



# KS Bull 2025 Issue 1



## Raffles Institution

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## CONTENTS

### 2024 Year 6 GP Prelim | Paper 1

#### **‘Only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs.’ Discuss.**

|   |             |        |   |
|---|-------------|--------|---|
| 1 | Pan Haotian | 24A01B | 5 |
| 2 | Chua Yu Jie | 24A01B | 8 |

#### **To what extent should the state interfere in the private life of its citizens?**

|   |                   |        |    |
|---|-------------------|--------|----|
| 3 | Ernest Tan En-rae | 24S03M | 12 |
|---|-------------------|--------|----|

#### **‘Technology has given us a false sense of hope in solving problems.’ To what extent is this true?**

|   |             |        |    |
|---|-------------|--------|----|
| 4 | Dhruv Manoj | 24S06G | 16 |
|---|-------------|--------|----|

### 2024 Year 6 GP Prelim | Paper 2

#### **5 Passages: “Climate change”**

|   |                        |        |    |
|---|------------------------|--------|----|
| 6 | Jennifer Jing Jia Yi   | 24A01A | 22 |
| 7 | Phua Yong Xuan Addison | 24S03F | 24 |

### 2024 Year 6 GP Promo | Paper 2

#### **8 Passages: “Pet ownership”**

|    |                      |        |    |
|----|----------------------|--------|----|
| 9  | Chan Shun Hang Isaac | 25A01B | 29 |
| 10 | Lin Jiarui           | 25S06D | 31 |

### 2024 Year 6 KI Prelim | Paper 1 | Question 1

**Critically assess the view that we cannot know anything about the external world.**

11 Michelle Lee Rui Ling | 24A01A 33

### 2024 Year 6 KI Prelim | Paper 2 | Question 1

12 **Passage: “Contemporary art”** 36

13 Emma-Ruth Oh | 24S07A 38

### 2024 Year 6 KI Prelim | Paper 2 | Question 2

14 **Passage: “Government-funded environmental initiatives”** 41

15 Lee Yu Zhe | 24A01A 42

16 Soh Jun Hee | 24A01A 44

### 2024 Year 6 KI Prelim | Paper 2 | Question 3

17 **Passage: “Lack of equality and inclusivity”** 46

18 Arunmozhi Vikneswari | 24S06F 47

### 2024 Year 6 KI Prelim | Paper 2 | Question 4

19 **Passage: “Being a winning corporation”** 49

20 Michelle Lee Rui Ling | 24A01A 50

21 Soh Jun Hee | 24A01A 52

## 2024 Year 5 KI Promo | Question 2

**‘Science is simply consensus.’ Discuss the implications of this view on the nature and construction of scientific knowledge.**

22 Pan Wan Ting Christina | 25S06C 54

## 2024 Year 5 KI Promo | Question 4

**‘The validity of knowledge depends on the methods used.’ Discuss with reference to the nature and construction of knowledge in two fields.**

23 Wong E Jeh | 25S06N 56

## 2024 Year 5 KI Promo | Question 5

24 **Passage: “How a society is constructed”** 60

25 Wong E Jeh | 25S06N 62

|  |                       |           |
|--|-----------------------|-----------|
|  | <b>Editorial Team</b> | <b>66</b> |
|--|-----------------------|-----------|

**‘Only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs.’ Discuss.**

The statement that only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs is an aphorism that many regard as fact, not opinion. From a cursory glance, international politics resembles not an even playing field but an unequal arena in which only superpowers – like the US, or China, with their economic preponderance, or Russia and France, with their military prowess – may ascend to the podium. Smaller nations, like those in Southeast Asia, Africa, and South America, often lack a significant value: the right to not just speak, but to be heard, and have your interests taken into account. Regardless, I contend that it is far too absolutist and defeatist to claim that only powerful nations have a significant value in the ever-evolving global affairs of our time, where smaller nations may still have the limelight.

Those who term themselves the “realists” of global affairs often resign themselves to the cynical stance that only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs. Since these major powers were often the pioneers of international organisations, they monopolise attention and discourse through the hierarchical structures of international organisations. The United Nations Security Council is famously dominated by the Permanent 5: the only 5 nations who hold veto power, and can single-handedly shut down any discussions. This power has been wielded as a weapon for powerful nations to ensure that their voice rises above the din, and their interests are considered above all else. During the Rwandan genocide in the 1990s, African nations begged for the world to take action against génocidaires who had unleashed bloodshed and chaos upon Rwanda. Their calls rang hollow in the Security Council – the word “genocide” was never even mentioned in council caucuses as the United States euphemistically termed it “civil strife”. The reason their voices could not be heard is because France exerted its veto power to shut down any talk of intervention in Rwanda, for fear of having to extend additional resources on military aid. This example evinces how the ossified, hierarchical structures of international organisations magnify solely the voices of the powerful, while silencing the weak, who hold no international authority. The harsh truth is that this is not an isolated example contained within the United Nations, because powerful nations have the greatest leverage in almost every international organisation. They have the unique ability to silence others because their institutionalised power gives them leverage over weaker nations who have no resources to force others to listen. Within the World Bank, the United States directs most developmental projects because they are the largest donor, and hence insist on having the final say over where their money goes, despite recipient nations’ milquetoast protests. Halfway across the globe, China’s voice is amplified in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation as it is the founder, and thus centres most discourse around its domestic interests. Both examples elucidate that powerful nations have the only significant voices,

because only power can grant leverage – in the form of threatening to withdraw funding to weaker nations if they object or asserting their interests in discussions they direct. Hence, weaker nations who face the double jeopardy of being excluded from discourse in both international organisations like the United Nations, and regional organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, may never speak, or if they do, are never heard.

However, to say that only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs is a blanket statement that fails to capture nuances of reality. Certainly, it may be said that less powerful nations individually lack a significant voice; but no man is an island, and no nation is all alone. Through banding together over common interests, less powerful nations may combine their influence to exert leverage over more powerful nations and force them to listen. Southeast Asia mostly consists of developing countries like Myanmar or Cambodia, with neither economic nor military might. Taken together, though, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is the fastest-growing regional economy in the world. This alone has invited the world to cater to ASEAN's interests: when Vietnam called for help against China's incursions in the South China Sea, the US spoke out against China's transgressions, and dozens of other countries staunchly supported the International Court of Justice's ruling against China's territorial claims. Small and weak nations may also band together to push urgent needs to the forefront of global affairs. Island nations, like Vanuatu and Tuvalu, are so small that they are often forgotten by the layman – but at each and every single United Nations General Assembly meeting, or the Conference of Parties climate conference, they directed their speaking time towards clamouring for action against sea level rise, which threatens to inundate them (as they are low-lying nations). It may be easy to dismiss one country's delegate, or one opening speech – but when dozens of Pacific Islands demand attention at the same time, it is impossible to avert your gaze. Global powers like the US, the UK and France have since pledged millions of dollars towards the construction of seawalls in low-lying island nations. Both of these examples illustrate a heart-warming global trend: smaller and weaker nations are forcing their interests to be heard through cooperation. This factor has undoubtedly granted them a significant voice: one need only look at the millions of dollars small nations have received in aid, or the dozens of press statements issued in solidarity from countries around the world, as proof that their interests have been raised, heard, and discussed. Hence, cooperation is often a loudspeaker, amplifying the voices of the erstwhile unheard.

Lastly, though it may have been true in the past that smaller nations are 'steamrolled' and silenced, they are now breaking powerful nations' monopoly in global affairs due to their increasing strategic importance. In the era of superpower competition between China and the US, each superpower is attempting to win this global tug-of-war by garnering more new allies. Those new allies are often found in small nations, whom superpowers had previously sidelined, but now view as untapped resources they can win over to expand influence. In order to persuade these wary countries to join as allies, stronger nations have had to promise them a significant voice, and guarantee that they will listen to their interests. Sri Lanka, for instance, has never been a powerful nation, and starting from 2020, they have been mired in an economic hellscape and beleaguered by poverty. Conventional

wisdom suggests that their weakness sets them up to be dismissed in favour of more powerful nations, as weaker nations have no means of strong-arming others into listening. Shockingly, when Sri Lanka called for aid, China quickly offered a no-strings-attached \$1.8 billion bailout – far better than the draconian austerity programme the International Monetary Fund had prescribed. The US swiftly followed up with its own offer of aid worth millions of dollars, falling in lockstep with China as they compete for allies. The logic is simple: even powerful nations now need more allies to have an edge over competing powers – in order to entice allies, they need to demonstrate their benevolence by promising to listen to allies' interests. This competition has elevated the voice of weaker nations. Cynical commentators remarked years ago that this trend would not endure, but just a few months ago, when Maldives asked for economic aid, both China and India heeded the call to vie for its loyalty and partnership. Clearly, even as superpowers become more and more powerful, and have a greater ability to dominate global affairs, they have no incentive to do so. Instead, to curry favour with small nations, we have seen an unprecedented reversal of power, with weaker nations' interests amplified and considered. Hence, it is empirically false that only powerful nations have a significant value in global affairs.

All in all, the landscape of global affairs is not monolithic and unchanging. Less powerful nations have garnered attention, and now see responses instead of silence when they call for help. Thus, the absolute, pessimistic stance that only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs does not stand.

### **Comments**

*Struck a good balance between breadth of points and depth of logical development. Depth of knowledge of examples is also very impressive. In terms of exemplification, I just have minor concern regarding the inconsistent use of Vanuatu and Tuvalu. Perhaps you could make it clearer why, ultimately, the voice they were accorded were due to banding together/formation of strategic alliances. Highly effective language use, even highly impactful. Perhaps an area for growth is to try to use more sophisticated transitions. Very persuasive.*

**‘Only powerful nations have a significant voice in global affairs.’ Discuss.**

The ancient Greek proverb or truism of “the strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must” is one which has held sway particularly over the realm of international relations for nearly two millennia. Indeed, the fundamental imbalance between states who hold “power”, be it militarily or economically, and those who do not possess such power continues to hold true today. Nevertheless, as to the statement’s sweeping claim that it is only and solely the states possessing this power that have the capacity to sway and have an impact on global affairs which concern all humankind, a greater degree of doubt has emerged, particularly in the modern day. It is argued that the shifting nature of international diplomacy in the present day, where influence is based on softer factors such as reputation than on sheer force or military might alone, allows smaller nations ever-increasing sway over global affairs. While this view undoubtedly has its merits, it nevertheless ignores the broader fact that these smaller states can only exert influence if and where the global superpowers deem it appropriate and useful for them to do so, with power thus fundamentally remaining with the handful of powerful states. Ultimately, therefore, though undoubtedly overly sweeping in its assessment, and though isolated exceptions may emerge, the statement must be judged to hold true with regards to international relations.

It must first be acknowledged that, particularly in the modern world, weaker nations have been able to exert influence, and thus to have a voice on global affairs. These weaker nations, who are unable to match up to global superpowers across a variety of metrics from economic might to military force, are nevertheless able to navigate the fraught waters of international relations with a greater degree of dexterity and nuance than the less agile superpowers. Indeed, when one considers the state of superpower competition or much of the last century, with ideological lines drawn in the sand and superpowers rigidly adhering to their mutually implacable positions and views, the role of weaker nations is heightened rather than detracted from, in being able to serve as intermediaries and thus to take the lead in affecting real change and progress in global issues. Singapore itself serves as a prime example of this idea, having fostered a reputation of neutrality and fairness in its relations with other states globally, hence positioning itself as a trusted mediator even for some of the most contentious disputes in the modern day. Thus, Singapore has served as the host for meetings between the United States and North Korea, considered by the US as part of its “axis of evil”, and between the PRC and ROC, considered by the former as an openly rebellious breakaway territory. It is precisely Singapore’s relatively weaker geostrategic position, at least relative to the global superpowers of the US and PRC, that commends it to superpowers as a neutral party, thus allowing it to serve as a host for such unprecedented meetings. Through such diplomacy, moreover, the influence that Singapore is able to exert is enormous, being responsible for the success or failure of unprecedented and unlikely to be repeated forums of



international diplomacy, thus challenging the adage that only powerful nations are able to exert a significant voice on global affairs. Indeed, it could even be argued that the role of smaller, weaker, and ‘neutral’ nations such as Singapore or to use another example, Qatar in the Middle East, is even greater than that of the superpowers or of the states involved in such discussions themselves, since high level meetings such as that between Trump and Kim would have been impossible without the “good offices” and participation of Singapore as an arbiter. Therefore, in the ever-increasing climate of ideological and geopolitical polarisation, it seems to be the case that weaker nations can not only have a voice at international affairs but play an extremely significant role in shaping the state of the world far beyond what their resources or hard power might otherwise allow.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned argument, though valid, fails to account for the fundamental fact that the ability of small nations to exert significant influence remains circumscribed by the willingness of the powerful to allow them to do so. By dint of their weaker economic, military, and geopolitical strength vis-a-vis these global superpowers, weaker states are thus unable to directly challenge or confront them in areas arbitrarily deemed by these stronger states to be exclusively their prerogative. Thus, even when smaller states are allowed to participate at the highest levels of international diplomacy, it is in explicitly and narrowly circumscribed areas and with particular functions to play. To take the earlier example of the Trump-Kim summit, Singapore’s role, and hence any influence it had over the meeting and resultant international repercussions, was explicitly limited to acting as hosts for the event, with little opportunity to chart a path in the US-North Korea dispute, which threatens nuclear annihilation globally, beyond that which those parties permitted it to take. Indeed, it is far more common for larger and more powerful states to exclude and even to forbid the diplomatic participation of smaller states in affairs deemed to be of particular strategic interest to themselves, while reserving for themselves the exclusive right to interfere in the affairs of weaker states, thereby creating an inherently unequal system of global diplomacy where weaker nations are prevented from influencing or even raising relevant issues while stronger states face no such limitations, being therefore solely and uniquely able to have a voice in global affairs. Such injustice has been evident throughout history, from the United States’ condemnation of Cuba for seeking to establish Communist governments in Latin America during the Cold War while hypocritically and often violently seeking to establish friendly governments in the region, to China’s prohibition on discussions of its maritime claim in the South China Sea today, leaving weaker Southeast Asian states unable to enforce or even discuss their lawful maritime rights in face of Chinese obstinacy. Indeed, the latter is a particularly egregious example of stronger nations being able to circumscribe the scope of international diplomacy and hence to strip away the influence and even agency of weaker states in these global affairs. Given the South China Sea’s vital position in global trade networks, China seeks to extend its influence over it with its 9-dash line claim, one which is explicitly illegal under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which China is a signatory to, and which comes into conflict with the lawful claims of Southeast Asian states like the Philippines. In spite of efforts not only by individual states but by ASEAN as a whole to redress this injustice through bilateral and multilateral talks, China’s staunch refusal to even countenance discussion or questioning of its claim to the region has left ASEAN, which cannot match China’s military and economic might, completely impotent

against even this grave injustice, clearly evidencing the inability of weaker nations to exert diplomatic influence beyond areas deemed appropriate by superpowers themselves. Undoubtedly, therefore, given their sole and unchallenged ability to dictate and decide on the participation of other states in global affairs, it is only and exclusively these powerful nations who have a significant voice.

Exacerbating this inherent injustice is the explicit enshrining of unequal power for stronger nations in global institutions, which allows them to override and ignore other states and thus to be the sole significant actors in global affairs. In the post-World War II world in particular, global affairs, be they military, diplomatic, or economic, have largely been contested and resolved at international forums such as the United Nations. Nevertheless, in spite of the rhetoric surrounding these international institutions as equal forums and platforms for all states, powerful or weak, the reality is that these institutions enshrine and institutionalise the dominance and pre-eminence of powerful states over their peers. Chiefly, when one examines the system of permanent members in the UN Security Council (UNSC), this injustice is most clearly borne out, with the 5 permanent members being the most powerful states in the post-World War II world, who explicitly institutionalised their dominance through according themselves unchecked veto power to disregard any decision taken by the council as a whole (including 10 non-permanent members) regardless of their rationale in doing so. This power has throughout the existence of the UNSC been unjustly wielded for self-interested ends. In the 1996 UN Secretary-General selection, for instance, the US was able to repeatedly veto the re-selection of Boutros Boutros-Ghali owing to their individual dissatisfaction with him, in spite of 13 of 15 UNSC members, and a broad majority of all member states at the UN as a whole being strongly in favour of Boutros-Ghali's re-selection. More recently, the US again proved to be the lone dissenting voice voting against an immediate and unconditional ceasefire to stop Israeli aggression, and indeed war crimes, against Gaza, with its opposition being sufficient to veto the measure. The gross injustice of the veto, and the mockery it makes out of the supposed principle of the equality of nations at the UN, clearly demonstrate the unchecked and singular power of stronger states to enact their will. When the near unanimous decision of smaller states can be arbitrarily reversed for the self-interest of one powerful state alone, it is tragically evident that power in the UN, and by extension in almost every facet of transnational and global affairs today, lies exclusively with these powerful states, who are alone able to exert a significant voice, in terms of influence and sway, over such global affairs.

When examining comprehensively the relative abilities of stronger and weaker states to have a voice on global affairs, in terms of exerting influence and sway, it must therefore be concluded that in spite of the ostensible influence weaker nations may occasionally possess, most fundamentally, the statement continues to hold true both in the past and the modern day. The unchecked power of stronger states to circumscribe grounds for discussion and to enact their will over the objections of weaker states renders them ultimately the only significant voices in global relations and affairs. Given also the institutionalisation and entrenchment of this inequality on the global stage, change to the current status quo of perverse inequality between weak and powerful nations must come from within these powerful nations themselves, to willingly and consciously strip

themselves of their inherent privileges, both implicit and institutional, and in so doing to be able to disprove that sweeping and tragic, yet nevertheless justified and true statement. It is only when all nations are truly and genuinely placed on an equal footing irrespective of their economic or military might that the voices of weaker nations can have a significant voice in global affairs, and the monopoly powerful nations have held in influencing events to their liking alone can be ended.

### **Comments**

*Authoritatively conceived and argued, and very impressive, particularly when one takes into consideration the circumstances. A minor query about whether or not the institutionalisation of the powerful nations' might within international organisations is a primary or secondary cause (whether it is a symptom or a reason for their tremendous ability to shape global affairs). Language use was similarly impressive. Very good range of vocabulary, expressions, and sentence construction. Skilful use of transitions.*

**To what extent should the state interfere in the private life of its citizens?**

Proponents of privacy and the right to freedom of choice have long argued that governments should not meddle with the private lives of its citizens. This sentiment is shared by many worldwide, as evinced by widespread backlash and public outrage after Edward Snowden, former contractor of the United States' National Security Agency (NSA), exposed the NSA for unconstitutionally tapping into emails, phone calls and text messages of its citizens in the name of "national security". In their view, state intervention in the private lives of its citizens entails a gross violation of the fundamental right to privacy and freedom of choice, and could put the health and safety of individuals at risk. Yet, at the same time, there is also a significant number of people that opine that governments are justified in and even obliged to step in when the actions of individuals, even when done in private, can cause harm to themselves or to the wider community. Furthermore, given that governments often have access to a wider variety and greater depth of information, technical knowledge and resources, they are also in a better position to make decisions on behalf of its citizens at times. Hence, they opine that the state should interfere with the private lives of its citizens. While I concede that the right to choice and bodily autonomy is important, I posit that the state is still justified in interfering with its citizens' choices under certain circumstances and should do so to protect society at large.

Detractors of my stance often lambast state intervention in the personal affairs of its citizens as a flagrant violation of the right to choice. As outlined by the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), all individuals can and should have the autonomy to make decisions regarding their own lives. After all, the unique personal circumstances, lived experiences and deep-rooted beliefs that an individual holds will shape the decisions they make, and the effects of such decisions will largely be borne by the individual that makes them. Thus, they argue that the state should have no business in prescribing certain choices for its citizens or punishing them for making those contrary to what the state deems desirable. Looking back to the past, Singapore's population policy in the 1980s and 1990s was deemed controversial by many. Then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew tried to control our burgeoning population with the "Stop at Two" policy before pivoting to encouraging educated females to have more children in a bid to boost the skilled labour force using its Social Development Unit (SDU), which aimed to matchmake university graduates together to make "smarter" offspring. As if this was not drastic enough, the government also attempted to discourage uneducated mothers from having more children by offering them financial incentives of up to \$10,000 to undergo medical sterilisation. This policy was criticised by Singaporeans and the global community alike, with some even branding it as a form of eugenics. In this case, the state chose to intervene in the private decision of starting a family unit, which requires careful consideration of

one's financial, familial and psychological state, in the name of the greater good, that is, boosting Singapore's workforce to allow for sustained economic growth, which would undoubtedly benefit its citizens in the long run. By choosing to interfere in the personal lives of its citizens, dictating who should and should not bear children, the government has arguably violated the fundamental right to choice and has crossed a line. Even in the present, Singapore has still taken a rather invasive approach to controlling the private affairs of its people. Up to its repeal in 2022, the infamous section 377A of our Penal Code was a point of contention and hotly debated in Parliament and civil society. The rights of the LGBT community to live out their lives in the private domain should not be encroached upon simply to appease the conservative majority or for fear of disrupting the "status quo". Fortunately, with the efforts of vocal activists and increasing societal acceptance, the law was finally repealed. Both examples highlight how state intervention into the personal decisions of its citizens are unwarranted, as they constitute a transgression of the basic human right to choose how to live one's life freely, without fear of discrimination or reprisal. Hence, it can be argued that the state should not interfere with the private lives of its citizens.

Another argument often put forth by opponents of state intervention is in the case of bodily autonomy. The right to decide what to do with one's body is also enshrined in the UDHR. After all, an individual should have control over the biological and physiological faculties and functions of their own bodies. An apt example of this would be the recent overturning of the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* in 2021, which previously declared the right to abortion as constitutionally protected and allowed women across the U.S. unhindered access to safe medical care, should they choose to terminate their pregnancy. Yet, when the Conservative majority of the US Supreme Court ruled that *Roe v. Wade* did not actually confer the right to abortion protection under the constitution, many Conservative states, including Alabama and Texas, immediately outlawed the procedures, shuttering abortion clinics and medical centres overnight. Most notably, in Texas, abortion was outlawed past the foetal age of 6 weeks, a time where most women have yet to discover their pregnancy, with no exemptions for rape or incest. The decision shocked and angered many Americans as well the global community, who saw it as a step backward in the fight for women's rights. Even the Conservative and Evangelical Christian population in Texas deemed the ban a violation of one's right to decide what to do with one's bodies, with close to 60% opposing the state legislation. Mothers with foetuses diagnosed with encephalitis, a fatal condition that would almost certainly result in the death of the foetus, were barred from undergoing abortions and had to carry their child to term, putting them at greater risk of ectopic pregnancies, post-natal depression and other medical issues. In such cases, state interference in private matters not only violates one's bodily autonomy, but can even end up causing greater harm and threaten the safety and health of its citizens. Thus, governments should not meddle with the private decisions of its citizens, especially when it comes to medical matters, where individuals, who know their bodies best, should take charge in decision making.

However, while I acknowledge that some state intervention in health-related matters is unjustified, one must also be cognizant that this might not always be the case. Individuals, as much as we would like to think otherwise, may not always know what is best, even for themselves. Governments are better equipped with the technical knowledge and resources and are thus better poised to make informed decisions on behalf of its citizens at times. This is especially important since in most democracies today, governments are charged with the vital responsibility of the well-being and safety of its citizens. As a result, the state can still be warranted, and even expected to intervene in matters regarding an individual's private decisions. Take the global wave of bans on e-cigarettes and vaporisers, or vapes for short. From Singapore to the United Kingdom, an increasing number of restrictions, from raising the legal age to purchase vapes to 21 years old (up from 18), to a complete ban, have been implemented to protect citizens from the harms of vaping. According to the US Centre for Disease Control (CDC), vapes can bring about a multitude of chronic, long term respiratory issues such as small cell lung cancer, oesophageal cancer and emphysema, as the chemical compounds used in the production of vape liquids contain volatile organic compounds (VOC), as well as carcinogens. Some studies have even found the effects of vaping to be 3-5 times as harmful as traditional cigarettes. Yet, many consumers are still mis- or ill-informed on the harms of vaping, in large parts thanks to the bright and alluring advertising pushed out by vape companies, which draw consumer's attention to the interesting variety of "flavours" vapes can take on. This has incentivised youths as young as 8 years old to try vaping, with Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Education (MOE) reporting that school children of ages 9 all the way to 18 have been taken to task for vaping-related offences. This is not the fault of consumers, who cannot be expected to grasp the technical and complicated jargon used to explain medical conditions, as supplier-induced demand is the culprit for overconsumption of harmful vapes. Instead, what this signifies is that governments are justified and should even be expected to correct such information asymmetry and inform citizens of the harms of consuming such products, or even going to the extent of an explicit ban on all vapes, as they would have access to the medical findings and information surrounding the harms of such products. Hence, to this end, the government can and should interfere with the private lives of its citizens to prevent them from making suboptimal decisions.

Finally, the state is also warranted in intervening in the personal decisions of its people when their actions have the potential to cause significant harm to not just themselves, but society at large. As mentioned earlier, given that individuals lack complete, perfect information about the repercussions of their choices and behaviours, the state can step in to protect the interests of society and the individual. Take the example of Singapore's recent ban on advertising for excessively sweetened beverages, as well as its compulsory Nutri-Grade labelling on all beverages. Under new guidelines, companies are no longer allowed to market products that contain 10% or more by weight of sugar (Nutri-Grade D and below), in a bid to nudge consumers away from such unhealthy drinks. At first glance, such intervention may seem excessive and even draconian, as the right of an individual to enjoy a sweet treat once in a while seems to fall way outside the purview of the government. However, one has to be wary of the downsides of consuming excessive

amounts of sugar. Singapore's rates of diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, have been climbing in recent years, with the percentage of Singaporeans with diabetes or pre-diabetes creeping up to 10% in 2023, according to MOH. In the long run, the increasing prevalence of such chronic illness, coupled with our ageing population, could put undue pressure on our healthcare infrastructure and institutions, which could compromise the quality of healthcare for all Singaporeans. Hence, the government's decision to promote healthier lifestyles, through Healthier SG (which allows better monitoring of citizens' health by having a dedicated healthcare provider), the National Steps Challenge and ActiveSG (to encourage citizens to exercise and keep fit), amongst other initiatives, along with encouraging us to control our diets and limit out intake of unhealthy goods, is actually justified in the long term. Doing so allows citizens to preserve their own health to lead longer, more fruitful lives, and avoid strain on public infrastructure and resources in the present and future. Thus, state interference in the lifestyle decisions of its people, particularly concerning our health and which could have an impact on the wider community, should be warranted, or even lauded.

All in all, after considering both the arguments for and against government intervention in the personal decisions of its citizens, I opine that some degree of state interference is still justified and arguably necessary to protect the welfare of individual citizens and society at large. While our rights to bodily autonomy and freedom of choice are indeed inalienable and should not be encroached upon to the extent that it puts us in even greater harm, given that individuals themselves do not always have complete and accurate information, they may end up making misinformed choices that adversely impact not only themselves, but engender wider repercussions for those around them. Thus, in these instances, the state, as custodians of its citizens, is charged with the responsibility to step in and correct these errors in judgement to preserve the wellbeing of its people. To prevent the state from overstepping its boundaries, checks and balances should also be implemented to ensure that individuals ultimately hold the final say in matters concerning their own lives, bodies and safety. Hence, I argue that some level of government intervention should be warranted.

### **Comments**

*Thoroughly argued and relevant piece of writing, with clear illustration and evidence in place to support arguments made. Analysis and evaluation of ideas is done in a logical and systematic way that makes it quite convincing. Constantly goes back to the question. The last two body paragraphs seem to go back to the same idea of governments possessing greater knowledge than citizens – could have considered other reasons to expand your scope. Evenly developed paragraphs, with clear and consistent signposting done throughout the essay. Controlled writing, with a keen attempt to introduce variations in expression.*

**‘Technology has given us a false sense of hope in solving problems.’  
To what extent is this true?**

The advent of technological innovations has indubitably changed our lives. From the smartphone to solar panels, the development and integration of technological devices, gadgets and infrastructure has sought to improve our lives one step at a time. Even with alarming creations, such as the H-bomb or the electric chair, the permeation of technology into defence and even prisons attests to its prevalence in our society. Given the ubiquity of technology in our lives, and the incessant chatter about novel technologies such as artificial intelligence and quantum computing, it would be fair to assume that technology will continue to address the problems in our lives. AI has been heralded as the next big thing since the smartphone, while quantum computing promises to increase processing speeds by the thousandfold. Yet, with the great power that comes with these developments, viewing technology as a panacea to our world’s woes seems presumptuous. While technology does hold immense promise in solving existential threats such as climate change, it is precisely the double-edged nature of technology that highlights how our trust is misplaced. Technology’s inherent ineffectiveness in its nascent stages, coupled with the dark shadow of malign intentions that embroils technological innovations, points to how our hope in technology could be excessive in solving both large and small problems.

Given how instrumental technology has been in our lives, it would be fair to posit that our hope and technology is well-placed. The development of the computer and smartphone promised to strengthen our connectivity with the immediate communities around us and the world, allowing us to access troves of information that humankind has accrued over centuries in the click of a button. The development of digital infrastructure that accompanied these innovations laid the groundwork for the globalised world we live in today, amplifying connectivity and making business transactions easier. The concomitant rises in gross domestic product and improved trade relations can be attributed to the development of these networks which were enabled by technological innovation, as such technological innovations have delivered on promises before and solved issues which have allowed us to build a more interconnected and interdependent world. It will not be unfair to assume that technology can continue doing so. Take climate change, for example. Global efforts to adopt green technologies in a bid to curtail rapidly rising global temperatures have given rise to various innovations, with green hydrogen being one of them. Green hydrogen promises to eliminate the emission of greenhouse gases and ensure cleaner, less pollutive energy production processes. The premise behind green hydrogen is as such: sustainable energy capture methods such as solar panels or wind turbines are used to generate electricity, which are utilised in an electrolysis process to produce



hydrogen. This hydrogen can then be transported to be used as fuel. Given the cleanliness and sustainability of such a process we would be right to view it as a fuel cell which can power the future and assist us in reducing rising global temperatures. The man in which technology has resolved large-scale global problems in the past gives us confidence and belief that technology can once again help us solve other large-scale global issues. Hence, the hope that we have in technology is fully justified.

However, the problems we face are multifarious in nature, and technology is often not up to the task of solving such complex problems, especially in its nascent stages. Computers required years of development and refinement before they could become mainstays in our homes and around the world. Similarly, budding technologies require continuous refinement before they can be viewed as effective solutions to the issues we face. Green hydrogen, at present, is exceedingly costly to produce, and even more costly to transport. Storage is another issue, with highly specific tanks and containment conditions being required for the safe storage of such flammable fuel. By developing green hydrogen, scientists did not cut the Gordian knot to climate change and global warming; they instead unravelled a new host of issues that comes with technological solutions. Technology may be able to solve the issue in principle; however, concerns over cost, safety and the integration of safe technology become pertinent. As such, foisting new technologies as a cure-all to our woes, especially for quagmires as problematic as climate change, indeed gives us a sense of false hope. The possibility of the technology bearing fruit to provide a timely solution that every major world player is agreeable to, is exceedingly low. Hence, there is a false sense of security that arises when we look to new technologies as a solution to our problems.

Furthermore, technological advancement has led us to believe that all issues have a technological solution. The wars being fought in the Middle East and Eastern Europe are unquestionably ensconced in technological innovation, with advanced missile systems and artificial intelligence being utilised by various parties to gain an edge in these conflicts. However, barring the use of nuclear weapons, these wars are unlikely to be won on the basis of technological supremacy. Whilst Israel arguably has one of the world's most developed militaries, the state still has not been able to wrest control of swathes of Palestinian land since 7 October. Russia, despite its military technology, has not been able to suppress Ukraine, who have been fighting the war on borrowed time and weapons. The development of superior capabilities is unlikely to end these conflicts. Conflict is a deeply human issue<sup>1</sup>, requiring negotiation, trade-offs and compromise. The solution does not lie with technology, but with those in power who decide what to do with said technology and who decide what the most favourable outcome of the conflict is. As such, we cannot place our faith in technology to solve our problems, but the consequential people who hold sway in such conflicts. Similarly, technologies such as social media, which has given rise to

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<sup>1</sup> This is a key evaluative idea that would have been best foregrounded in the first/topic sentence at the start of this essay (E.g. "Technological advancement has led to believe that all issues have a technological solution when the reality is that it often fails, because some of these problems are deeply human issues that require meaningful, in-person interactions to address.")

issues such as teen depression and social media addiction, also does not have a solely technological solution. While companies such as Meta and ByteDance have resolved to make changes to their algorithm to reduce the incidence of these problems, it is not the algorithm that causes these issues, but the nature of the technology itself. Social media creates a virtual panopticon, in which users affirm and perpetuate harmful notions through their very participation on social media platforms. By posting an image of yourself, you are presenting a constructed, artificial version of yourself which compels others to do the same, resulting in a vicious cycle which leads to a plethora of mental health conditions we see in social media users today. Once again, the solution does not lie with technology, but with us, the humans who use the technology. In order to solve these problems, we need to acknowledge the artificial nature of social media, and instead of participating in the construction of a false virtual persona, we should see social media as an appendage of our lives, not as a nexus through which we clamour for attention. We cannot hold out hope for technology to solve these problems and cannot buy into the promises by world leaders or tech CEOs that they can use technology to resolve problems like war or social media addiction. Those who take their words seriously will find themselves severely disappointed.

While technology has been a major driving force for progress and offers us hope for both global and societal issues, it is not a panacea. It is the people who determine whether the problems can be solved or not. In the case of climate change, while we do have promising technologies (albeit currently ineffective), a concerted effort is required to convince world leaders and fossil fuel company CEOs that energy sustainability is a pressing endeavour worth pursuing. For protracted conflicts, negotiation and compromise are necessary, as opposed to inefficiently asserting technological superiority which leads to more death and chaos. For social media, an understanding of the harms of social media is needed to circumvent mental health issues. Whilst we may feel a false sense of hope due to the promises of technology and the great influence that it wields in our lives, it is worth keeping in mind that problems are ultimately solved by people, not technology.

### **Comments**

*Quite a breath of fresh air, where this question is concerned. You did demonstrate a clear understanding of the need to clearly justify how and why tech has misled us into thinking that we can rely on it to solve problems. This is much more than many other students realised. Balance was achieved, and effectively so (though the lack of signposting to indicate to the reader that you do not necessarily agree with the antithesis' views you were acknowledging took some gloss off that). There were two support points to provide some range/scope to your discussion. The second point in particular was quite original and insightful. Very good range of expression and sentence structure. A number of instances of impactful use of language. Well done!*

## PASSAGES

### Passage 1

*Michael E. Mann contends that lifestyle changes are not enough to save the planet.*

Everyone faces choices every day that carry a climate cost. Do we turn the lights on in the morning, or is the light of daybreak sufficient for finding matching socks? Do we feast on bacon and eggs for breakfast, or will a bowl of oatmeal suffice? There is a lot of talk these days about the need to lead lower-carbon lifestyles. There is also a lot of finger-pointing going on and, some argue, virtue signalling. But who is truly walking the climate talk? The carnivore who doesn't fly? The vegan who travels to see family abroad? If nobody is without carbon sin, who gets to cast the first lump of coal? If all climate advocates were expected to live off the grid, eating only what they could grow themselves and wearing only the clothes they'd knitted from scratch, there wouldn't be much of a climate movement. That level of sacrifice is unacceptable to most.

We don't need to ban cars; we need to electrify them (and we need that electricity to come from clean energy). We don't need to ban burgers; we need climate-friendly beef. To spur these changes, we need to put a price on carbon, to incentivise polluters to invest in these solutions. Though air travel accounts for only a paltry 2% of global emissions, whether or not climate scientists should fly consumes far more than 2% of my Twitter timeline. Unfortunately, sometimes doing science means travelling great distances, and we don't always have the time or luxury to take slower low-carbon options. We have a job to do, after all. But still, a single scientist, or even hundreds of scientists, choosing to never fly again is not going to help the environment. Purchasing carbon offsets for flights is a viable means of decarbonising your air travel, for now. However, the true solution, pricing carbon, requires policy change.

There is a long history of industry-funded 'deflection campaigns' aiming to divert attention from big polluters and place the burden on individuals. Individual action is important and something we should all champion. But appearing to force people to give up meat, or travel, or other things central to the lifestyle they've chosen to live is politically dangerous: it plays right into the hands of climate change deniers who tend to portray climate champions as freedom-hating totalitarians.

The bigger issue is that focusing on individual choices around air travel and beef consumption heightens the risk of losing sight of the gorilla in the room: civilisation's reliance on fossil fuels for energy and transport overall, which accounts for roughly two-thirds of global carbon emissions. We need systemic changes that will reduce everyone's

carbon footprint, whether or not they care. The good news is we have tactics to bring environmentally friendly (and to be clear, these need not be lifestyle-disrupting) options to fruition: pricing carbon emissions and creating incentives for renewable energy and reduced consumption. By putting a price on carbon, people can actually make money by reducing emissions, selling their services to corporations that are always looking for ways to cut costs. Never underestimate the resourcefulness of people when there's money to be made! But a price on carbon needs to be designed such that marginalised communities most at risk from such a climate impact aren't adversely impacted economically as well.

This is why we really need political change at every level, from local leaders to national legislators all the way up to the President. We need change not just at the breakfast table, but at the ballot box as well.

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### **Passage 2**

*Jason Marks argues that personal action matters if we are to avert the climate catastrophe.*

It's important for the environmental movement to keep insisting that individual behaviour changes are not only required but righteous. Such real talk opens the way to having a public conversation about how to fairly navigate the changes to come. But, for me at least, beyond the cold political calculus is the more important issue of integrity: we need to walk the talk.

It's essential that each of us who cares about the fate of the planet at least makes an attempt to align our individual actions with our role as public citizens. This doesn't have to involve foisting guilt on people; it should take the form of a steely determination to transform our way of living.

Because here's the thing: When we choose to eat less meat or take the bus instead of driving or have fewer children, we are making a statement that our actions matter. In doing so, it amplifies political activism. It's precisely the difficulty of such personal changes that make them valuable; to borrow from John F. Kennedy, we should align our individual actions with our beliefs not because it's easy – but because it's hard. In doing so, we are likely to find that the effort is empowering. When we take responsibility for the environmental consequences of our daily actions, we feel like we are in control. And when we're in control of our own life, perhaps then we'll feel more empowered to take control of – or at least play a role in – larger political systems.

Which is to say that personal action and collective, political action are self-reinforcing. Individual lifestyle changes can act as a kind of alloy that strengthens political activism. Taking the first step in walking more lightly on the planet is all the more important because it creates momentum.

So maybe we should agree, as a movement, to stop rhetorically putting personal action and collective action in opposition to each other as if it was some kind of activism zero-sum game.

Ultimately, how, when, where, and in what form to act is up to us. The most important thing is simply to act and not overthink it. Don't let anyone tell us differently.

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### ***Passage 3***

*Lifestyle blogger Joanna Ma assesses the impact of paper straws.*

It's safe to say that the global campaign against the use of plastic straws reached fever pitch this year, but are paper straws really the eco-friendly alternative they claim to be? The main argument for using paper straws instead of plastic ones is that paper is biodegradable. This means that it can naturally be broken down and won't end up floating in our oceans or being swallowed by turtles. However, the fix isn't as simple as swapping plastic for paper. While paper straws, unlike plastic ones, will naturally decompose, or break down, into smaller pieces, there is still a chance that small animals could swallow these little bits of paper.

The recent switch has seen many opt for paper straws to do their part, instead of, say, metal straws. However, paper straws are still single-use waste items. The truth is this: people want to reduce their plastic usage without giving up convenience.

We ought to consider the impact of our actions carefully instead of jumping on the bandwagon. The only guaranteed way to make a difference to the environment is for people to stop using single-use straws altogether. There are already so many existing tools that can perform the duty of straws. Why can't we just drink from our cups?

Ultimately, we need to change our lifestyles so that we use items that can be used again and again. Even if we create products using the most environmentally-friendly materials, as long as they are single-use products, the Earth won't last.

**How far do you agree that personal action is necessary  
to address climate change in your society?**

The author in Passage 1 states that “We need change not just at the breakfast table, but at the ballot box as well.” This is true of my society. The PAP government in Singapore uses a multi-pronged approach in tackling the issue of climate change, and heavily recognises the importance of governance in creating change, even at the breakfast table. This can be observed through the yearly talks in school assemblies with regards to cultivating greener habits, and the booking system in schools being applicable to actions such as forgetting to turn off lights or fans. Other than that, the government subsidises research and development in areas that encourage a reduction of carbon emissions, such as project Eat Just, which seeks to produce plant-based chicken nuggets. Certificates of Entitlement (COE) in Singapore cost hundreds of thousands of dollars in order to reduce road traffic and pollution. All these actions taken by the government suggest a top-down approach in tackling the climate catastrophe, as the Singapore government seeks to develop Singapore into a Green City with its 2030 Green City Plan. The government recognises the importance of being an active participant in the global climate change movement, seeing as we are a country especially reliant on foreign exports and investments so any supply chain disruptions stemming from global warming, pollution, deforestation and other effects of climate change will impact our country on a large scale, seeing as we lack natural factor endowments and are extremely vulnerable to external shocks. The second part of the reason for this top-down approach is a generally apathetic and pragmatic population that needs to be encouraged and incentivised to reduce our carbon emissions. Singaporeans do not directly feel the impact of climate change that much, as we do not undergo changes in seasons or fluctuations in climate. Moreover, Singaporeans generally are rather pragmatic in nature and unlikely to have faith in the impacts of their individual actions on climate change as a whole. This explains the main role the government plays in using legislation and financial incentives to increase the citizens’ participation in the climate change movement.

In Passage 3, the author states that “The truth is this: people want to reduce their plastic usage without giving up convenience”. This is generally not true in my society, as I find that there is a divergence in the Singaporean population, where a part of the population wants to reduce their plastic usage and is willing to give up convenience to do so, while the rest do not want to reduce their plastic usage at all<sup>2</sup>. This divergence can largely be accounted for by the generation gap in Singapore’s population. Among the young, one can observe the former situation. Youths in Singapore are increasingly involved in the climate change movement, as seen by the variety of student-initiated projects with regards to tackling climate change. The Youth Action Challenge held by the National Youth Council yearly is a platform where youths pitch their projects and obtain funding to bring their ideas to fruition. Though this is not an easy feat, the programme has seen an increasing level of participation since 2016, showing that youths are not afraid to put in effort for climate movements. This is due to the critical thinking skills of the new generation and the fact that they will be the ones suffering the brunt of the impacts of climate change. Though usually apathetic, youths are driven by the fact that if they do not take action, nobody else will. Their inventions and ideas further reflect the success of Singapore’s education system, as they are innovative, pragmatic and most importantly effective, unlike changes such as from plastic to paper straws.

### **Comments**

*Quite an effective and analytical response with good understanding of the text and ideas shared! Good effort!*

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<sup>2</sup> It is worthwhile to note – for accuracy’s sake – that there has been an overall reduction in plastic bag usage following the mandatory plastic bag charge as highlighted in Parliament by Minister Grace Fu, who spoke of the measure as being “generally well-received” among Singaporeans: <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/supermarket-plastic-bag-charge-disposable-carrier-drop-use-grace-fu-4035166>

**How far do you agree that personal action is necessary  
to address climate change in your society?**

In passage 1, paragraph 5, Michael argues that should we want to see an improvement in the environment, not only do people's lifestyle have to change, but more crucially, the government's effort is vital to see positive impacts. I agree with his statement that in Singapore, Above all else, the improvement of the environmental condition hinges on the government's effort, which would eventually drive personal action. In Singapore, environmental sustainability is one of the key goals of the government, leading to the implementation of various policies in hopes of promoting this. An example would include the charging of plastic bags at major supermarkets, and the plan to increase the number of charging ports for more environmentally friendly electric vehicles. As can be seen here, many of these government policies have the eventual impact of changing our habits, such as by encouraging the usage of reusable bags, or owning an electric vehicle. Such political changes might be viewed as handholding, but this could be attributed to the nature of us Singaporeans. We tend to be extremely resistant to changes in our lifestyle, demonstrating reluctance in doing things differently from what we are already used to. Many have described us as people having a "if it's not broken, why fix it?" mentality. Furthermore, Singaporeans view their individual actions as insignificant to the wider global issue of climate change. Given we are a small country, and our emissions are low compared to other superpower nations, we are further pushed away from the idea of making a change, when we view that such a change in lifestyle leads to a lack of difference. Eventually, the government must take a more paternalistic approach, guiding us step by step, slowly but steadily teaching us how to change our daily lives. Hopefully, this means such acts can become a habit, and eventually a part of our lifestyle and finally prove to the world that even a bustling city, a concrete jungle, can achieve lifestyle changes to save Earth.

In passage 2, line 19, Jason argues that taking personal action would inspire others to do the same, eliminating any inertia surrounding the issue and causing a ripple effect of great and extensive changes in society. While I acknowledge his optimism, I disagree that such personal action alone is sufficient to spark a change in the lifestyle habits of Singaporeans. Despite the fact that in recent years, we see on the news that various small food businesses are introducing "bring your own container" initiatives, selling only to customers who brought a reusable container to store the good products like snacks or nuts, these businesses do not seem to thrive. Even in schools, when individual canteen vendors provide discounts for bringing one's own cutlery, to huge companies like Starbucks having



a similar initiative, at the end of the day, when we look into rubbish bins, the mountain of plastic cutlery waste stares right back at us. Convenience, above all else, is the greatest priority of us Singaporeans. To find a way to do something that frees up valuable time and energy gives us some sort of a spiritual satisfaction - where we acquire bliss from finding a new and innovative method to save time. Here in Singapore, the pace of living is neck breaking. Everything moves so quickly - even our escalators in the MRT speed up and down. Evidently, time is of the essence here. In this hypercompetitive society, any time "wasted" sorting through reusable cutlery, washing them, and packing them into our bags is time that could have been spent working. The opportunity cost of this time is immensely high - especially when we encapsulate this fiery competition and unwillingness to lose to other Singaporeans. Thus, this priority of efficiency and productivity is placed on a pedestal so high in our hearts that no other cause, including climate change, is able to compete with it, even if there are a few individuals who try to spark change, through personal action and being a role model.

**Comments**

*Good job on the AQ, consistently raising relevant examples and evaluation. The evaluation was very thorough in the second paragraph. The first paragraph does raise some sensible claims, but some important 'why' questions need to be explained more.*

## PASSAGES

### Passage 1

*Kenny Torella discusses the case against pet ownership.*

Some days, when the doomscrolling becomes too much, I switch up my social media consumption to something I call petscrolling. It is the act of swiping through an endless feed of Instagram reels featuring resilient three-legged rescue dogs hiking in the woods, feisty yet charming shop cats, and the occasional potbellied pet pig splashing around in a kiddie pool. The internet is awash in this feel-good content starring some of the 250 million animals – nearly one for every person – who populate American households. It all reinforces the inherent goodness of the ancient human-animal bond and lets us believe that where there are pets—whom most owners consider to be family members—there is joy, love, play, and hope.

Recently, though, I have begun to wonder if this is always the case. According to bioethicist Jessica Pierce, there are deep shadows beneath the sunny narrative of pet ownership, things like physical abuse, animal hoarding, puppy mills, and dog fighting. But beyond such extremes, Pierce’s work aims to direct our gaze to where more subtle but far more common forms of neglect and cruelty lie. To Pierce, even well-meaning pet owners may have a lot to answer for: punitive training, extreme confinement, lack of autonomy, verbal abuse, unhealthy diets, lack of grooming, inadequate veterinary care, lack of exercise, boredom, and even abandonment.

All this is possible because, unlike children, pets are not really family members—they are property with few laws to safeguard their rights. And because abuse and neglect primarily occur in the privacy of the home, there is little accountability for it. Even the most responsible pet owners, which I would count myself among, are bound to fail to meet the needs of their animals due to other responsibilities and the inherent challenges of keeping a dog or cat in a world made for humans. We may see ourselves as the best of animal lovers, but we very well could be inflicting suffering on our pets every day.

We demand companionship with as little friction as possible, expecting our pets (especially dogs) to always be docile and agreeable, and to adapt quickly to the human world, with its countless rules and norms that mean nothing to them. And then when they inevitably fail to do so at first, we deem their natural habits misbehaviour in need of correction, or abandonment. It is telling that the world’s most popular dog trainer, Cesar Millan, partly relies on dominance and control to bring his subjects to heel.

Just how uneven the relationship is between pets and their human owners was demonstrated during the pandemic when, lonely and stuck at home, one in five households easily adopted a new pet. As new pet owners returned to work, however, their newly lonely pets struggled with the sudden change, showing high rates of chewing, digging, barking, escaping, pacing, hiding, and indoor urination and defecation.

A number of animal welfare scholars, like Pierce, are challenging the rosy picture that the pet industry has painted around the domestic human-animal bond, and sometimes pose a radical question: should we end pet ownership? I am increasingly inclined to think the answer could be yes—or that at the very least, there should be far fewer pets, and those owners should be prepared to put in the time and effort to provide them with far better lives. However, abolishing pet ownership is a political and cultural nonstarter. What might be more realistic is to radically rethink how we acquire and treat them, and just what we owe them.

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### **Passage 2**

*Nancy Walecki examines the benefits of owning pets.*

Owning a pet can hold a surprising wealth of benefits for our overall health and well-being. One oft-cited benefit is the increase in physical activity. Dog owners, for example, are more likely to meet recommended exercise guidelines due to the daily walks and playtime needed for their canine companions. This regular physical activity translates to a multitude of health improvements, including a stronger heart, lower blood pressure, and improved cholesterol levels, for both the human and the dog. Pets also play a significant role in managing stress. Interacting with them, whether through petting, playing, or simply observing them, triggers the release of oxytocin, a hormone known to reduce stress levels.

Owning a pet often necessitates a structured routine, as they require regular feeding, walks, and playtime. This schedule can indirectly influence our own routines, encouraging a healthy lifestyle, especially for individuals who lack a sense of daily purpose. Additionally, pets that require frequent outdoor activities motivate us to spend more time in nature, which has well-documented benefits for overall well-being.

Research suggests that caring for pets can also indirectly encourage healthier eating habits. The routine involved in pet feeding may influence our own eating patterns, and we might find ourselves drawn to making healthier choices not just for our pets but for ourselves as well.

Beyond the physical, pets foster social connections. Walking a dog, for instance, often leads to friendly interactions with fellow pet owners, fostering a sense of community and combating feelings of loneliness and isolation, especially for individuals living alone or facing social anxiety.

The benefits of pet ownership extend beyond physical and mental well-being, with pets significantly contributing to mental health support. Therapy animals have been shown to be effective in helping individuals manage crippling anxiety, depression, and addiction. The structured interaction with these animals promotes mindfulness, trust, and emotional well-being. And for individuals facing difficulties like substance abuse or homelessness, pets can provide a powerful source of motivation and a deterrent from risky behaviours. The responsibility of caring for another living being offers a sense of optimism, even in challenging situations.

Perhaps the most significant benefit of pet ownership is the love and companionship they offer, which can bring joy and provide a sense of belonging, fostering a more fulfilling and happier life. By incorporating a furry friend into our lives, we can unlock a treasure trove of health benefits.

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### **Passage 3**

*Canine Companion Consulting examines off-leash dog issues.*

Discussions around off-leash dogs usually bring up strong feelings for us as pet owners. Often, we want our dogs to be able to run around and just be a dog. However, this is not easy in our increasingly urban environments.

There are very important considerations that we should always think about prior to ever letting our dogs off-leash. First, is it legal for me to have my dog off-leash in this area? In most places, that answer is no. If I happen to drop my dog's leash to let him run a little in a park or field, I am always concerned about impacting others' use of the space, so if I do drop his leash, even for a moment, we are always scanning the environment to ensure we are not deterring someone else from using the space.

The second factor I consider is the safety of my dog. Could there be a car, bicycle, snake, or any other animal nearby? I have seen pet owners who unleash their dogs to allow them to roam freely in areas where there are lots of fast-moving cars. This seems highly irresponsible behaviour as a pet owner.

And what of the off-leash dogs that liberally poop everywhere? Who's going to pick *that* up?

**How far do you agree that owning a pet brings more benefits than problems?**

In passage 3, paragraph 1, Canine Companion Consulting mentions that “Often, we want our dogs to be able to run around and just be a dog. However, this is not easy in our increasingly urban environments.”. This is particularly applicable in an extremely urbanised Singapore, though there have been efforts to combat this. The urban density in Singapore, where six million are cramped into a tiny city-state, means that any action will inevitably influence someone else – very few have their own ‘turf’, or ‘their grandfather’s road’ in the local parlance. Understanding this, the Singapore Government has instituted a wide variety of monetary disincentives to prevent inconsiderate actions, so much so that Singapore is often labelled the ‘Fine City’ for the wealth of fines promulgated into law for various offences. This includes offences relating to pet ownership, where pet owners will be fined if they allow their pets to defecate without clearing their litter. With such punishments, it is difficult to allow pets to truly ‘run free’, as this necessitates pet owners running after their pets to pick up litter to avoid paying steep fines. The aforementioned urban density also means that pets and their owners are bound to encounter someone during any walks or outdoor play. Unlike other countries where people can have sprawling ranches free for their pets’ exploration, therefore, a close watch must always be kept on pets in Singapore to avoid affecting others, creating difficulties for owners. However, this is not to say that allowing pets to run free is impossible – Singapore’s National Parks Board has set up a wide range of parks around the country to encourage individuals and pet owners alike to go there for their walks. In these protected spaces with vast expanses of land, pets can have a wide area to run free while owners watch over them. One example is the Singapore Botanic Gardens: with hills and large grassy areas, pets are enabled to roam free and explore, albeit of course with owner surveillance. Hence, even in Singapore, allowing pets to run around is still possible.

More optimistically, Walecki mentions in passage 2, paragraph 1, that “Pets also play a significant role in managing stress. Interacting with them, whether through petting, playing, or simply observing them, [... reduces] stress levels.”. This is a benefit particularly applicable to Singapore, though there are other factors that affect this. Singapore, as an especially fast-paced and cosmopolitan society, faces extreme stress levels: the local focus around ‘KPIs’, or Key Performance Indicators, is itself an indicator of the razor-sharp focus that Singaporeans place on maximising efficiency, which certainly incurs costs on mental well-being. Singapore’s relatively high suicide rates at all age groups demonstrate the potentially devastating effects of this stress, which is undoubtedly, at least in part caused by a general social focus on performance. Pets’ role in alleviating such mental woes,

therefore, is critically important – pet owners are able to destress by playing with their pets after work or school, leading to better mental health. However, there may be caveats to this as a benefit: the rise of ‘cat cafes’ all around Singapore allow customers to interact with cats while drinking coffee or eating in a café-like setting, or to simply watch them play around and interact with each other in the café. Given the surge of such enterprises, the comfort that pets bring is no longer barricaded by the difficulties and challenges of pet ownership; individuals can just pay a fee and interact with cats all the same, reaping the stress-relieving benefits without any of the costs of owning a pet. As such, the stress relief of pet ownership is no longer actually unique to pet ownership in Singapore. Besides, the aforementioned rapid pace of life in Singapore, coupled with an eroding work-life balance after COVID-19 and hybrid work arrangements as workers are increasingly expected to continue work digitally after office hours, means that pet owners simply cannot even afford the time to truly play with their pets beyond giving it the basic necessities to stay alive, or worse, shove the responsibilities of pet ownership onto a domestic helper, which many households in Singapore hire. Hence, the stress relief function of pet ownership may not actually manifest in any real benefits in a Singaporean context, or may be achievable without the trade-off of other pet-ownership-related costs.

**Comments**

*Clear, consistently executed evaluation, good discussion of trends and characteristics in Singapore. Overall, this is balanced and nuanced. Very good job!*

**How far do you agree that owning a pet brings more benefits than problems?**

I agree that owning a pet brings more benefits than problems.

Firstly, I agree with the author's view of owning a pet having "a surprising wealth of benefits for our overall health and well-being". Indeed, amidst the unparalleled fast pace of living and soaring stress levels in modern Singapore, the opportunity to demonstrate mutual affection with a personal companion such as a pet can serve as a timely outlet to transform negative emotion into positive optimism. In fact, the mutualistic existence of a pet can serve as an effective remedy for accumulated feelings of isolation; in recent years, trends such as the Covid-19 pandemic, an ageing population and dwindling birth rates have catalysed the emergence of a "loneliness epidemic" as a result of compromised communal interaction, whether as a result of government regulations or increased solitude due to old age. Recognising the vital role that pets play in reinforcing the mental health continuum that implicates the welfare of every citizen, active measures have been taken to promote pet ownership. Recently, the government has legalized the adoption of cats in HDB flats and refurbished and transformed countless urban spaces into parks, injecting more greenery and thereby providing more avenues for pet owners to interact with their pets, whilst reaping the many merits of being in touch with the environment, such as alleviating anxiety and boosting mental health. Arguably, the increase in pet ownership has also significantly increased the number of ways in which people can socialize on both physical and even digital fronts. Given that Singaporeans spend as much as 6.5 hours a day on social media as well as the prevalence of the internet arising from our nation's stride towards becoming a Smart Nation, we have seen a growing number of local influencers or even just content creators posting photos and videos of their pets online, to warm welcome by local netizens who often share their own pet-owning experiences in the comments. Since pet ownership also transcends the lines of class, race, gender and religion, this can go a long way in promoting social ties and cohesion especially considering the diverse social makeup of Singapore, while serving as a long-term investment to safeguard the psychological needs of our workforce – one that is so integral to the productivity of our knowledge economy.

On the other hand, the author's quote that "there are deep shadows beneath the sunny narrative of pet ownership" may also retain some degree of truth in my society. Today, Singapore is characterized by a culture of stark pragmatism – a value that has become embedded in the national psyche since our founding years due to the urgent need to remain relevant and competitive amidst a tumultuous economy and considering our lack

of natural resources. This coupled with Singaporeans' penchant for comparison means that the act of adopting a pet may detract from the genuine willingness and motivation to care for it continuously, but rather lean more towards a short-term measure to alleviate loneliness, satisfy one's curiosity or even as a consequence of peer pressure. Thus, this could very well lead to unsustainable owner-pet relations, where the latter is disposed of or even neglected once the former has lost interest. In recent years, the rise in number of abandonment cases and increased number of neglected cats and dogs in local pet adoption shelters is testament to the capriciousness and myopia of some pet owners at the expense of their pet welfare, which in many cases constitutes a form of animal cruelty. Moreover, the issue of pet waste in the form of defecation or urine that is not cleaned up by their owners poses an ever-growing threat to the pristine natural landscape that Singapore prides itself on; indicative of this would be perhaps the multitude of signposts at parks which warn pet owners to "clean up after their pets", which shows that owner responsibility may still be lacking in this aspect. All such instances of irresponsibility towards pets not only have disastrous implications for the welfare of animals, but also reflect on a broader level the suboptimal mentality of locals which tends to prioritize convenience and self-interest above the needs of others. This could negatively affect our national image and reputation as an inclusive and compassionate society, leading to unforeseen repercussions on economic growth and mentality. Despite this, however, local effort to improve treatment of pets has also seen growth in recent years, with the rise of many civil society organisations like SPCA advocating for better pet rights. This, in the long run, may shape locals' mentality for the better.

**Comments**

*Some good points raised despite some gaps in your analysis. Relevant issues discussed.*



**Critically assess the view that we cannot know  
anything about the external world.**

Certainty in our knowledge of the external world has been elusive for centuries, but perhaps the view that we cannot know anything about the external world is rather extreme. Although our knowledge about the external world can be heavily doubted, there may still be ways to know some things.

The doubtfulness of our knowledge of the external world arises from the fact that it is justified only by our perceptions. Our perceptions, through our senses such as sight and hearing, are not always reliable. For instance, when we view a stick through a glass of water, it appears bent because of the water's refraction of light. Hence, the mental image that is generated from our sight (that the stick is bent) is different from reality (that the stick is straight). As a result, we may argue that sense perceptions can be trusted to justify our beliefs only when we are sensing in optimal conditions, without obstacles like the glass of water.

However, even when sensing under optimal conditions, we cannot rule out the possibility that we are not perceiving the real world, but instead a dream world. Our senses behave much like in dreams as they do in reality, and some dreams can be so mundane that, in the moment, they are indistinguishable from reality. Since we cannot tell dreams apart from reality, we cannot trust that what we perceive is indeed the external world and hence cannot be certain if we are constructing knowledge of it.

The most radical level of Cartesian doubt is to doubt the existence of the external world entirely. It posits the possibility that all our perceptions are not really sensed by us but rather created in our minds by an evil demon who wishes to deceive us. Here, all claims of an external reality, including our memories of an external reality, can be doubted since it is possible that an all-powerful evil demon implanted such thoughts in our minds. Hence, all our supposed interactions with the external world could be uncertain, and we cannot trust that the world exists or that we have ever been in it.

At this point, it seems that every part of our knowledge about the external world is doubtful, from our perception of it to its very existence.

However, our very doubt affirms certain transcendental truths – beliefs that remain necessary even in scepticism. For example, the expression of doubt is contingent on the existence of language – if I can speak English, it must be that English exists. Famously,

Descartes' "cogito ergo sum" – I think therefore I am, at the very least proves that there is an entity that is doing the doubting!

But the problem here is that these necessary knowledge claims do not assure us knowledge of the outside world. The assurance that I exist cannot be deductively linked to the existence of the external world, at least as I have experienced it to be.\* Therefore, it seems necessary to accept we cannot know anything for certain about the external world.

Even if we accept our doubt, we must acknowledge that at a certain point it is just not practical to be doubting to such a radical degree. As Hume argues, there are some things about the external world that you cannot help but believe, even if we are not rationally justified to. For example, if a dagger was flying towards me, I would not stop to doubt if the dagger was real, and I would not be willing to test my doubt either. By moving out of the way, I subconsciously believe in the existence of the dagger.

In order to know things about the external world, we must have beliefs and justification for said beliefs, and to be able to discern the truths of these beliefs about the external world. Radical scepticism suggests that our justification can always be doubted, since it rests on our sight, existence, etc. Hence, certain justification, which can be thought of as epistemic superglue, is unattainable in any attempt to obtain knowledge of the external world as long as there is any possibility of doubt.

However, reasonable justification, or regular epistemic glue, can let us form uncertain knowledge about the external world. By reducing our standard for justification, we open the possibility of knowledge.\* For example, consider the proposition "There is a blue bird outside". For certain knowledge, we require the following beliefs to be true:

1. I see a blue bird outside
2. My senses are reliable
3. The external world exists

For reasonable knowledge, however, only 1 is needed, since it is already reasonable enough justification for my claim.

Of course, what is considered to be a 'reasonable' level of justification is subjective. Some may argue that I should at least check if my senses are reliable. However, even as I doubt the reliability and accuracy of my senses, the perceptions themselves are incorrigible. I cannot doubt that I feel cold, even if I can doubt that it is cold. Since the gap between perception and reality cannot be bridged and is unknowable (we are unsure of the difference), we may as well accept our perceptions as they are.

In conclusion, it is true that no certain knowledge can be known about the external world. Even transcendental arguments are unable to bridge the gap between our minds and the

external world. Therefore, in order to gain any knowledge beyond the knowledge of our minds, we must accept a degree of uncertainty. Accepting uncertainty would be most intuitive and would allow us to construct infinite knowledge claims about the external world, with reasonable reliability.

**Comments**

*This piece offers a neat response that argues in favour of knowing something about the external world with reasonable certainty. While you demonstrated a wide-ranging understanding of the issues surrounding scepticism, certainty and knowledge of the external world, your explanation and examples for some of the points can be more fully explained (see \*). This response features good use of language and presents a coherent flow of ideas.*

### PASSAGE

It used to be the case that you could enter an art museum and know exactly what to do: walk up to any static, finely crafted object, stare at it to appreciate its beauty and form, move on to another object and continue the process until you leave the gallery overflowing with aesthetic pleasure. No interaction with anything or anyone required. But the rise of modern artists who have experimented with different art forms has upended the rules governing aesthetic appreciation. Entering an art museum may now involve a choice of humming a tune before a guard lets you pass or turning your body 90 degrees to squeeze between two naked people facing each other. (Many choose the humming). Obviously, conventional art and modes of aesthetic appreciation have prepared us poorly for ‘conceptual’ art, so-called based on the proposition that it features ideas as much as physical stuff.

The early 20th-century work of Marcel Duchamp posed significant questions for conceptual art: Does artistic creativity necessarily involve skilled fabrication? Can ideas alone be works of art? What is the nature of art? The decline of traditional artistic media helped to pull the rug out from under us. Artists have chipped away at, and sometimes abandoned wholesale, the conventions and boundaries that previously oriented us. Take painting, a medium that was long governed by conventions so obvious that it would have seemed silly to list them: a painting involves paint applied to a surface, presented so that the representational content is the right side up and facing away from the wall, and such that the painted surface is to be preserved for future appreciation. But artists have toyed with this model: Georg Baselitz makes paintings whose content is to be presented upside down; Fiona Banner made a painting whose primary marked surface is displayed facing the wall; Saburo Murakami made paintings whose paint was designed to flake away over time; and Gerald Ferguson made paintings that the purchaser is authorised to repaint if they wish to perform aesthetic ‘maintenance’.

If the conventions of painting were suspended only for these works, it wouldn’t be such a big deal. But, in fact, such manoeuvres have become so pervasive as to destabilise entire art forms. And when the central project associated with the art form is undermined, this makes it more difficult for us to grasp the artist’s own project. If I’m watching an activity but don’t know whether it is a dance, sport, or unstructured play, how am I to know or understand what they are doing or why, or offer an assessment that connects to the goal and values internal to the activity?

While the materiality of these works is all over the place, they are bolstered by an immaterial scaffold: a set of rules that point us toward what the artist is up to and what

really matters. While it is not readily visible on the surface, since it is not associated with a specific material support, there is an underlying logic and set of constraints that constitute specific choices as meaningful. Conceptual artworks often come with specific rules for display, conservation, and participation, which are integral to understanding the artist's project and the expressive content of the work. These rules set up a certain kind of experience for us: they shape the physical elements we will encounter and how we will be invited to engage with them. They also shape what we will experience over time: if we return to the work, will the physical elements evolve, be replaced, or be preserved? Can the configuration change, or is it fixed? Yes, the lack of clear, traditional rules in contemporary art can lead to uncertainty and perplexity, but also provides a sense of possibility for both the artist and the viewer. These rules allow artists to mobilise change, engage institutions in creative acts, and invite viewers into decisions about participation, which can lead to powerful and fully engaged experiences. After all, isn't that what art is about?

**Critically evaluate the above argument with reference to the nature and construction of aesthetic knowledge. Respond with your own critical comments to support or challenge the author's position.**

The author's main conclusion is that the lack of clear, traditional rules in contemporary art provides a sense of possibility for both the artist and the viewer, which can lead to powerful and fully engaged experiences. The author establishes his main conclusion through four main arguments. Firstly, the rise of modern art has "upended the rules governing aesthetic appreciation". He uses the example of using ideas as art, showing how modern art has abandoned wholesale, the conventions of traditional art form. Secondly, "such manoeuvres" have become so pervasive as to destabilise entire art forms", with "such manoeuvres" referring to the move towards modern art. Lastly, the author argues that despite the uncertainty that comes with the novelty of modern art as evidenced in his first two arguments, there is nonetheless "a set of rules that point us toward what the artist is up to and what really matters", helping us understand and appreciate non-conventional art forms. The fourth implicit main premise is that if we can still abide by a "set of rules" to appreciate non-conventional art, the novelty of such art allows for new possibilities and powerful messages. The four main premises together establish the author's main conclusion. I accept his main conclusion as the author makes astute observations about the evolving nature of art while acknowledging the persistence of a seemingly constant set of guidelines to appreciate art as it changes.

Firstly, the author is right in arguing that the move towards modern art forms lends uncertainty to what is considered art and how art should be defined. As a result, not having a fixed definition of art seems to hinder our ability to appreciate and make aesthetic judgements on what is considered good art. For example, conventional art pieces typically fall within the mimesis art theory, where good art refers to art that can mimic reality as accurately as possible. The clarity and fixed nature of such a definition indeed enables us to distinguish 'good' and 'bad' art. For instance, mimesis art theory helps us to know why a child's drawing of a scenery is not considered art, but Bob Ross' detailed and almost picture-like paintings are considered good art. However, the rise of modern art and Surrealist artworks – Salvador Dali's "The Persistence of Memory", for example – do not seek to merely mimic reality but represent it in a provocative and surreal way to convey a message directly contradicts how conventional art is judged. Recent 20th century art forms like readymades – Marcel Duchamp's "The Fountain" and Tracy Emin's "My Bed" (her literal bed displayed in a museum) – further upend what we traditionally consider as art, ostensibly positing that anything can be art as long as we say it is. While not taking the form of traditional paintings to mimic real-life scenes, the very act of displaying such pieces in an art museum spurs us to question what art is again. This demonstrates that a fixed

definition of art is elusive and the implication of such subjectivity in determining art is that we ostensibly cannot make aesthetic judgements between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ art if we do not even know what it is. For example, people can disagree on whether “The Fountain” is truly a work of art and the very controversy it sparked points to our inability to reach consensus on aesthetic judgements with the rise of modern art forms.

Yet, the author is astute in arguing that there exists an “underlying logic and set of constraints that constitute specific choices as meaningful”, helping us nonetheless appreciate modern art. The existence of this “set of rules” can be supported by the Kantian view on how aesthetic judgements are universally formed. Primarily, aesthetic judgements arise from the free play of imagination that our mental faculties engage in when we perceive an art piece. The judgement that a work of art is beautiful comes from the immediacy of when we perceive an art piece and our perception aligns so harmoniously with our faculties of imagination that we derive a sense of pleasure, giving rise to the aesthetic judgment that an artwork is beautiful before we can even understand its meaning. This suggests that we are intrinsically equipped with the mental faculties to judge art pieces, including works that do not follow traditional forms of art, without necessitating a recourse to a fixed definition of art. Such aesthetic judgements are characterized by Kant’s Four Moments, one of them being Purposiveness without Purpose, for instance. Such an aesthetic judgement is characterised by our ability to identify that there is some sense of purpose and intention behind a piece of art, despite the artwork not necessarily having an underlying purpose, or one that is known to us. For example, when looking at Henri Matisse’s “The Snail”, without first knowing that he is portraying a snail, we can already identify some intention that went behind the arrangement of colours and shapes such that we can appreciate and identify it as beautiful without a concrete understanding of what it seeks to portray or convey. Given that this faculty of free play of imagination is one that is shared amongst all human beings and is necessary for our experience of art, there indeed exists some sense of objectivity in how we perceive and appreciate art. This gives us direction on which art pieces are considered beautiful, and allows us to achieve some agreement on the artist’s main message behind his art.

Lastly, the author makes an insightful point that despite the nebulous nature of what art forms are considered art, our ability to nonetheless appreciate non-conventional art works, as accounted for by the Kantian view of aesthetic judgements, paves the way for “new possibilities of powerful messages and full engaged experiences”. Given that non-conventional art forms inherently seek to be provocative in their presentation and the message they convey, this allows for artists to spark discourse about art and mobilize changing sentiments on what is considered art. For example, Duchamp’s “The Fountain” sparked discourse on whether the artistic value of artworks lie in their presentation, the intrinsic aesthetic value of composition, colour, et cetera, or the message it puts out. Duchamp’s piece sparked discourse on the definition of art, evidencing the potential for non-conventional art to create powerful and engaging experiences.

To conclude, while the constant evolution of art movements ostensibly erases the possibility of a fixed definition that seems necessary in knowing what art is to judge artworks. Yet, when examining the nature of our aesthetic judgements through the Kantian lens, our mental faculties derive aesthetic judgements without needing to fully understand an artwork or even knowing what art is defined as. As such, human beings, with a shared capacity to form aesthetic judgements for even non-conventional art forms, are able to engage in discourse about art, allowing non-conventional art forms to lead to new ideas.

### **Comments**

*Excellent piece that thoroughly explores conventional vs. contemporary art and why and how we form aesthetic judgements when we encounter art. Broad range of examples used to illustrate points, which were fully relevant. While there is thorough exploration of the nature of aesthetic judgements and of art, some of the links back to the author's argument are not so clear at times. This, however, does not detract from the overall quality of the response. Well done!*



### PASSAGE

Cavity-wall insulation – filling cavities between inner and outer brickwork with cost-effective insulating material – is becoming more widespread in the UK. Figures from energy regulator Ofgem suggest that, since 2008, such insulation has been installed in more than three million homes under various government schemes. More than 1 billion pounds of public money have been spent on insulation initiatives. But the defects of cavity-wall insulation have been known about for years. Properly retrofitting insulation to already-built buildings requires real skill. Walls and brickwork may have cracks that bring in moisture, especially in the notoriously wet British climate. Combine poor ventilation, condensation, a scarce supply of expert workers and Britain's draughty housing stock, and you have a recipe for disaster.

The insulation debacle is an allegory for the country's broader Net Zero agenda and how environmental activists are bringing about the country's downfall. Politicians pick up on the flavour of the day, without anyone stopping to think whether these suggestions would work at all, and the result has been a costly and damaging mess. What we really need to campaign for is a cessation of government-funded insulation initiatives. This would allow the installation of mass-manufactured, low-cost homes that are both warm and breathable. The market can and will decide if any solution to insulation can work in the long-term since bad ideas will be dropped immediately and good ideas will stick. Even if the campaign for this is long and hard, it will still be better than having the government spend public money on something that does not work.

**Critically assess the reasoning in this argument,  
explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).**

The author's main conclusion is that we should "campaign for... a cessation of government-funded insulation initiatives." He argues for this on two accounts: firstly, that government funding of the insulation initiatives has led to "a costly and damaging mess", and secondly, that the lack of government intervention would allow for a better outcome, the "installation of mass-manufactured low-cost homes that are both warm and breathable". Ultimately, I reject the author's main conclusion because his second charge is wrong, which entails that government intervention is still a better option.

The author argues for the first main premise by citing the "defects of cavity-wall insulation" which result in costly damages despite cavity-wall insulation itself being cost-effective. He then attributes such costs to the fact that politicians "pick up on the flavour of the day, without anyone stopping to think whether these suggestions would work at all." I support the author's first main premise. Firstly, the author is correct in claiming that politicians undeniably seize the trending topic because a politician's optics are central to being elected or appointed. Since politicians in the UK require public support to win seats, they are highly incentivised to appeal to the concerns that are most salient in the voters' minds at that present point in time. In the case of the cavity-wall insulation, the need for good publicity comes at the cost of practicality. Secondly, government intervention seems to breed inefficiency. On one hand, the government is funded by taxpayer money and thus faces no competitive pressures like private firms do, which could lead to complacency in how money is spent. On the other hand, short government terms mean that politicians are less incentivised to consider the long-term ramifications of their decisions, since it is likely that some other politician will take responsibility for these decisions when the time comes.

However, I reject the author's second main premise. The author argues for the second premise by claiming that "the market can and will decide if any solution to insulation can work in the long-term since bad ideas will be dropped immediately and good ideas will stick". My objection to this reason is two-fold. Firstly, the distinction between good and bad ideas is not one that can be seen "immediately", but rather one that takes a long time to be made clear, since environmental damage often manifests in the long run after accumulation of damages, and the research to examine potential harms takes a long time. Secondly, private companies in the market are often solely concerned with maximising profit and therefore often neglect the harms done so long as they do not affect their bottom line. When there are issues with insulation, homeowners will, more often than not, turn to the firms that provide maintenance services. This effect can be seen in other products, where planned obsolescence allows the firm to extract more money from

buyers – a lower quality of goods actually benefits them. Hence, private firms have little incentive to maximise the quality of insulation, and instead can make more profit by leaving room for minor defects.

In all, I reject the author's argument – it is clear that government intervention is needed to fill in where private firms are lacking.

**Comments**

*Decent argument offered in opposition of the author's position, with some explanation and detail on two main points. The concluding paragraph can be more robust – present the conclusion in a way that clearly follows from the two evaluative points made.*

**Critically assess the reasoning in this argument,  
explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).**

The main conclusion in this passage is that government-funded environmental initiatives should be stopped. The author uses the analogy of insulation initiatives to compare the relative failures of government funded initiatives, which he established as opportunistic and short-termist. This, when contrasted with the free market's insulation plans that would be successful in the long run, conveys the author's approach for reducing government intervention in such areas. I disagree with the author's main conclusion.

Firstly, the premise that politicians and government funded initiatives are always opportunistic and a "costly...mess" is false. Governments frequently have a major incentive not to be opportunistic and short-termist, due to them incurring major damage to their reputation in the long run. Moreover, the presence of checks and balances within and outside the government, such as opposition parties and the media, often ensure that experts of the field are consulted and the opportunity costs from spending on a specific initiative are weighed before a decision to intervene. In the case of insulation housing, for example, the fact that such insulation has been installed in more than three million homes seems to point to some efficacy and effectiveness of the government intervention in creating warm homes for households. In fact, the same problems the author established, in the "draughty housing stock", "wet British climate" and "scarce supply of expert workers" are all problems that private firms would find similarly or more challenging to overcome without government intervention. It seems, therefore, that government-funded initiatives are not always a costly mess.

Moreover, the author's argument relies on the assumption that the free market, when weighed against the government, can create better solutions – in terms of overall nett effect – since it has a self-correcting mechanism. This is not true, given that the self-correcting mechanism of free markets greatly relies on the presence of competitors to challenge established market players, as well as the perfect knowledge of the nature of the product by consumers. Households, incentivised by the low prices of insulated homes by a firm in the free market, for instance, might jump at the opportunity, spurring demand for potentially more unsafe and unsustainable homes if the low cost was achieved as a result of cost-cutting measures and reliability of the insulation was traded off. In the short term, such "bad ideas" can not only exist, but be further perpetuated through the cycle of market forces, harming millions of households the government has an interest to protect in the process. Furthermore, the analogy of insulation for broader environmental problems does not apply. There is no incentive for environmental research and development that is extremely costly and highly likely to fail, to be carried out in the free

market, notwithstanding the ease of other firms' ability to copy such ideas. At the same time, such research efforts would hugely benefit the population and reduce long-term effects of climate change. The presence of such large positive externalities thus means that the free market, even if working perfectly, would not be able to supply the socially optimal amount of environmental research required.

In conclusion, while the government may not be the most effective player, the problems of the free market, as well as the untenability of the allegory in this case, would lead one to reject the author's conclusion.

**Comments**

*Very good piece that thoroughly evaluates the main ideas raised in the passage, with substantial detail of why the proposed solutions may not work well. More clarity can be applied when reading and reconstructing the main conclusion.*

### PASSAGE

It has been several years since the Covid-19 pandemic hit us hard, but little is being done to address its effects on the poorest and most vulnerable peoples in the world, even as things seem to have returned to normal, with global supply of goods and services returning to pre-covid eras. The pandemic pushed 96 million people in the world's poorest countries into acute food insecurity by end-2020, and virus-induced new poor rose from 119 million in 2020 to 124 million in 2021. 77% of Africa lost income during the pandemic and attempts to cope with this loss are exacerbated by food insecurity and an inability to access medicine and staple foods. One would think that these figures would have dropped by now, but issues such as climate change, human conflict and war continue to destabilise economies, not to mention the lack of access to crucial social services and increased gender-based violence. Women and people with disabilities are caught disproportionately in the crosshairs of these impacts.

In light of this, everything the developed world does to champion gender equality, inclusivity, and diversity is mere rhetoric. What inclusivity is there when developing countries are not taken seriously because they are poorer by no fault of their own? How will women in the developing world ever be treated equally if they can't even vote? And how can they vote if they can't even feed their families? Nothing substantial has been done by the 1.3 billion people who live in relative luxury, while the remaining 6.7 billion people suffer at the hands of these few. Anyone who can buy and sell can trade, but it is only those who have enough resources to withstand sudden shocks to the market that thrive. Until the poorest of us are given a fair chance at work and trade, we cannot say that we have succeeded in any attempt to promote equality and inclusivity.

**Critically assess the reasoning in this argument,  
explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).**

The author's main conclusion is that "everything the developed world has done to champion gender equality, inclusivity, and diversity is mere rhetoric". He supports this by establishing that the world still faces inequality and lack of inclusivity, in addition to the fact that "nothing substantial has been done by the 1.3 billion people who live in relative luxury", i.e. the developed world. Implicitly, he claims that everyone in the developed world is responsible for ending issues such as gender inequality and inclusivity. I reject the main conclusion as he fails to establish the idea that inequality is still prevalent, and the implicit premise — that the developed world is responsible for solving social issues — is questionable.

Firstly, the author claims that gender inequality and lack of inclusivity is a pervasive issue. In support of this, he claims that 1) the world is facing numerous issues (the "pandemic pushed 96 million people in the world's poorest countries into food insecurity"), and 2), that because of these issues, gender inequality continues to prevail. This second reason is rather suspect — although it is evident that gender inequality still prevails in society, is the reason truly because of economic issues? The author substantiates this by asking the rhetorical question: "how can they (women) vote if they can't even feed their families?" There appears to be little correlation between being financially secure and having rights as a woman; this is exemplified by the contrary, where even women who are financially secure and able to support their families fall victim to gender inequality. In India, when women are raped, families frequently respond by arranging a marriage for the victim and the rapist; this occurs regardless of the financial status of the family. This suggests that the causal relationship that the author has attributed between economic stability and gender equality is not necessarily true, which means that his main premise — that the world still faces gender inequality — is not established.

Furthermore, the author's other main premise — that the "1.3 billion people who live in relative luxury" have done "nothing substantial" — does not necessarily follow through to the main conclusion that the developed world's measures to champion gender equality is mainly rhetoric. This is because the author seems to attribute the role of solving gender inequality to the developed world, perhaps because of his earlier misconception that more economic stability correlates to gender equality. However, even if this relationship were the case, this premise assumes that everyone living in developed societies has the autonomy to influence decisions on a large scale such that they can solve gender inequality in other countries, which appears to be a reach. Any such large-scale decision is more in the hands of political leaders who may not take the opinion of the public into account.

Thus, as the author makes a critical (false) assumption for this main premise, it does not lead to the conclusion.

**Comments**

*Good response that features sound evaluation and decent justification. The evaluation presented deals with the main warrant of the passage, and the points offered are supported by contextual knowledge. Consider exploring other points to increase coverage of the author's argument.*



### PASSAGE

What does it take for a firm to be a winning corporation? It is obvious that you need a great product, visionary leadership, professional management, and strong customer focus. The visionary Steve Jobs built the Apple empire with just those few elements, and so did Jeff Bezos with Amazon.

But what happens when trust is lost, when major hiccups occur to established and reputable firms like Boeing? Boeing's troubles began when regulators found that they failed to comply with manufacturing quality control requirements with the 737-9 MAX aircraft this year. Recent safety scandals also halted production, costing the company millions of dollars in insurance claims and lost revenue. Then Boeing's board members filed to limit their liability in instances of corporate mismanagement, which failed, since the courts reinforced the need for directors to be aware of corporate malpractices and take action to remedy such instances. It didn't help that a whistleblower who had worked for Boeing for over 32 years was found dead shortly before he was supposed to testify against his former employer. Whether the firm had a hand in silencing the whistleblower, we will never know. But in the court of public opinion, the former winning corporation is supposedly doomed.

Yet, given the nature of Boeing's presence in both commercial aviation and defence, it seems unlikely that Boeing's relationships with suppliers and customers will be hindered. On one hand, people insist that Boeing return to its fabled engineering, safety and quality roots or else risk no longer being at the top. On the other hand, people continue to travel like no pandemic ever occurred and airlines continue to buy Boeing planes every year. So, clearly, what matters isn't so much a high-quality product or professionally managed firm but the fact that no other real competitor in the market exists to challenge it.

**Critically assess the reasoning in this argument, explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).**

The author's main conclusion is that what matters isn't so much a high-quality product or professionally managed firm, but the fact that no other real competitor in the market exists to challenge it. He argues that since consumers continue to support Boeing (2) despite a loss of trust due to bad performance (1), the creation of a winning corporation does not depend on quality (SC) and instead depends on whether there is a real competitor in the market to challenge it (MC). I do not accept his conclusion, as his premises are not well linked to his sub-conclusion and conclusion.

The author seeks to answer the question of what it takes for a firm to be a winning corporation through the example of Boeing. Firstly, he explains how Boeing has failed to show quality product and professional management, which I accept. His following argument is valid as it is in modus tollens form (if p then q, not q, therefore not p), where p= loss of trust leads to failure, and q= Boeing has failed. By disproving q, he argues that the loss of trust does not lead to failure and implicitly that trust does not lead to success, to lead to MC (where trust is determined by quality product and professional management). The link to the implicit sub-conclusion is tenuous, and the premises are questionable, hence the argument is unsound.

It is not necessary that just because a loss of trust does not lead to failure, that the inverse must be true. Although this is not mentioned in the author's sub-conclusion about "what matters". I would consider the term "success" because it is what the author sets out to answer in his opening line. (He promises not to name factors that "winning" depends on, but "what it takes" to succeed.) In order to achieve this, he must prove the implicit claim, that trust does not lead to success, which is not necessarily true. Even if the bad performance of a firm did not immediately lead to a company's downfall, it does not mean that the company's good performance did not lead to its success. In fact, it may be on account of the firm's previous success, which the author himself acknowledges ("fabled engineering, safety and quality roots") that customers are willing to continue business with Boeing despite present mishaps.

Secondly, the claim that Boeing's loss of trust did not lead to failure seems rather sweeping. He seems to suggest that the public is hypocritically criticising Boeing while consuming Boeing's products. To begin with, the extent of consumption of Boeing's products is not shown, failing to show that Boeing's performance has maintained. His claim that "people continue to travel like no pandemic occurred" is not particular to Boeing planes, and airlines buying "Boeing places every year" could mean an airline buying

a single Boeing plane compared to dozens in previous years — in failing to show magnitude and relevance to Boeing in his evidence, the author does not account for the fact that just because Boeing has not gone bankrupt does not mean they cannot be experiencing faltering business as a result of their recent performance.

Furthermore, the link to his conclusion that it is instead market dominance that ensures Boeing's success seems irrelevant to the previous discussion. It takes the form of (either p or q, not p therefore q), which assumes that there are only two possible reasons for Boeing's success, being good performance and market dominance, and that these traits are mutually exclusive, which is untrue. There could be other reasons such as contracts with airlines, cost advantages et cetera. Furthermore, there can be multiple reasons for success, and the supposed continued success of Boeing despite bad performance does not suppose that the lack of competition must be more important as a reason or be the only important reason. Also, his conclusion assumes that Boeing has a monopoly over commercial planes, which is not true, as it shares a duopoly with Airbus. (Critics of Boeing, as previously mentioned, can add to his list of people continuing to fly without supporting Boeing by flying Airbus, but I digress.)

Hence, I do not accept the author's conclusion as not only does he conveniently deviate from his original intention to a point that is easier to prove, his premises are insufficient and links too weak to support his conclusion, especially the assertion of an alternative factor that is not proven true and rather assumed to be mutually exclusive/ the only possible answer (which it is not).

### **Comments**

*Excellent evaluation that systematically explores each of the author's premises and links from the main premises to the main conclusion. Good insight shown in the evaluation offered. Well done!*

**Critically assess the reasoning in this argument,  
explaining why you do or do not accept its conclusion(s).**

The author's main conclusion in this argument is that what it takes for a firm to be a winning corporation is the fact that no other real competitor in the market exists to challenge it. The author first lays out potential criterion for a firm to be a "winning corporation", such as its management or leadership, but then goes to undercut these criteria through the example of Boeing. The author establishes that while trust, a common criterion that might be taken to undergird success, was lost after Boeing's regulation trouble, the fact that it has not faltered in its businesses with suppliers and customers seems to highlight that its monopoly power, not trust, undergirds its success. I cannot accept the author's conclusion.

Firstly, the fact that Boeing's relationships have not been greatly hindered due to its monopoly power is indeed true. The highly essential nature of aircrafts for both commercial aviation and defence has made demand for this industry and for suppliers like Boeing extremely inelastic and insensitive to change – no number of regulations or mismanagement by Boeing itself would deter the need for new aircrafts and planes to be built for these purposes. Coupled with the highly expensive equipment that is required to build aircrafts in the first place, as well as Boeing's numerous established relationships in the industry, it is true that there are extremely high barriers to entry that would exist for a new entrant looking to enter the market. This means that even if Boeing suffers a blow to its trust and credibility over past incidents, the lack of a new competitor in the market to capitalise on potential loss in business after its incident would be able to account for the continued success of Boeing despite loss to its trust. It is true, therefore, that monopoly power is indeed a promising criterion for ensuring a firm's success.

However, in generalising the conditions for success from Boeing, a singular airline corporation in a singular industry, to the broader conditions for success which all firms would require fulfilling, is too great of an inductive move that cannot be supported. In the first place, the warrant of the argument, that there exists a sole criterion for success for all corporations, is not true. Success frequently depends on many factors itself, the nature of the industry one is in, or the nature of the firm's position. If the industry is a highly consumer-facing one, such as a telecommunications company like SingTel, the yardstick for success (and continued customer loyalty) might indeed be trust and credibility – the lack of which would hurt the sales and profits of such firm to a much greater extent, even if there were few competitors around. For a nascent firm like Apple in its upstart days, the visionary leadership it had might have been its precondition for success, as it allowed the firm to stand out from other players and establish a dominant market position which

ensures its current longevity. Ultimately, each factor caused by the author – leadership, management, trust, and monopoly power – are all relevant to success as they can all determine how a firm navigates and maximises its profits in an industry. The extent to which each factor holds to the success of an individual firm, thus, is rather more dependent on the nature of the firm and its broader industry itself than on a fixed criterion.

**Comments**

*Excellent piece that offers insightful and thorough evaluation of the key arguments raised by the author. Do explore the logical moves that the author made in greater detail to obtain full marks.*

**‘Science is simply consensus.’ Discuss the implications of this view on the nature and construction of scientific knowledge.**

To agree that ‘science is simply consensus’, one would have to agree that science is a matter of majority opinion, where if a body of experts agree on a piece of scientific information as knowledge, it is cemented as knowledge. For the most part, I believe that this is an inaccurate assessment of the nature of scientific knowledge as well as the methods employed in its construction. Instead of consensus, the construction of scientific knowledge relies heavily on predictions and empirical evidence. To believe that science is simply consensus would imply that science is highly subjective and even constantly changing, which does not appear to be the case in science.

Consensus, in the context of science, implies a general agreement amongst scientific experts. These are scientists who have the necessary understanding of and training in the scientific method, such that they are qualified to carry out experiments and use data to generate hypotheses and predictions. They also have an additional role in critically evaluating the work of other scientists and are respected for their opinions. The most direct implication of believing that science is simply consensus is that leading scientific theories are all those that most heavily appeal to scientists. We can, however, observe that this was not the case in the past, and still is not the case in the present. The acceptance of scientific theories as knowledge in the present despite their unpopularity amongst scientists back in the day is a major indicator that rather than the subjective opinions of scientists, empirical observations are the main criterion that make or break a scientific theory’s validity. For instance, the Copernican model of the solar system is the model that we have come to view as accurate, despite it having been heavily protested amongst the scientific community at the time of its conception. Similarly, Darwinian evolution, though once widely regarded as far-fetched, is the mainstream explanation for how the diversity of organisms came to be. In both cases, later observations that matched evolution and the heliocentric model were key in these theories qualifying as scientific knowledge. In short, it is evident that science relies on empirical observations to verify and falsify scientific theories, not subjective expert opinion. As such, science is not simply consensus.

A proponent of the viewpoint that science is simply consensus would claim that the idea of consensus can show up much deeper in the process of scientific inquiry, namely in the observation stage. A specific physical phenomenon tells us nothing – scientists must interpret it and agree on the same interpretation for science to be significant. For instance, when using a cloud chamber to measure the movement of a positron, scientists must all fundamentally agree that a particular change in the measurements of water vapour corresponds to the movement of the positron. There is implicit inference done by and

agreement between the scientists in even performing a measurement. Naturally, this implies that the truth of scientific knowledge does not correspond with an external, independent reality, but really upon the subjective, agreed-upon narrative. The example of researchers seeing little sperm men upon their first observation of sperm under the microscope (when we know this is not the case) and publishing it as a theory shows that mutual agreement and observation play a significant role in generating scientific theories to the point of overriding what was truly there. This naturally lends itself to many problems in science, such as perceptual theory-ladenness, where if scientists all had agreed-upon preconceived notions, they could grossly misinterpret what they were truly observing. This results in the nature of science being highly subjective and prone to error, which is not an unfair assessment in this case.

Even so, science cannot *simply* be consensus as it, on a larger scale, implies that science aims to find theories that more and more scientists agree on. It implies that science has no link to the external reality of physical phenomena, because experts are not necessarily motivated by the desire to pursue knowledge that corresponds to reality as much as possible. This idea is not supported when we consider Falsificationism and Kuhnian Paradigmatism in science as models for scientific progress. Falsificationism emphasises that a theory should be disregarded as soon as it is disproved by contradictory empirical data. Paradigmatism describes science as a puzzle-solving process that proceeds via paradigm shifts, prompted by the accumulation of discrepancies in expected predictions and observed data. In both models, the overturning of old theories to accept better ones in terms of predictive power is determined solely by its performance in predicting phenomena. In other words, science progresses by finding theories that better explain the knowledge gaps left behind by old theories and is continuously driven by objective data. Therefore, if the true nature of scientific progress is one that aims to be as objective as possible in describing physical phenomena, it must be detached from subjective human opinion, and consensus cannot be what makes up science.

In conclusion, the claim that science is simply consensus implies that the generation of scientific knowledge comes from seeing whether the majority of the scientific community agrees with it on their own personal basis, entailing the subjective nature of science. I argue that this view is not possible considering how science has been progressing in terms of its construction both past and present, namely through Falsificationism and Paradigmatism.

### **Comments**

*This is a great response that features a very tight argument and executes it well. It also ties in Falsificationism and Paradigmatism in ways that address question requirements, especially the discussion of science as consensus on a few levels. Good job!*

**‘The validity of knowledge depends on the methods used.’ Discuss with reference to the nature and construction of knowledge in two fields.**

Why do most people trust Google Maps to bring us to our requested destination in the shortest period of time? Why did most governments around the world encourage their citizens to take the COVID-19 vaccine? The answers to these two questions rely on two different types of knowledge: Mathematical and Scientific knowledge. Even though they are constructed differently, what is common between them is that we trust these forms of knowledge (to a certain degree) and that they have real-world applications. I argue that the validity of knowledge depends on the methods used to construct them and I will show how this applies to the fields of Mathematics and Science.

The opening examples seem to portray the validity of knowledge as having pragmatic benefit, but I believe that a measure of validity also considers the degree of certainty of the knowledge as well as its justification. This is inextricably linked to the way we construct knowledge, and I have three main arguments. Firstly, the validity of knowledge depends on the type of methods used; secondly, the validity of knowledge is proportionate to the degree of robustness of its justification; and thirdly, the validity of knowledge depends on its ability to withstand attack.

Firstly, the validity of knowledge depends on the type of method used. The type of method is crucial because it determines the extent to which arbitrary or epistemically poor factors influence the knowledge constructed. Take, for example, a medium who uses tarot cards to determine my romantic fate. I would be hesitant to accept her conclusion that I will have little success in this aspect not because I do not like the ‘knowledge’, but because her method of picking cards randomly and looking to the skies seems to me quite arbitrary, relying more on luck and her subjective intuition rather than a justified method. Now applying that to Maths and Science, we clearly see that their methods influence the validity of knowledge. Maths relies on the Axiom-Theorem Method, in which knowledge is derived deductively from premises assumed to be true (axioms). In this way, Mathematical knowledge uses a robust, deductive, a priori method of construction and there is little to no room for doubt, unless one were to question the axioms. On the other hand, Science relies on the hypothetico-deductive method, in which scientists make conjectures or speculations about the world, often based on observations, and then carry out experiments to confirm or reject those hypotheses. In this method, testing, rather than proving, is the main priority. The difference in their methods is two-fold. Firstly, the role of humans in the construction of knowledge is very significant to the validity of knowledge. Mathematics’ allure is that humans need not play such a big role. In my opinion, all one requires is a set of axioms and a working brain to deduce knowledge – everything else



flows naturally. This could be said for Peano arithmetic and Euclid's Elements: a set of defined axioms gives rise to all the subsequent knowledge in those systems. Granted, there will be Platonists who claim that only people can do Maths because this knowledge is stored in our minds waiting to be discovered, and Intuitionists will pester us with the primordial human intuition they claim to exist in everybody being necessary for us to construct Mathematical knowledge. I agree with these criticisms insofar as they require a human brain for the construction of Mathematical knowledge, but my broader argument still succeeds because it shows that there is no subjectivity in Maths if everybody has the same starting tools. Contrast that with Science, where the role of the scientist is very significant. Here, bias and subjectivity reign supreme because the entire design of the experiment is influenced from top to bottom by the scientist's subjective cultural beliefs. In the hypothesis forming stage, a scientist must choose, whether subconsciously or not, a set of theories to work under. These theories guide him in determining which variables to change and control. For example, a physicist testing the effect of mass on the period of a pendulum operates under the assumption that theories of Newtonian gravity and the conservation of energy apply, and that time moves constantly, etc. This is problematic because it is equally justifiable to work under any set of assumptions to test a hypothesis, making the choice arbitrary. In the experimentation stage, the scientist faces problems when trying to confirm or reject his hypothesis due to holistic and contrastive underdetermination, whereby he does not know if the results falsify the hypothesis or other assumptions; and he cannot decide what conclusion to draw from the data since infinitely many conclusions can be drawn from a finite set of data points, respectively. These issues result in the scientist having an extremely heavy role in the arbitrary selection of hypotheses, theories and conclusions, not to mention the more mitigable but still significant practical issues relating to observation and human error. What belies this problem is David Hume's Problem of Induction, which states that there is always an epistemic gap between empirical observation and knowledge empirically derived because we cannot know with a 100% certainty that we are not being duped in the construction of empirical knowledge. This detailed comparison of the axiomatic-theoretic and hypothetico-deductive methods reveals that Mathematical knowledge tends to be more certain (and more valid) than Scientific knowledge. It means that the strength of the knowledge depends on the type of method used, in particular depending on the subjective intervention of humans.

Secondly, the validity of knowledge is proportionate to the degree of robustness of its justification. Notwithstanding the type of method, there are still differences in the way we carry out each method that influence the degree of certainty of the knowledge. For example, in Mathematics, a theorem that can be proven multiple ways, utilising many different branches of Maths, is, in my opinion, more valid than a theorem that can only be proven in one way. While this may sound absurd because "if all of Maths is 100% certain, how can some theorems be more certain than others?", I would like to consider the definition of validity here as relating to the justification (as I outlined earlier) rather than certainty. Here, a theorem justified via many means or justified more elegantly is more valid because it adheres to the theoretical virtues of the discipline. This is why the

Pythagoras' Theorem, which can be proved geometrically via many ways, is hailed as a brilliant theorem, taught to children all over the world; whereas the four-colour theorem, which was proved by a computer, does not receive as much widespread adoration. Both theorems are true and valid, but some theorems seem more convincing (or well-justified) than others. This is due to our preoccupation with the virtues of parsimony or Mathematical beauty, where the pursuit of Mathematical knowledge is guided by such virtues that act as a yardstick for the knowledge constructed. That is why Mathematicians in the 19th and 20th centuries embarked on quests to ground Mathematics in logic, for it would reinforce the robustness of Mathematics if it could be found to be free of contradictions in the Logician sense. Similarly, Science recognises the fluid levels of justification in its discipline and always strives to find the most robust justification. Take the example of sample sizes in the pharmaceutical industry. Advertisements for such products always emphasise the success of clinical trials but also the large sample size across the population. That is the way we constructed knowledge about the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine. Scientists conducted trials on large sample sizes and concluded that the vaccine helps prevent the worst of outcomes to patients. The more successful recoveries, the more valid the knowledge. There would be no need to conduct trials for more than one person if we believed in Scientific knowledge to be complete certain. Instead, society aims towards high certainty, which informs the method in Science. Hence, the validity of knowledge is proportionate to the degree of robustness of justification.

Lastly, the validity of knowledge depends on its ability to withstand attack. In both Mathematics and Science, any knowledge must be able to withstand rebuttals or counterarguments. This prevents scholars from building entire bodies of knowledge that are seemingly robust but incompatible with other well-established theories. For example, we would not take Hilbert's Formalist Mathematics to be a valid depiction of Mathematics because Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems demonstrated that no system of Mathematics can be internally consistent or complete, rendering Hilbert's programme moot. Similarly, in the Sciences, a good scientific claim must be able to withstand criticism. In the early 20th century, scientists proposed to have discovered a new form of radiation, N-rays, but upon further scrutiny and comparison with experimental data, the claims were debunked as myth. The same goes for Lamarck's theory of evolution that posited that organisms inherited acquired traits, which was challenged by Darwin and his observations that giraffes would not inherit longer necks from parents that did not possess the right genes. The theory of evolution we know today is Darwin's version that supposes genetic inheritance. These practices in the Sciences fall under Kuhn's Paradigmism, whereby Kuhn believes that "normal science" faces pressure from "revolutionary science" every now and then, spurring paradigmatic revolutions that change what we know. The best claims would be those that can withstand such changes, or can be compatibly subsumed in new paradigms, enhancing their validity.

In conclusion, I believe that the validity of knowledge depends on its methods.

### **Comments**

*This was a pleasure to read! This response is clear, straightforward, and engaged with the knowledge issues like a well-oiled machine, although some examples can be better highlighted to convey points more forcefully. Overall, this script showed a wide-ranging understanding of issues raised in the question (for example, notions of validity and method). A special commendation: it is one thing to know what was carried out, but quite another to know why, and the special episode raised regarding the crisis in the foundation of Maths often suffers such an ignorance from most of us thinking about the history of ideas. This exhibits a mature take – well done!*

### PASSAGE

What is society? How is society constructed? “There is no such thing as society”, Margaret Thatcher, the United Kingdom’s former Prime Minister, quipped. Many regard this claim as naturally true, but this is mistaken.

A look at scholarly discourse helps us realise how mistaken this notion is. French sociologist Emile Durkheim argued that the objects of study in sociology are ways of acting, thinking and feeling, and because these ways can and do have causal effect on individuals, they are just as real and objective as physical objects and forces. Just as we experience the force of gravity on us, we can similarly be affected by public opinion or inflation. Just as we study causal relationships in nature, so can we study causal relationships in the way we act, think and feel. There is no difference between how societies function and how quarks or electrons behave. It is obvious that Durkheim is right on all accounts and there is such a thing as society.

Critics who believe otherwise argue that social entities like ‘the corporation’ or ‘the army’ refer to theoretical entities that are constructed to conveniently explain what exists; the actual things that exist are the people who engage in economic activity and transactions, the men and women in uniform, etc. However, wouldn’t these actual existing things eventually accumulate to become social entities, so much so that it is no longer efficient or even practical to suggest that the latter do not exist? For example, we would not refer to a cereal box as just a bunch-of-coloured-chips-and-flakes even though they are just that! It is obvious there are social entities that exist independently of the individuals that are in it.

Recent international crisis and conflicts might give us reason to abandon the view that societies exist. One could claim, for example, that society as it was prior to the COVID-19 lockdown no longer exists and never will again, and we would be living in a different society after the lockdown. But what does a different society even mean? Surely, the world before and after the lockdown are vastly different, but there is no denying that we are still in one and the same world, in one and the same society. Society clearly exists perpetually, regardless of any crisis or conflicts. Electrons, quarks, gravitational waves do not become any less real before and after a pandemic, so there is no reason to assume that society should become any different or unreal. If anything, crisis and conflicts have undoubtedly proven that there is such a thing as society.

In addition, if societies do not exist, then does this mean that we need not concern ourselves with the welfare of other people? If this is so, then the idea that societies do not

exist would not have good consequences. It might lead to people becoming indifferent to anything and anybody and doing whatever they want regardless of social norms and ethical norms. After all, there would be no overarching authority to tell people what to do. It is therefore necessary that we keep the idea that societies do exist, to prevent the occurrence of such an undesirable chain of events. Even if one argued that societies do not exist, the cons of the notion that it does not exist far outweighs whatever pros opponents might claim it has. Ultimately, to claim that there is no such thing as society, like Thatcher, would be mere ignorance.

**The author makes claims about the nature of social scientific knowledge. Discuss and evaluate the author's claims, using your own understanding of the nature and construction of knowledge in science as well as the ideas raised by the author.**

The author's main conclusion is that societies exist, and he argues for this conclusion from four angles of argumentation. Firstly, he argues that there exist causal relationships between various factors in society and the way humans act, think and feel, making society a sort of system with rules and laws that can be studied. Secondly, the author argues against the detractor by stating that individuals make up larger entities that behave differently from those individuals, suggesting that societies exist. Thirdly, the author argues that societies always exist despite certain events that may affect parts of them. Fourthly, he makes a case for accepting the existence of society on pragmatic grounds. I find the author's overall argument deductively valid but not convincing because his inferences are weakly drawn. In general, the author assumes a realist ontology of social scientific knowledge and believes that social scientific knowledge can be constructed via different means. Yet, he fails to consider certain problems or pitfalls in his assumptions.

Firstly, the author argues that there exist causal relationships between various factors in society and the way humans act, think and feel, making society a system with rules and laws that can be studied. While he does not make explicit these factors or the methods of study, I suspect he is referring to the social scientific approach of methodological naturalism, a method of study assuming that there are variables at play in society (such as one's socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender and political ideology, etc.) that influence the way people act, allowing for a scientific, objective approach of research to draw conclusions about human behaviour. To the author's credit, that seems to be true in societies. One would reasonably expect the law of demand to hold true generally across societies for it makes intuitive sense that people would want to buy more of a product if prices go down and conversely, only afford to buy fewer of it if prices increase. Such pieces of social scientific knowledge seem to justify that societies exist because we can study aggregate behaviour with a large degree of predictive power. However, the author fails to consider that humans do not always behave rationally or predictably, which undermines his claim about the orderly way behaviour can be predicted based on certain variables. For example, one may believe that the poor have a lack of financial literacy or tend to mismanage their money, which would seem to support a lot of empirical data about poor people being stuck in vicious cycles of poverty. However, there could be extenuating circumstances affecting poor families, causing their poverty, or it could be that the poor possess great financial literacy and lack capital or credit, thus resorting to imprudent practices of borrowing. The crucial thing here is that not all variables can be successfully

accounted for in a social scientist's research, and hence, it is difficult to assume that all people behave rationally according to certain factors. Moreover, the author assumes that such relationships can be constructed based on existing methods of social science, but he fails to consider their pitfalls. For example, the Hawthorne effect describes a scenario where subjects of research studies behave differently because they know they are being studied. A research study investigating the relationship between race and one's academic motivation, for example, may indirectly influence the students observed to be more or less motivated, depending on arbitrary factors such as whether the students have to study in class for a longer duration due to the research study (and hence could be less motivated to study or maybe more motivated to put on a 'good show' for the researchers, hoping that lunch would come earlier). The key thing is that this arbitrary influence of the researcher could result in skewed social scientific knowledge that does not capture the nature of society at all, so we cannot ascertain whether societies really exist, leading me to question whether the author's 'causal relationships' claim aids him in reaching the conclusion that societies exist.

The author goes on to argue that individuals make up larger entities that behave differently from those individuals, suggesting that societies exist. I largely agree with this claim so long as we adhere to a definition of society as "a group of people that exhibit certain behaviours that can be observed". The author seems to be making sense when he says that groups of people like corporations or armies exist since they are made up of people who exist. While he is not very clear with what he intends to say in making this claim, I believe that he is making the claim that larger social entities like armies and corporations could represent a sort of aggregated people, comprising their interests, demands and capacities. Since armies and corporations exist; and society is also an aggregation of people, it must exist too. In the real world, the legal system is known to treat corporations with legal personhood, allowing people to sue corporations for damages as if it had the ability to make autonomous decisions and consider the ramifications of its choices. This shows that corporations can be seen as an aggregation of the board of directors or shareholders, behaving in such a way that represents the people it comprises. In social sciences like criminology, researchers also tend to analyse the way certain demographics behave, such as looking at the relationship between race and recidivism in the US, helping them gain knowledge as to the way certain groups of people behave. This is not without its criticisms, for some people argue that connecting race to negative behaviours constitutes racial profiling that may inadvertently lead to more punishment for certain races, which serves to reinforce the phenomenon by acting as a self-fulfilling prophecy. This would undermine the author's argument that societies exist in a realist sense because it would mean that humans are the ones inventing such classifications and acting on it to reinforce these classifications rather than having discovered behaviours in society.

The author's third point is that societies always exist despite certain events that may affect parts of it. Here he draws the analogy to quarks and electrons, claiming that they exist even after a pandemic and hence societies must exist after disasters like pandemics. This

is a weak analogy because there are no defining similarities between scientific objects and social scientific objects. One would argue that physics particles exist in the empirical sense but struggle to find an equally compelling ground for social scientific objects like society. Society has no physical attributes that can be measured using experiments like in science, but rather it appears to be a sum of interrelations that can be observed and interpreted by humans. I disagree with the author's assumption that societies exist empirically and perpetually. A more nuanced view would be to view societies as constructed by our imagination in a nominalist sense, with each construction affected by the beliefs of a particular point in time, the person constructing the knowledge and his motives or biases. This takes into account the inevitable influence of human bias in the construction of social scientific knowledge, as accepted by researchers who adopt the interpretivist method of social science. For them, they acknowledge the subjectivity of their constructed knowledge and self-reflexively reveal their own biases in the process of construction, showing how they only intend to construct knowledge about a particular segment of society rather than make generalisations about the world. This is evident in the discipline of History, where different historians across cultures and time periods tend to write narratives about their countries' past differently. Someone living under the Soviet regime would be painting Stalin's rule in a much more positive light than an American historian today. This reveals the nature of social scientific knowledge as being much more malleable and fluid than the author characterises, because of human influence.

Lastly, the author makes the case that we should accept the existence of society due to pragmatic reasons. It benefits everybody to believe in a larger community which we all belong to because we would inherently feel the need to listen to instruction and improve the lives of everybody in this community. Here the author seems to be taking a non-realist approach, accepting that even if we cannot ascertain the existence of societies, we should nonetheless take it as true. I find this a much more developed stance to take because it focuses on the practical outcomes of social science, closer to the heart of why we even pursue social scientific knowledge at all. This approach is the closest to the critical theory method of social science, in which researchers characterise society as a web of power structures, hoping to reveal its problems to catalyse change. This change can only be beneficial (in their opinion) because it helps to equalise power disparities, improving people's livelihoods. For example, Marxist ideology aims to galvanise the proletariat to overthrow a tyrannical bourgeoisie to achieve communism, where everybody's needs are met satisfactorily. This critical method, while theory-laden and ideologically driven, tends to avoid the more epistemic concerns of knowledge by instead focussing on pragmatic action. This suggests that the author believes in the overall goal of social science as one that prioritises action for better outcomes, which explains why we should accept the existence of societies.

Hence, I agree with the author that societies exist, but I would caution him to consider some potential issues with his position.



### **Comments**

*This response exhibits lucid thinking, especially through the comprehensive coverage of the possible nuances of the author's points. At the same time, the framing of the paper is intrinsically tied to issues in the nature and construction of knowledge (NACOK), evident in the way concepts such as methodological naturalism were referenced, but in the way topics sentences and links were worded to engage with NACOK issues. While it is alright to view the author's last point as perhaps advocating for or switching to a critical social scientific approach, does this mean or imply that his main conclusion (i.e. societies exist and not the constructed concept of society) still stands?*



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