptic is said to be a person who constructively withholds his judgments regarding the validity of seemingly dubious or inconclusive propositions. Contrary to popular belief, a sceptic is neither a pessimistic cynic who refuses to commit to certain ideals nor an irrational denier who unreasonably rejects assertions without sufficient evidence and consideration. From my perspective, it is nothing but disheartening to observe that there are many people subscribing to the notion that scepticism undermines one's attempts to establish secure knowledge. In fact, scepticism does not cripple the foundation upon which our existing knowledge claims are constructed but rather strengthens their validity by necessitating the process of justification, which is of utmost importance for constructing sufficiently reliable knowledge from an epistemological point of view.

Before proceeding to global scepticism, we shall first examine the role and significance of ordinary scepticism, which is more relatable to our daily lives. Simply put, ordinary scepticism is the practice of casting doubts on the validity of justification of certain beliefs or the beliefs themselves, something that we all engage in, albeit to varying extent. Scepticism gives an impetus to justification, which is crucial for propositions to attain the legitimate epistemic status of knowledge. It is important to make the distinction between ordinary scepticism and destructive distrust, as the former constructively and reasonably identifies weaknesses in beliefs and/or their justification methodologies for their betterment while the latter discredits beliefs without providing satisfactory reasons. By exposing potential epistemic defeaters, scepticism makes improvement possible to these weaknesses that have always been in existence but left unaddressed. It is palpably clear that scepticism, if properly utilised, by no means frustrates one's attempts to establish reliable knowledge. Instead, it prompts the refinement of these potentially flawed propositions and it is reasonable to assert that without the input of scepticism to critically examine the validity of such claims, they might remain perpetually unimproved.

Some people might argue that despite the constructive role that some forms of scepticism play in consolidating what we know, there are still other forms of scepticism that reside on the extreme end of spectrum, which seem to be capable of completely demolishing some foundational implicit assumptions that the whole existing system of knowledge is built upon. Rene Descartes' scepticism about the existence of the external world is such an example. In his Evil Demon Hypothesis, all of us with no exceptions could be currently deluded and deceived by an omnipotent evil demon. Since, logically speaking, it is impossible for us to differentiate reality from virtual reality that the evil demon might be deceiving us with, we are therefore incapable of asserting with absolute certainty that the external world exists. At a superficial glance, it seems that Cartesian scepticism demolishes our foundational assumptions and leaves no ground for knowledge about the phenomenal world that immediately surrounds us. However, from a more pragmatic viewpoint, all of us would be paralysed in terms of actions if we stringently and blindly pursue the elusive cause of absolute certainty in our knowledge claims. From a fallibilist viewpoint, justification is considered sufficient if it eliminates all relevant, not all possible, epistemic defeaters. In other words, a vast majority of our knowledge claims require no absolute certainty as it is simply impossible to eliminate some of the most

Knowledge & Inquiry

remote yet problematic defeaters, including scepticism about the external world. In this light, we can safely say that Cartesian scepticism does not pose any substantial threats to the justification of our knowledge claims due to its impracticality in this world of uncertainties that demands actions.

From the above argument, it is obvious that even one of the most extreme types of scepticism does not frustrate our attempts to construct reliable knowledge; one may wonder why and how scepticism is essential then. Descartes, to many people's surprise, was an anti-sceptic who was just utilising scepticism as a constructive instrument that puts all existing knowledge claims under the most unfavourable conditions to examine their validity. Therefore, the spirit of scepticism renders one a more critical thinker, more mindful of limitations of certain methodologies and more cognizant of the existence of certain remote yet powerful epistemic defeaters. All these are pivotal in helping one achieve a greater deal of clarity and scope in one's grasp and justification of knowledge claims.

To conclude, scepticism is only ostensibly threatening. It is actually an extremely useful device that plays a constructive function in knowledge construction whereby justification and refinement of justification are made possible.

Is subjectivity inevitable in history writing? If so, does it undermine the intellectual value of historical knowledge?

Shi Ke 13S43

Subjectivity is an inherent aspect of historians' work. This is a result of the nature of history itself and the methodology adopted by historians. Both make it impossible for historians to be completely objective. The key is to seek a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. While such subjective narratives cannot claim to be justified truth, I do believe they are still of great value to us.

The pool of historical sources is vast and incomplete. It is vast because there are so many sources that historians can select from. History is a giant complication of events, people and ideas. At the same time, history is incomplete because not all events and actions of the players are recorded. Many voices are omitted and will never be known to us. In addition, historical sources tend to focus on certain groups of people, typically politicians and other elites of society. Lack of representation of other groups of people presents another source of incompleteness. Hence, history can never be truly objective because we simply cannot have a full picture of what truly happened. History only provides "a" version of the past, not "the" version.

Since the pool of historical sources is so vast, it is necessary for historians to make selections when writing about history. This is where subjectivity sets in. Historians cannot just present whatever they have found. They have to select and organise the sources into meaningful forms. However, selection implies that historians have to apply a set of criteria, and this is the subjective part. As history is written for a certain audience, it will only include sources which certain audience consider as relevant and significant. The process of accommodating audience necessarily involves subjectivity. This is inevitable because sources without organisation are meaningless, but once organisation sets in they become subjective.

Historians are not simply concerned with what happened, they do wish to know why and how certain events happened. They attempt to interpret historical events, to supply meanings and explanations for history. However, it is impossible to come up with a truly objective account of the past. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, different historians would adopt different theoretical frameworks and paradigms, rendering their explanations different. Secondly, history itself does not make an objective account possible. The causation in history is not linear, but rather like a web. A particular event may be caused by the interaction of a number of other events, people and ideas. Historians cannot help but have to only select a few and provide their own explanations. The process of explanation is bound to be subjective, because historians simply cannot adopt a detached position in writing history.

Hence, history is inevitably ideological. The selection and interpretation processes are both influenced by one's political and religious beliefs as well as socio-economic backgrounds. A Chinese and a Japanese historian may have different interpretations of what actually happened in WWII. Also, historical writings reflect the theoretical frameworks and paradigms one adopts. A Marxist historian would interpret the war in terms of class conflict and economic factors. Historical writings are necessarily subjective because historians are influenced by their ideological status.

However, simply because history is subjective, it doesn't mean our view of the past is distorted or biased. Bias is the deliberate suppressing of sources and distortion of facts to one's own end. It entails a definite "wrong" version of history. Selectivity means historians would equally consider all sources. It does not commit intellectual dishonesty. Such subjective narratives provide a possible account of the past. We can argue about the position in the subjective narrative, while we can dismiss the biases easily.

Knowledge & Inquiry

To seek justified truths in history is in itself an impossible task. History is so vast and we simply cannot have a full picture. Once we focus on the key events, we are assigning relevance to the events. Subjectivity is an inherent feature of history. What historians can do is to seek convergence between competing ideas. Although history is subjective, its intellectual integrity is warranted by endless revision of our current version of history. When new evidence emerge, we can adjust or even falsify our beliefs in history. The falsification process adds to our confidence in historical knowledge, which, like science, is provisional. We are approaching the truth, despite that truth is unattainable.

I want to further argue that subjectivity is what makes our society more profound. As the Marxist view enters the field of history, it provides new insights of how and why things happen. We can disagree with it, but it does give us an idea that there could be other possibilities. We do not hold on to one single "legitimate" version of history. Instead, we are exposed to all kinds of explanations. It is in this process of learning about other ideas and arguments that we become clear of what our own paradigms are, what our understanding lacks, and what other possibilities there could be. Subjectivity shapes how we think about history and gives us a clearer view of society and ourselves.

To conclude, although historical writings are subjective, the interaction between ideas makes us more certain about the kind of positions we wish to adopt. Every historian provides a version of history, each with its own value and validity. Absolute truths in history, like in any other field of knowledge, are too much to ask for. What we can do is to seek a balance between objectivity and subjectivity, to present our own view and listen to others at the same time. We have to bear in mind that history is a product of our beliefs and theoretical frameworks, and cannot be free from subjectivity.

Teacher's comments: Well-argued and a very interesting approach. Possibly the case for the quote needs further explanation.