

2006

Issue ONE

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## Foreword

### Learning the Art of Writing

"That is what learning is. You suddenly understand something you've understood all your life, but in a new way."

- Doris Lessing

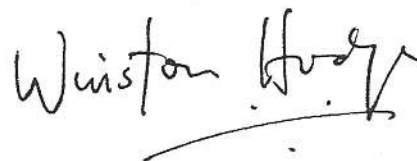
The *GP Bulletin*, or the *GP Bull* as it has come to be known, is a collection of outstanding essays produced by RJC students for General Paper. We have compiled the essays to share with students of RJC as well as other colleges because we believe that good essays should not be kept filed away and forgotten. Instead, they should be read and enjoyed by all, and even inspire readers to write essays that are as good as or even better than those featured.

We hope that the essays in the *GP Bull* will also serve a more practical purpose for GP students in that they can be a useful model of the various approaches that are adopted to present ideas in GP. Our intention is for the essays to complement what students have learnt - for them to have a "Eureka" moment when they discover how an issue can be discussed from different perspectives, and be excited about exploring various angles and presenting the arguments cogently in an essay. This process is perhaps what Doris Lessing, an acclaimed writer, would describe as *learning* - to suddenly understand something you have understood all along in a new way.

With this *GP Bull*, we hope to be able to extend the intellectual buzz here at RJC to other campuses, and to give readers a glimpse into the education we provide at RJC.

Enjoy.

Auspicious Melioris Aevi



**Winston Hodge**  
Principal  
Raffles Junior College

Essay <b>01</b>	Title: "Professional sport today is nothing but entertainment and profit." Do you agree? Name: Aw Jia Quan Joel    Class: 1A01B
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Legendary Liverpool Football Club manager, Bill Shankly, once said, "Football is not a matter of life and death. It is more important than that." That was, however, decades ago, and one can definitely argue that the professional football scene, as well as that of most professional sports, has changed a lot, for better or worse. The proliferation of professional sports as a form of popular recreation, especially with the advent of satellite and cable television and the penetration of the goggle box into any urban environment, as well as the increasing profitability of the trade, have naturally led the wider public to question the purpose of professional sport. Is it for nothing but entertainment and profit? It is indubitable that professional sports teams and leagues are increasingly managed and operated as business units, and the entertainment value of teams is inextricably linked to the survival and growth of a team, or an entire league or tournament, if only for the importance of attracting more fans whose support translates to more money, sceptics argue. I disagree, however, for surely there must be more to professional sports than entertainment and profit.

One only has to look at the number of people who tuned in to watch the 2002 World Cup Finals to understand the global standing of sports as a form of entertainment. A few hundred million people reckoned that seeing the likes of Zinedine Zidane kick balls in Japan or Korea was entertaining enough to warrant paying their local broadcasting network. The number of people who turn up at the Camp Nou, home stadium of Barcelona Football Club, amounting to at least 80,000 week in, week out, is testament to the level of entertainment football provides. When one loves a game so much that his life is deemed incomplete without it, watching it played by the best is certainly an enthralling experience. It is hence especially expedient for society to question the purpose of professional sports in an epoch of widespread media penetration and accessibility, since it is reasonable to assume that most of the audience watch sports for entertainment rather than for genuine affection and loyalty to the teams or players involved, since watching is only a channel surf away, and makes for nice meal time entertainment. Now fans do not have to bundle themselves to a golf course in London to watch Tiger Woods pocket another birdie on a PGA tour. NBA fans can also watch Shaquille O' Neal throw slam dunks on his opponents on the dedicated NBA web channel, NBATV.

While this new age of media and communications has ushered professional sports into an era of unprecedented exposure, and hence, vast global entertainment appeal, it certainly has made sports (incomparably) profitable. Professional sport is, as any other free market good, affected by the demand and supply. Although the audience has increased exponentially since the advent of 'live' sports broadcasts, the number of leagues for a sport has normally remained stagnant. Coupled with the income from television stations, owning a sports team has become a dream for many. Money is increasingly an important factor in sports, as the decisions made by professional sportsmen are ostensibly based on their wages, or potential wages. For example, Joe Johnson, previously of the NBA West Conference Finalists Phoenix Suns, recently moved to the Atlanta Hawks, one of the worst teams in the NBA last season because the Hawks could offer him a wage much higher than the Suns could. Besides lucrative player contracts, the operation of clubs, or sports tournaments (such as the Open series for tennis), is determined largely by the profit margins expected or desired. Consider Chelsea Football Club, which recently changed its ticket prices so that the highest tier of tickets costs about £85, and handicapped fans have to pay as much as the rest of the fans. The lucrative sports business has also led otherwise unrelated businessmen to invest in sports, which is a clear sign of the influence profit-making has on sports. Consider also, Russian oil magnate Roman Abramovich's takeover of Chelsea Football Club two years ago, which has since changed the face of English football.

However, there certainly is much more to professional sports than entertainment and profit. Professional sports, some of which have existed for generations, such as basketball and football, both of which were invented in the nineteenth century, have come a long way, and affected the lives of millions. Often, it is the competitive nature of sports that attracts fans, apart from the ability to entertain. This competitive grit and endurance that are visibly manifested on the playing field embody much of what sports mainly entailed when they were yet to become lucrative businesses. Sports are akin to a social glue, bonding fans together in their loyalty. This unity, and sense of fraternity, shine through in the way athletes perform in competitions. It was evident in the way American tennis legend, Andre Agassi, was cheered by American fans, in an American tournament, the US Open; it is what a sports icon can mean to



fans who share some common bonds with him or her. The above example is in no way an overt show of nationalism and racism but rather, a vociferous call for nationalism and fraternity (although unfortunately, racism has reared its ugly head on many occasions in professional sports). Consider, also, the celebration of tens of thousands of Liverpoolians on the streets of Liverpool when Liverpool Football Club won the Champions League, which many pundits have said is "good for England". Sports, undoubtedly, brings people together for a common reason, and gives them cause for celebration. Fans are also very appreciative of the hard work put in by athletes, seen as reciprocation for the dedication fans have, and an example of pure, unadulterated human relations.

Professional sports are all the more special because of history, and the rootedness and sense of belonging that exist very much because of the legacy of previous generations. For example, the current tennis men's world number one, Roger Federer, captures the heart of fans on a regular basis not just because of his sublime set of skills, but also because it seems like he can, and will, break Pete Sampras's record for most Grand Slam titles. This awareness of the history of sports gives not just the fans, but also the players, pride, for being part of a generation that witnessed Michael Jordan's Chicago Bulls, or the Brazilian Football Team winning their fifth World Cup trophy, or Federer (probably) shattering all tennis records, to name a few examples.

Certainly, these two aspects of professional sport, entertainment and profit-making, have gradually grown in influence, especially in the last two decades. While I do not exactly agree with Bill Shankly, it is in my opinion that professional sport is an important societal phenomenon, and brings more to life than entertainment, or business.

**Comments:**

*A cogent argument with appropriate examples. Balanced views; fluently written.*

Essay **02**

Title: "Professional sport today is nothing but entertainment and profit." Do you agree?

Name: Brenda Goh

Class: IA01B

In our modern society today, professional sport has indeed found its way into our lives, becoming somewhat of an obsession even. Soccer fans are willing to stay up till unearthly hours just to watch their favourite teams play, despite having work or school commitments the next day; athletics fans fork out large sums of money just to attain that coveted ticket to the Olympic Games in Atlanta; loyal basketball fans, even those here in Singapore who have never been to a National Basketball Association (NBA) game in their life, diligently follow each match, even attempting to emulate the moves of their favourite star on the basketball courts. The passion that the various professional sports have ignited in our lives is indeed evident; however, the commercialisation of professional sport today has again made us question whether it is nothing but entertainment and profit, existing simply to satisfy the needs of us consumers.

Indeed, the commercialisation of professional sport is widespread. Take the case of the popular wrestling show in the United States of America, World Wrestling Entertainment, which admits that the violence and wrestling seen on the show are all staged, and do not actually harm the "wrestlers" in any way. Despite this, throngs of fans continue to watch and attend these "matches", cheering on their favourites such as the "Undertaker", screaming wildly whenever their favourite wrestler manages to wrestle down his opponent, screaming even louder when he stomps down on his opponent to achieve that effect. In sports such as basketball and soccer, advertisements are plastered on every possible place that may catch the viewers' eye, such as the brand 'Vodafone' on the jerseys of the Manchester United players, large advertisements screaming 'Nike' on billboards plastered around the playing area, sportswear companies scrambling to endorse the shoes of the most popular athletes. It can therefore be seen that professional sport has indeed become a great advertising tool that companies are willing to fork out large sums of money for, even buying over, as seen from the examples of Chelsea and Manchester United, or investing huge sums of money in the team, just because they view it as a worthy investment that would benefit their companies. It is even debatable whether these companies actually have any passion for the sport, such as Malcom Glazer, who admits to knowing nothing about soccer, or whether they are simply using sport for their personal profit.

However, it is too harsh to say that professional sport is nothing but entertainment and profit. While the commercialisation of professional sport has affected us through the great use of advertising, and the lucrative profits it has given back to its investors, one must not forget the reasons that cause viewers to pay such close attention to each match, the passion for the sport it ignites in people, and the benefits it brings to us, the viewers, which is perhaps, its real purpose.

Firstly, professional sport inspires us. Most fans know by heart the stories of their favourite players and how they rose to prominence, such as Ronaldinho, the young Brazilian who grew up playing soccer on the streets, but who has since come to be regarded by many as the best footballer in the world today; or David Beckham, the English boy who grew up in the Manchester United Academy, slowly making his way up in the team, diligently practising his free kicks day after day, today viewed as one of the best free kick specialists in the soccer arena. Professional sport inspires us, it tells us that even the ordinary can become the extraordinary, that even those who come from small towns, poor families, have the chance to be what they want to, as long as they work hard. The lowly basketball player in the small secondary school team can be inspired by these professional athletes, and train hard in his own way, to become the best he can be. Coaches often screen professional sports matches before a big game for their small-town teams, seeking to inspire their players to go all out in the upcoming game and play their best.

Also, professional sport shows that it is not only advertising for profit; rather, the generosity of many sportsmen and women sets an example for many of their fans, who may then feel compelled by the example of their 'idols' to contribute to charities or donate to various crisis relief organisations. Michael Jordan is one such athlete who continues to donate generously to various children's charities, and has even brought these disadvantaged children to professional basketball games, giving them an experience that they would probably never forget. In the aftermath of the tsunami that occurred in Aceh and other areas in Asia, Maria Sharapova donated her winnings from a tennis tournament to the relief efforts in the area. Various matches are also held to raise funds for charity, such as the Charity Shield in which various soccer celebrities participate in a soccer match to raise funds. These charitable acts



of the different sports stars show that professional sport is not just about profit and entertainment, but also that the love of sport can be extended to do good in other ways too, and in so doing, compels their fans to do likewise.

Lastly, professional sport ignites passion, and even patriotism. It benefits viewers in that it brings a sense of pride and comradeship whenever the team they support triumphs, and connects them with people all around the world who too are fans of the same team and with the team itself. Bars and pubs are often filled with loud cheering before the match starts. Fan memorabilia, though a product of advertising and a source of profit, cause fans to feel great pride whenever they dress up in their favourite teams' jerseys and stand in the same stadium with thousands of fans that they do not know, but with whom they cheer enthusiastically, even singing in unison the tunes and chants of their club. This support for professional sport sparks off patriotism too, where the people gather behind their home town or country, pledging their support for the players. It is no wonder that the Olympics and the World Cup are such popular events, with people forking out large sums of money just to get a ticket, as people gather to rally around their country's team. Even here in Singapore, we stay up till late just to cheer on our sportsmen in the swimming arena, swelling up with pride as we watched Jing Jun Hong reach the table tennis finals, and yet feeling no loss in pride when she was dropped to the fourth place. We were simply proud that Singapore, a small country, managed to reach the finals. Athletes sing their national anthem with pride as they receive their medal, and it is no surprise to see their countrymen's eyes welling up in tears as they sing along with pride. Take the example of the recent addition to the Manchester United team, Park Ji Sung, the South Korean player. Though some may argue that his addition was for profit-making purposes, it must be noted that many South Koreans eagerly catch Manchester United games now, feeling great pride that one of their own countrymen had managed to break into the professional European soccer scene. Even in Sunderland, in the year that the team won the FA cup, the town's industrial output suddenly shot up, with the people, fuelled with pride from the win, eagerly going to work simply to discuss the victory, a far cry from regular late-comings or irregular attendance in the past. As such, it can be seen that professional sport does indeed fuel the people with a sense of passion, uniting people who have not met before, and rallying them behind the same team that they all support, bringing a sense of comradeship that is hard to conjure up.

In conclusion, though much of the commercialisation of professional sport today has indeed tainted the purity and passion of the sport itself, with investors who have no interest in the sport at all but who simply wish to use sport as a tool for profit, it is too harsh to say it is for nothing but entertainment and profit. Though advertising and using money have become a large part of sport and a means to gain the upper hand in the sports scene, people do not simply watch to be entertained, and the fundamental reason why people watch and enjoy professional sport so much cannot be forgotten. Not only does it inspire us to be the best that we can be and remind us that we do have the ability to achieve what may seem impossible, it also evokes a sense of charity in people, showing that professional sport is not actually all about profit. Last of all, professional sport binds people together with invisible ties, uniting and bringing a sense of comradeship to all.

**Comments:**

***Could have cited more examples other than just soccer and wrestling. An attempt to address the question – coherent and well developed arguments.***

Essay

**03**

Title: "Punishment for crime exacts retribution, compensates the victims, and rehabilitates the offender." To what extent do you agree with this assertion? Name: Gavin Swee Wei Ming Class: 1A01B

Almost all societies today and in the recent past have adopted some form of punishment for those who commit crimes and engage in activities deemed unlawful. From societies in China which exacted harsh punishments such as death for adulterers, by drowning or decapitation, to modern societies where fines are sometimes paid as penalties, punishment and enforcing a penal code seem to be the way governments deal with crimes and illegal activities. The assertion that punishment for crime exacts retribution, compensates victims and rehabilitates the offender is one of the ways to explain and justify punishments – but it in itself is flawed in many ways, as I will attempt to prove. I therefore agree with this assertion, but with major reservations.

The idea of retribution as a means of justifying or perhaps explaining punishment for crime seems to be, at first sight, an attractive one. The idea of "good triumphs over evil" is a very good reason for allowing this to stand, but beyond that the only other effect of punishment for retribution seems to be the vindictive pleasure of seeing someone punished. The noble notion of letting someone "get what he deserves" for committing something deemed as wrong is, as mentioned, noble, but the question that undoubtedly arises is, 'so what?'

In fact, the idea of retribution as a way to justify and explain punishment makes the advocate of it almost as bad as the person who committed the crime – perhaps only slightly less so because the advocate now has a reason to do so. However, the desire to inflict unhappiness in the form of punishment on the offender makes us equal to the offender, for we are, as we try to 'exact justice', degrading ourselves to the level of the offender as we inflict unhappiness and anguish on the offender, who has now become a victim of some sorts at our mercy. In that sense, therefore, I do not agree that punishment for crime should be for the sole or even predominant purpose of exacting retribution. But what if it isn't the primary purpose?

Punishment as a compensation to victims is perhaps a better explanation, its main justification being that it provides some sort of emotional comfort to the victim. For example, seeing a murderer apprehended and punished may be a comfort to families and loved ones of the victim of a murder. In that sense it is perhaps acceptable to see families and loved ones of victims as victims to some extent, because often the trauma extends beyond the victim to the people around as well. Punishment as a closure for families of murder victims, and as a form of emotional comfort for victims, seems therefore to be a good justification for punishment.

An offender who is ordered to pay damages to a victim is of course making a sort of compensation for the victim, but sometimes, beyond that, compensation may not be compensation after all. In the case of murder, while punishment serves to comfort and provide some form of closure for the family of the murdered, there is no compensation for the victim, that is, the murdered person does not gain anything from the punishment of the offender, and even if it is capital punishment, because the murdered person will not, technically, come to life again. Therefore, sometimes punishment may not compensate for the losses of victims, because as it is often said, "what is done cannot be undone."

To me, there is justification for compensation as a means to explain and justify punishment for crime only if there is some form of hope generated from this punishment. This hope, which may be for a much wider 'receiver' such as society, may come in the form of rehabilitation for the offender.

In many cases, therefore, punishment serves as a method of rehabilitating and correcting the actions of the offenders. A very good example would be the idea of confining drug addicts and rehabilitating them so that they avoid taking drugs in the future. This, however, is under the assumption that punishment, in whichever form, serves as a way of changing the habits, thinking and behaviour of the offender, as punishment as an end in itself is certainly unacceptable to me – therefore my aversion to capital punishment.

As the saying goes, 'hatred begets hatred', and to me, some forms of punishment such as capital punishment do not serve any purpose except to satisfy the vindictive desires of some. Capital punishment, for example, does not seem



to serve any purpose – the offender is not given a chance to change, the victim gains nothing except the morbid satisfaction of seeing somebody hurt, and there is what economists call a “zero sum gain”. To me, the only other way of justifying capital punishment, or any punishment for that matter, is the idea of punishment in the short run serving as a deterrent for potential offenders in the long run. In that way, punishment is thus not an end in itself, and it serves a far more sensible purpose of stopping the source of all this debate – crime – in the long run. But this, as we can already see, means that ideally there will be no punishment.

I can of course argue that there are far better deterrents to crime than the exacting of punishment, but perhaps the Chinese saying of “killing one to warn a hundred” serves as a far more effective deterrent. The use of the death penalty as a punishment for smuggling minute amounts of Class A drugs, for example, is perhaps a good enough “barrier to entry” for many. More practical is the idea of motorists having to pay fines for committing traffic offences – and this idea of having to part with one’s money serves indeed as an excellent deterrent. From a much broader perspective, therefore, punishment is a way of ensuring law and order in societies because it serves as a deterrent. Would Singapore’s rate of drug trafficking be so low if not for the strong deterrent laws placed upon it?

On hindsight, using retribution to justify punishment seems insensible and intrinsically wrong, and compensation for victims seems like a highly far-fetched idea. However, punishment as a means to different ends – deterrence and rehabilitation – seems like a pretty sound reason which explains why it is used till this day. I therefore do not agree with the assumption on the first and second count, but agree with the third count, and the notion of punishment as a deterrence.

**Comments:**

*A cogent discussion – systematic and soundly argued. One other purpose of punishment – protection of society, especially from recalcitrant criminals – could have been brought into the discussion.*

Essay <b>04</b>	Title: "Punishment for crime exacts retribution, compensates the victims, and rehabilitates the offender." To what extent do you agree with this assertion?    Name: Lim Ying Ting Denise    Class: 1A01B
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"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth", so the old saying goes. In modern society's courts of law, that is what the system seeks to achieve – justice. It is aimed at exacting discipline on law breakers, and in doing so, perhaps even satisfying the human craving for vengeance, thus allowing the victims to feel a sense of catharsis, and finally, putting the offender back on the road of righteousness. I agree to a large extent that indeed punishment for crime, which is defined as the formal sentencing of an offender in a court of law, is justified by these aims, which to a large extent, it succeeds in achieving. This is not to say, however, that the court of law, in meting out punishments to the seemingly deserving, is in any way infallible. Controversial issues have arisen, such as capital punishment, the act of taking away the offender's life because he has, directly or indirectly, extinguished someone else's. In other cases, the courts have mistakenly condemned innocent people, thereby compromising their ability to exact just retribution.

Firstly, punishment for crime does, to a large extent, fulfil our expectation of justice. For example, should someone steal money from your house, it is only natural for you to desire the thief to return what is rightfully yours. More than that, it is not uncommon to wish to see the offender punished, for causing you that seemingly terrible, albeit temporary, period of anguish, in which you discovered your money has been stolen. In a court of law, the offender, if he had been caught, would be punished over and beyond the act of merely returning the stolen sum to the victim, thereby allowing you to enjoy that momentary sense of justice, that the righteous has been rewarded, and the guilty put to shame for what he has done.

If this were the case always, that the court should be able to mete out a punishment equivalent to the offence you feel has been inflicted on you, then how desirable would such a system be! However, obviously such a system is difficult to arrive at, and more often than not, it is impossible to say that retribution has been exacted, and due compensation given. No doubt, it does offer a degree of compensation, but to what degree? For example, take the case of Saddam Hussein, the fallen President of Iraq, currently firmly in American custody. There are so many people who feel that any punishment the court is able to deal out to him will be far too lenient. Indeed, retribution will be given, but to what extent will it serve as repayment for the crimes he has committed? Or take the example of the Terror, a period of time in France in 1793, where people were executed for the most trivial of crimes. However, even in considering such cases, we must come to the conclusion that most of the time, some punishment is certainly more successful than none, and therefore ought to be exacted anyway. Moreover, we cannot assume such cases to be the norm, and though the system unfortunately allows for such exceptions, it does largely satisfy one's sense of justice, despite the punishment not being entirely fitting.

The evidence that such a system of punishing crime does offer justice is seen primarily in its existence. The fact that people are largely satisfied that there exists a system to punish crime shows that the system does succeed in maintaining justice to a large extent.

As for rehabilitating criminals, the system does, to a certain extent, succeed in doing so. Evidence is found in the Yellow Ribbon Project, a Singaporean attempt to reintegrate ex-offenders into the community. This shows that there are many people in Singapore who believe these ex-offenders do deserve a second chance, for they have indeed changed for the better during their time in prison, therefore giving credibility to this argument. There is a need to "help them unlock the second prison", to display the successful results of their rehabilitation, probably found in the punishment's deterrent effects.

However, it is perhaps more difficult to prove that punishment for crime does rehabilitate the offender. Statistical evidence seems stacked against it, with Brazil having one in four ex-offenders eventually turning back to crime. Does punishment, in fact, create a sense of resentment within the person being punished? Does this resentment then manifest itself in a renewed thirst for vengeance, channelled into attempts to succeed in breaking the law a second time, this time without being caught?

Furthermore, there is the issue of capital punishment. It is undeniably difficult to assess whether executing a person



would, in fact, force the offender to change for the better, unless one has access to the offender's afterlife. In such a case, perhaps it is possible to imagine that the fear of death might force an incarcerated offender to turn over a new leaf. However, the punishment itself, the execution of a man declared guilty, surely cannot be the impetus for him to begin a life crime-free. For example, it is difficult to imagine that the punishment of death would have caused a serial rapist such as Ted Bundy to go down the road of rehabilitation. Though capital punishment may succeed in exacting retribution and compensating the victims – or more commonly, in this case, the families of the victim(s) – it fails miserably in rehabilitating the offender.

In conclusion, punishment for crime does, to a large extent, succeed in meting out justice, though it does not appear to have been as successful in bringing about rehabilitation. The degree of retribution dealt out, and the degree of compensation received is often slightly inappropriate but that does not discount the fact that it does offer justice to people. Rehabilitation, on the other hand, does not appear to have been as successfully achieved through punishment. Therefore, I cannot agree with this statement completely, though it largely succeeds in achieving the stated aims. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" – perhaps this system would work better, if we could always define the 'eye' in the situation, and perhaps even how it ought to be extracted from the human body. Now that would truly be justice.

**Comments:**

***Sensible arguments about the perceived strengths and limitations of these three aims of punishment. However, you could have discussed other aims – deterrence and protection of society – as uncovered in one of your examples, the death penalty.***

Essay <b>05</b>	Title: "Political apathy among youth in Singapore is incurable." Discuss. Name: Shivin Nadira      Class: 1A01A
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A great deal has been made about the alleged political apathy of Singapore's youth who tend to stay clear of discussing issues and developments which have bearing on Singapore's political atmosphere, preferring the safer zones of youthful interests such as the English Premier League or schoolyard gossip. To question whether or not this apathy is incurable is to liken it to a disease, whereas this writer argues that the youth's political apathy is merely the most obvious symptom of a greater malaise.

The political apathy of Singapore's youth can be ascribed to both the stifling system of government; and the reluctance of the youth themselves to raise their voices over the barriers that have been put in place.

For young people today, pleasure and enjoyment of all sorts are regarded as a necessary right to be consumed as eagerly as possible, before the inevitable decline into adulthood, stability and dullness. This constant search for immediate gratification nudges the youth towards pop culture, sports, computer gaming – but which seldom demands of them the same tenacity or depth of ideas as a foray into political discourse. Politics is necessarily seen as 'boring', because it is a field dominated by old, serious, high-achieving people who are either intimidatingly pristine (the PAP) or unfortunately corrupt (politicians everywhere else). This is patently a reductionist, shallow viewpoint, but one that has been encouraged, intentionally or otherwise, by the mechanisms of the local government, synonymous in this case with the ruling party.

The space in Singapore for political discourse is sorely limited, both physically and metaphorically. Speakers' Corner is out of the way, unconducive to public discussion. 'Communist' is and has been used liberally to denounce certain people whose views happen to be discordant with those of the government. This ignores the fact that Marxism is merely another political philosophy and a critique of capitalism, not a magic spell that can galvanise someone into rebellion merely by having read and maybe accepted some of Marx's arguments. The predominant voice of the conservative heartlanders is equated with the 'public', so we always act in the 'public interest'. 'Pragmatism' is the ultimate Singaporean trait to have, and 'idealism' is very bad because it is not useful. 'Youthful idealism' is a phrase commonly used – so the youthful are not useful because they are synonymous with impracticality.

As mentioned earlier, I believe that all these point to a reluctance on the part of the government to allow an onslaught of liberalism to endanger a nation that has been so painstakingly brought to its current position of economic success. This fear has become so great that political apathy becomes preferable to the greater evil of political opposition. Nevertheless, this mindset must shift to accommodate new ideas from the youth; whether or not these views are practical with the current state of affairs is almost unimportant, for these are the voices of the future.

The youth's political apathy is not incurable. It is not even as deep-seated as is implicit in the given statement. In schools, students are given an increasing amount of autonomy in deciding what changes they would like to see in terms of administration, or curriculum, or the way in which their school's culture is developed. This proves that many among the younger generation are genuinely interested in effecting the progress of any institution or community to which they feel a sense of belonging. If similar autonomy, or at least more public avenues were accorded to Singapore's youth in terms of giving feedback to the government, a similar climate of engagement would probably take root.

The state should cease too in its crackdown on youths expressing themselves on the Internet through their blogs or public forums. It has often been the case in history that the habitual employment of punishment brutalises a society more than the occasional occurrence of crime. Sure, racist remarks are wrong for perpetuating hate and prejudice, but if such stringent measures are deemed compulsory against this type of offence, it suggests that the 'racial harmony' we prize is merely rhetoric, and that one should not make any negative comments publicly as it will inescapably invite strict punishment. It will not educate the young about understanding and accepting racial differences, it merely shoves this underlying racial tension below the surface, and leaves the problem to fester. Instead, authorities should scrutinise what is being expressed online to gain an understanding of current mindsets, and reform the unwanted elements through education or campaigns.



The youth in Singapore are inherently and incessantly curious. Given the right conditions, political apathy is not only curable, but will be rendered obsolete. Already, groups like the 'Young Republic', a mailing list-cum-forum, see a number of young (mostly fresh and out of junior college) Singaporeans discuss politics seriously, intellectually, but with a refreshingly youthful and often sardonic take that belies a sincere interest and engagement in the subject. Therefore, the extent to which political apathy can be solved really hinges on the willingness of those in power to release the minds of the youth which have been shackled for some time now and let them take flight.

**Comments:**

*An insightful piece. I certainly hope you'll use your freedom of speech wisely to effect such a change. Excellent work.*

Essay <b>06</b>	Title: Is Man a Machine?
	Name: Shen Yi Yuan      Class: IS03Q

Contemporary biological research on the human anatomy, the human psyche, the human lifestyle, all lean disparagingly towards the increasingly entrenched belief that humans are machines – desperately and completely engaged in the Darwinian pursuit of self-preservation and procreation. Apologists of such a view argue that humans are designed for reproduction; that all of a man's future is predetermined by the so-called genetic blueprint, that he will inevitably act unswervingly, the way he was designed. Such a view challenges the inherent value of life – if a machine loses function, is it not worthless? Such a view challenges one of the most fundamental tenets of a civil society – how can a machine choose, much less seek, life and liberty? Finally, such a view challenges the nature of our humanity – that beyond the material façade lies something uniquely special to our existence. Such a view is wrong, and is an affront to humans morally, socially and scientifically.

Firstly, let us explore the basic premise of the belief that Man is a machine, the belief that humans are designed on a genetic blueprint, and that all actions in life, from crusading for forest conservation to toying and obsessive masturbation, are predetermined. Ironically, such an absurd view is being embraced by the modern enlightened society. For example, in 2003, TIME magazine issued a front page article expounding on the idea that people are entirely controlled by their genes. Accordingly, if one sibling in a family is homicidal, there is an approximately 40% chance that the other will be similarly predisposed. If one sibling suffers from Alzheimer's Disease, the other sibling's risk of suffering the same debilitating illness is far higher than normal. Such "empirical data" is designed for shock value; it fascinates us because of the idea that humans have no control over their own lives, and that if a gene dictates it, then the button is pressed and all genes and pulleys swivel to complete obedience. In the age-old debate of Nature versus Nurture, it seems that Nature has won. If the Deoxyribonucleic acid codes for extreme aggression, the Transcription factors must transcribe it, the Ribosomes must translate it into proteins, and the person will become a permanently irascible, raving lunatic.

Such a ludicrous "finding" cannot be accepted, firstly, on the basis of Science. To illustrate with a simple analogy: assuming we all knew we were inextricably locked in destiny, determined by our genetics, would not absolute apathy result? Would this mean that this occurred because in a single generation, some random (and massive) chromosomal mutation exploded spontaneously across the globe that endeared the mentality of "watch and wait" into everyone? The answer is of course, no. Humans are always affected by the environment, by new sensory input and information. In biological terms, the expressed phenotype is always affected by environmental influence. All animals, including us, have an amazing ability to adapt to the environment. We are as much determined by our genes as by our reactions to the environment. To counter TIME magazine's example of homicidal tendencies in siblings, do siblings not share the vast majority of formative experiences? Had not both siblings been raised in an abusive home? Is not the abuse they suffered together as equally potent a factor in determining their homicidal tendencies? As has been shown, the idea that humans are machines does not stand in the face of logic and basic biological definitions of genotypic expression. Humans have as much control of their destiny as they choose to.

On a social level, such fallacious arguments must even further be defended against. Mindless obedience of a genetic code implies that "all men are born equal, but some more equal than others", hinting ominously of racial theories and superiority of certain races. We know that over 99% of the Negroid gene code is the same as that of a Caucasoid – what further proof do you need to show that men are not born into varying hierarchies of superiority? The possible social backlash of such wild claims of men as machines is too great to ignore – who needs another holocaust? Obviously society cannot accept such vitiating neo-Nazi sentiments in a world already troubled with tsunamis and earthquakes. The idea itself is inimical to democracy – that men are equal and have the fundamental right to liberty. Once again, men are not, and cannot be branded as, machines.

Finally, on a moral note, it must be realised that such an argument absolves the individual of responsibility. The old excuse for fornication was – the alcohol did it. Will the new one be – my genes did it? It is an extreme analogy but it illustrates the point. Law, justice, and responsibility are all shrugged off if we were to accept the ridiculous untruth that Men are machines and are preprogrammed for certain functions and nothing else – because it removes the

consideration of the most important aspect of all – choice.

Our sentience, our ability for self-questioning, our capacity for judgement all lie beneath the façade of our material selves. Machines do not have that. Our imagination, our dreams, our inchoate wants and needs, aspects of thought too complex to be branded machine, all bear testament to the falsity of a statement implying a purely mechanical individual. Everyday, people make decisions, large and small. Some of them are unpredictable. Some of them are emotional. But all of them are amazingly human, in that they are considered and reflected in a brain of awesome complexity, one that weighs consequences, responsibilities, not merely logically, but spiritually and emotionally as well.

The logical conclusion then, of my argument: “Can a machine do that?”

**Comments:**

***A very polished and insightful piece here. You’ve managed to touch base with most of the major issues and arguments centring around this debate and present a suitable evaluation. A work of superlative quality. Well done!***



Essay <b>07</b>	Title: Does the modern world rely too much on technology?
	Name: Lynette Goh Suk-Hui Class: IS03L

The advancement of science and technology has brought us innumerable benefits. The mechanisation of agriculture, harnessing of alternative power sources and increasing globalisation brought about by computerisation has transformed us from primitive cavemen into modern technology-savvy individuals. Development has given us a decreased mortality rate, fewer infant deaths, improved sanitation and higher standards of living. In fact, technology has become so much a part of our lives that we take it for granted. However, without it, we are rendered absolutely helpless. This leads to one of the greatest conundrums of all time: are we overly dependent on technology?

① Now, we no longer fumble with rudimentary tools but possess cutting edge equipment that puts the world at our feet. This sense of power that technology brings breeds complacency in the human race, and we may not pause to consider how we would survive without our nifty gadgets. Should we be one day stripped of our electronic toys, we would be entirely crippled and unable to progress. Consider: what would you do if your computer crashed? To most, it would be a calamity as all the information stored in it would be erased. Furthermore, it would be tantamount to the loss of a limb as we would be unable to participate in our daily routine of checking our emails, surfing the Internet, chatting with friends online and much more. Our immediate response would be to panic and hasten to get the computer repaired. Surviving without our computer is simply not an option.

② This brings to mind the recent power failures in America due to a series of hurricanes. In the affected states, people live in desolation as they are unable to function without electricity; commerce and industries cease operations, albeit temporarily, until the power is restored. As a consequence, the economy slows down while the government scrambles to provide electricity so that normalcy can resume. Thus, we can see that our lives are so inextricably linked with technology that it becomes a bane instead of a boon sometimes. This is the Achilles heel of the modern world.

③ Prime targets for terrorist attacks would be the centres where technology thrives – the city and urban areas, in particular, the literal powerhouse for every country's economy: the power stations. Take Japan for example; with more than 50% of its power supply contributed by its nuclear power stations, technology has left it extremely vulnerable. The effects of such an attack on a nuclear power station would be unthinkable. Yes, technology may have brought us many benefits, but it has also brought us fear, paranoia and susceptibility.

④ Moreover, with increased mechanisation and computerisation, Man is falling into the cushy traphole of abject laziness. Soon, we will be living in a world where from the moment we step into our house, a robotic manservant takes off our cloaks for us. We would then be guided via a traveller into our massager-cum-armchair strategically placed in front of our electronic fireplace with a built-in television. A series of voice prompts would then allow us to order our meals, which would be specially prepared by yet another robotic chef. We would not need to lift a finger to do anything ourselves as everything we require will be provided for. Desirable as the abovementioned lifestyle may seem, it is remarkably unhealthy for us to adopt it. Should we do so, I foresee a sharp rise in obesity levels and pulmonary-related diseases.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of mankind that has allowed us to come this far is our ability to work hard to attain and achieve our goals. Taking a leaf out of China's book, if we allow ourselves to be excessively pampered by technology, we would become like China's generation of "little emperors", conceited, lazy and unwilling to work. Hence, we have to strike an appropriate balance between using technology for good and wantonly using technology to satisfy our own materialistic creature needs.

⑤ Looking at the less developed third world countries, one would say that the people living there lead pitiful lives as they lack the technology that we have been so accustomed to being surrounded by. However, who are we to judge the fulfilment of their lives and to what standards are we comparing their quality of life? As part of the modern world, we are so used to the convenience that comes with technology that we would not be able to adapt to the so-called backward and primitive ways of, perhaps, the African aborigines. Conversely, the African tribes are unwilling to

adopt our more advanced practices as they feel comfortable with and are happy enough with theirs. They seem to be satisfied with their meagre possessions and obtain greater fulfilment from being able to hunt with their bare hands and travel on their unclad feet whereas we will baulk at the thought of having to walk even a few miles.

⑤ On the other hand, these tribes would undeniably flourish more with more effective hunting methods and more efficient weapons. Also, their death toll would not be as high if they had vaccinations and medication instead of relying on herbs and witch-doctors. This brings us to the heart of the problem: how much technology is too much? I would say, if we can do without it, do without it. Unfortunately, such a broad answer is unfeasible as the definition of "need" is highly subjective and differs from person to person. However, the problem of being overly reliant on technology has to be precluded before technology in itself becomes the stumbling block to our development. The use of technology should be supplemented with the acquisition of alternative methods of carrying out the same task, this time without the aid of technology. As our ancestors learnt to carve out a living for themselves in the past, we too have to learn the basic survival skills essential for life. Therefore, should we find ourselves in circumstances where we have none of our "servant" gadgets or we are without electricity, we would still be able to smile and say, "No harm done, I'll do without it." The ultimate test of this would be to face and tackle the challenge of spending a week in the virgin jungle with only the clothes on your back. Technology may have empowered us, but let us not let it weaken us at the same time.

**Comments:**

*One of few essays (on this topic) that attempt to address the question and grapple with the issues. Relevant discussion and a balanced view.*

Essay <b>08</b>	Title: Does the modern world rely too much on technology?
	Name: Yeo Sam Jo      Class: 1A01A

The front page of Digital Life recently boasted a startling but pertinent question: If someone stole your email password, your PIN number, your handphone and your virtual identity, would you still exist? The obvious answer to this is that you would still be in existence as a person, but if you lost all of those simultaneously, it could be at least a day before you escape from a virtual limbo, during which anyone could have assumed your identity and done virtually (no pun intended) anything which you would be held liable for.

That is the world that we live in today. The modern world, as we consciously know it by, is modern not just because of the distances and hurdles we have to overcome in terms of human rights and culture, but also because of the progress of knowledge thus far. Everywhere around us, there is a computer, a television, a radio, and the familiar staccato of polyphonic ring tones. Everywhere, from the seams of our clothes to the plastic wrappers we so carelessly throw away, from the latest Ford model to iEcologi vacuum cleaners and Osim iSqueeze massagers, there is the undeniable yet often neglected hint that technology makes the world go round, often in more ways than we realise.

Man, under the comfortable delusion that he is in full control of technology and its progress, often justifies the never-ending quest for a new gadget or a new method of going about life as a necessity and a way to further elevate our standard of living. After all, without the Mass Rapid Transit in Singapore, thousands of commuters would be rendered immobile each day. Man also tends to assume that time never stops (which is true), and hence as our ancestors have evolved through the ages, so should we, for progress is inevitable. This is, admittedly, true to a large extent, for if Man did not progress, there would have been no aeroplanes, no telephones, no light and no effective cures for diseases.

But therein lies the real question: are we progressing because we have to, or are we doing it simply for the sake of serving the end? Why, may I ask, do we need automatic doors, vibrating toothbrushes and even toilet bowls that help you clean your posterior after a trip to the washroom? Millions of air-conditioners, switched on each day to spare us the excruciating agony of heat, spell ultimate disaster for Mother Earth. Our way of life may have improved, but along with it comes the dangerous mentality that we simply cannot do without the convenience of technology. Internet search engines have become the new encyclopaedia, and for good reason. Google owes its growing fortune not to its ingenious founders, but to average people like us, who depend on the Internet for a quick-fix solution to all our queries. For instance, Wikipedia is undoubtedly more comprehensive in content than any other established print encyclopaedia (if one closes one eye to reliability, that is), and moreover, it is free!

Emails are also the new way of communicating without having to face or talk to anyone. As an exhibit in the Philatelic Museum some time last year described it, emails are the "letters in the digital age". But what is certainly most disturbing is the tendency to use technology as a form of escapism – breaking up via Short Messaging Service (SMS) and cancelling a meeting with the ring of a phone (or the click of a button) seem to be in vogue. Doing that allows us to shed our moral sense of responsibility and put the blame on technology if any message fails to get through, for instance. Elevated expectations are also what our dependence on technology is heading towards. Have we not had computers hang on us, causing us to tug our hair in despair upon the gradual realisation that all our hard work invested just vanished within that split second? Chew On it!, a local comic strip, once depicted one of its characters smashing the computer in frustration – a poignant satirical mockery of our virtual problems with anger management. In the workplace, many assignments are demanded via email, thus depriving the worker the luxury of time (since after all, with technology, one can expect results faster). Truth is, our reliance on technology has encroached upon our lives, so much so that we take technology itself for granted. Our insatiable thirst for convenience seemingly justifies our sloth, clearly an indication that technology is doing us more harm than good.

In a way, technology is also shaping our culture, such that it is not "cool" if one does not have a handphone or an MP3 player. When we compare the present to the past, we see that now, there are more students carrying handphones to school, not because they need it, but because it is a necessity, in "cultural terms".



In this modern world, Bill Gates is a billionaire for a reason obvious to all – technology. In answering the opening question proper, it does seem that many of us “tech-savvy netizens” would be rendered helpless if we lost our handphones and if our computers got hacked into. The Millennium Bug scare at the dawn of Year 2000 is a clear indication of our over-reliance on technology. Banks and businesses would have burst into chaos, and so should we. The modern world is being creative with technology, but we must ensure that we would not one day fade behind the shield of technology, which separates us from each other. We have seen what technology can do for us; let us see what we can do without it.

**Comments:**

*Overall, this is an excellent angle on the issue. I daresay you're right on many counts.*

Essay **09**

Title: "The great power of the media should be balanced by an equally great sense of responsibility." Discuss.  
 Name: Tettyana bte Jasli Class: 1A01B

"Three hostile newspapers are to be feared more than a thousand bayonets." The words of Napoleon Bonaparte, the man who ruled France for a decade and a half, reflect the power of the media during that period of his rule. Now in the twenty-first century, the power of the media is even greater, especially with the easy access to the Internet, newspapers, television and films that most people have nowadays. The media plays a huge role in imparting information to people across the globe. Because it exerts such a huge influence, I believe that "the great power of the media should be balanced by an equally great sense of responsibility."

It must be conceded that the media does have its good side, having used its 'great power' to impart accurate information to the general public. For example, in the recent Abu Ghraib Prison scandal which took place in Iraq, the media – specifically the news media – played an extremely significant role in bringing the prison scandal to the attention of the world. Shocking images of American troops abusing Iraqi prisoners filled newspapers and television screens and the public furore that erupted immediately after put the Bush administration under pressure. The administration was placed under public pressure to investigate the matter. The American soldiers involved in the scandal were charged and duly punished. One of them, Private Lynndie England, received a three-year prison sentence.

Also, another example which shows the merits of the media is Vietnam. At a time when the American government was trying to cover up the fact that Vietnam had turned into a 'quagmire', with scores of American soldiers dying by the day, the media became the voice of truth, bringing reports from the front and showing the American people what was really going on in Vietnam. The resulting public uproar after that forced the government to relook its futile efforts to wage a successful war in Vietnam. Eventually, the American government bowed to public pressure, acknowledged that the war in Vietnam was going badly and subsequently withdrew American troops from the country.

However, on the other side of the coin, it can be argued that the media has failed in fulfilling its 'great responsibility'. For example, recent reports about Newsweek magazine journalists inaccurately reporting a story on American troops desecrating Qur'ans in Guantanamo Bay have punched a hole in the credibility of the newspaper community. The subsequent result was a huge public reaction in Muslim countries, even sparking off a riot in Afghanistan which killed nineteen.

Other forms of media such as television, films and the Internet have also been 'irresponsible', for example, the deluge of sex and violence shown on television programs and films. In March 1995, Oliver Stone's film, 'Natural Born Killers', was released in the United States of America (USA). Shortly after repeated viewings of the violent film which detailed the exploits of two serial killers, two drugged teenagers from Louisiana, Ben Darras and Susan Edmondson, went on their own murderous shooting spree, in the process killing four and wounding twenty-five. Both teenagers claimed to have been influenced and incited to go on the shooting rampage by Oliver Stone's movie. In another case, shortly after the movie 'The Deer Hunter' was screened on American television, there were twenty-five recorded suicides by Russian roulette. Suicides by Russian roulette are shown multiple times in the film.

Violent television shows like World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) should be screened at a later time in order to protect children. However, writer Ian McEwan says that, "Children, like everyone else, know the difference between television and real life." Although it is understandably difficult to prove the link between television violence and violence in children, I still believe that the media has to take some sort of social responsibility and practise self-censorship.

Article 19 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights explicitly states that 'everyone should have the freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference, and the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers'. While this may be used for a case against censorship, it is wise to refer to another part of the Declaration – Article 29 – which states that 'Everyone is subject to such limitations as are determined by the law for the sole purpose of securing the

due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the general requirement of morality, public order and general welfare in a democratic society.' Hence, this complements Article 19, showing that while the media does have a right to impart any kind of information to the public, it has to do so within the boundaries of decency and sensibility.

Writer Ben Elton does not believe in censorship by external non-media sources but he does advocate self-censorship by the media. According to him, should the irresponsibility of the media provoke draconian censorship measures, it 'will be a sad day indeed for the freedom of expression and opinion'. Acclaimed British director Richard Attenborough scoffs at some directors' claims that sex and violence in their movies reflect society. Instead, such directors make films that show gratuitous and titillating violence because they know a lot of money can be made from such films.

In conclusion, to quote a famous line from a Hollywood film, 'with great power comes great responsibility'. I believe that with its ever increasing influence in the world today, the media needs to balance this power more evenly with an equally significant responsibility. Very much like the recent case of the three bloggers who were charged under the Sedition Act for making inflammatory racist remarks online, the media has to rediscover the fine line which lies in the delicate balance between artistic freedom and social responsibility.

**Comments:**

***A persuasive argument – balanced and with apt examples. Shows maturity of thought.***



Essay

10

Title: Is patriotism still relevant in the modern world?

Name: Gail Chua

Class: IS03L

Patriotism – the love for one's country, the pride in one's national achievements – and, most importantly, the willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice: to lay down one's life for the nation – has been around for as long as countries themselves. And in the past, it was certainly a very convenient idea, at least for the governments and rulers of old: it was the spirit of loyalty to the nation, the overwhelming sense that the motherland (or Fatherland) mattered more than one's life itself, that made so many otherwise sensible and intelligent young men throw themselves in front of cannons and engage in acts of unspeakable cruelty. Patriotism, when taken to its fervent, nationalist extreme, seemed almost like a religion in itself – millions were willing to kill, and die, in its name. And in the past, certainly, at least, in the nineteenth century – patriotism was a faith that had more adherents than any other existing belief; the beauty of it was that it was an idea that could be adapted in a thousand ways, to tug at the heart-strings of anyone in any society. 'Your country is your homeland,' it is said; 'it is more than just a place, it is your soul...' and the people, of course, were swayed by the emotional appeal.

Fast-forward a hundred years or so, and we enter the age of what is commonly called 'globalisation'. No longer have families been living on the same soil for generations, let alone farming the same crops – in many cases, even the topsoil itself has been removed and replaced with buildings, factories and other signs of progress. In America, it is not uncommon to see young citizens whose parents were recent immigrants from two different countries. 'One nation under God, indivisible,' states their pledge of Allegiance, but this is not the case in the hearts of many. For them, although they have come to America with dreams of riches and a better life, their hearts are still in their homelands – Vietnam and Pakistan – for instance. A single immigrant in a community full of born-and-bred Americans might take to American culture quickly, but not today, when so many of the 'outsider', 'immigrant' communities have formed enclaves of their own.

So, is patriotism still relevant in a world like this? On the face of it, it is growing irrelevant simply because it is getting harder to sustain. The core philosophy of patriotism, in the old days, was that one's country was better than everyone else's, and perhaps that was a simple illusion to maintain when most people lived their whole lives in their homeland and were willing to accept the government's depictions of foreigners as barbaric and uncultured – an illusion sustained for quite some time by the Chinese Middle Kingdom, among others. But in the twenty-first century, national borders are much more fluid: Europe, for example, a continent notorious for international squabbles and power-play, now has a large visa-free area for citizens of all countries. Faced with the underlying reality of expanding horizons, governments of nations realise that they can no longer expect their citizens to sit quietly, absorb propaganda and take up arms in times of invasion – they must, however grudgingly, accept and implement some of the more successful economic and political processes of their neighbours, if they want to gain citizens' support. Even so, in economically successful countries such as America, what people are supporting is the system, not the 'wonderful' American nation.

But even today, patriotism does have its uses. Governments which are successful in instilling national pride in its citizens have a much more stable society and a happier workforce. If citizens put national cohesion and loyalty above their loyalty to their own class or religion, society becomes much less fragmented, more cohesive – fellow citizens, in this ideal society, will be more willing to put aside their differences for the nation as a whole. This situation is indeed possible if the government in question has a thorough plan, and does not keep changing its policies. Take Malaysia, for example, which is trying to encourage multi-racial, integrated schools after half a century of conducting political affairs along racial lines! Yes, a sense of loyalty, even today, makes for a much more economically successful society. However, it must of course be conceded that governments have a much tougher time instilling patriotism in their citizens today – witness the headscarf controversies in Britain or France, for example. Ultimately, governments may be able to encourage patriotism and natural cohesion to a satisfactory level – but it is a precarious balance, one that will likely be toppled whenever the next flow of immigrants arrives.

Another area where patriotism is relevant today, apart from its role in fostering social cohesion, is in the defence of the country. In places such as Singapore, South Korea or Switzerland where 'national service' is mandatory, encouraging the population to love their country would make for a much smoother, enjoyable stint in the Army – for the young

boys themselves, and for the bureaucrats and generals who have to manage the logistics. And in countries which do not have compulsory military service – the more patriotic the citizens in times of trouble, the better for the country. Of course, it can be argued that patriotic or not, people will always be willing to fight back when provoked – it is a reflex action. But what about those who have more than one loyalty – such as those who hold dual citizenships and may be tempted to scurry from the country at the first sign of trouble? In this case, instilling a sense of loyalty to that country would be greatly desirable. Perhaps, one day, we will see politicians fighting to give as many concessions to citizens as possible, so as to cultivate a sense of happiness and belonging to the country – a kind of politically manipulated patriotism, so to speak. But who cares, so long as it does the job?

But in this day and age, a healthy sense of patriotism can only go so far until it starts becoming, well, hazardous to the health. Countries nowadays are so interdependent that any one country, whose citizens insist on being the best, is in danger of becoming isolationist, even violent. The Israel-Palestine conflict has stirred up plenty of patriotic sentiment on both sides; even with the evacuation of the Gaza strip to ease the tension, passions still run high. And a side effect of thinking that your country is the best, is that you begin to want to spread its marvellous system to the neighbouring countries. Napoleon's France is one example, Hitler's Germany, another. And while we are on the subject of World War II, didn't many Japanese believe that they were liberating the rest of Southeast Asia so that it could begin anew with allegiance to the Emperor? It is often said that the United States lost Vietnam because the Vietcong was fighting for the rest of their own country and the United States was fighting itself! The one displayed an overwhelming show of patriotism, the other a remarkable lack thereof. Of course, the more patriotic side won, and it took nearly two decades for Vietnam to get itself back to its feet in the world economy. Such are the dangers of over-boiling national passions.

'Warning: Consume in moderation, dangerous if taken in excess.' Perhaps a bottle of modern-style patriotism should carry such a cautionary label – it heals some social ills, but can only be put across to a certain point before the conflicting interests of the well-educated, mobile populations begin to shatter all social cohesion from within. After all, there is only so much patriotic sentiment that a government can pour down its population's throats; even third or fourth-generation citizens are sceptical, so they can forget about trying to win the hearts of recent migrants with high-sounding words about loyalty. But if governments introduce more palatable policies, patriotic sentiment might, indirectly, go on the rise – perhaps this is the method they should try.

Although people might try to compete with their national neighbours in a wave of patriotic feeling, they must always remember what is really important – the world at large, not just their homeland. What use is it if two superpowers bomb each other out of existence in an attempt to prove national superiority, if the whole world is destroyed as a result? In the Olympics, athletes compete with pride in their countries filling their chests, but in the end, even the gold medal pales before the supreme ideal of the honour and glory of sport itself. So it is with patriotism today. Some people might love their countries, but you cannot expect everyone to; international mobility has long made this a dream of anachronistic fanatics. And patriotism, though useful at times, may not always produce the best results – in the case of the European Union, for example, a too-rigid desire in France to hold on to national superiority has led to stalled negotiations with Turkey and a gloomier economic prospect, overall. So sing the national anthem with pride; it is your country that takes care of you, but in the end, you are a citizen of the world.

#### Comments:

*Written with much conviction. In-depth analysis and well-developed arguments. However, you need to link your sentences and clauses with appropriate linking devices and not just dashes.*

Essay <b>II</b>	Title: Is patriotism still relevant in the modern world? Name: Janice Heng      Class: IA01B
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How the mighty have fallen. Patriotism, once held up as a shining example of one of mankind's noblest emotions, is now an ideal to be scorned. It is anathema to those who associate it with its bastard brother, jingoism, and elicits little more than a yawn or a cynical laugh from much of today's youth – at least in Singapore. Encumbered with the baggage of the past, the idea of patriotism seems doomed to be trapped there, its glory days long over. That would, at least, appear to be the case at first glance. Yet, while patriotism does have connotations of more unsavoury concepts, and may initially appear to be a relic from less enlightened times, I feel that it can be – and is – still very relevant in the modern world.

There is no denying that patriotism has a history that many would never forget. From the chauvinistic jingoism of late 19<sup>th</sup> century imperialism to the dangerous fervour of Nazi Germany, patriotism has been exploited by governments for goals that are less than admirable. Some would argue that an ideal that has led to such mistakes cannot be relevant in a world that has acknowledged the past and is determined not to repeat it. Yet religion has been the driving force behind many acts of senseless brutality or arrogant expansionism, and it still thrives today. The errors of the past do not necessarily condemn patriotism's role in the present. Moreover, to equate patriotism with jingoism is akin to equating religious devotion with fanaticism – the difference is merely a matter of degree, perhaps, but a very significant one nonetheless.

Of course, just because patriotism need not be irrelevant does not automatically mean that it is relevant. As any teacher who has been in charge of conducting National Education lessons can testify, patriotism's greatest enemy may not be patriotism itself – rather, it may be the apathy and cynicism of today's youth. In the modern world, globalisation has blurred the boundaries between cultures, and given rise to the intriguing concept of the global citizen: one who belongs everywhere and nowhere at once. In a world that has grown so small and inter-connected, the idea of being loyal to a single country may well seem quaint and antiquated.

It is precisely because of this, though, that patriotism is just as relevant – if not more – in the modern world. Now that natural boundaries of distance and ignorance have been worn down, there has to be a greater force that keeps people where they are. Why else would Singapore's pragmatic administration persist in its National Education lessons and the extravagant National Day celebrations? Patriotism is the cement that strengthens a country's foundations, and in an age when little else binds citizens to their home, it is perhaps more relevant than ever.

Furthermore, patriotism still serves many of the purposes it once fulfilled in the past. Patriotism has served as justification for wars of conquest and independence alike, and even modern governments recognise the importance of rallying people around the flag. George W. Bush is by now infamous for his nationalistic rhetoric, which was used to justify the invasion of both Afghanistan and Iraq. A less drastic life-and-death example would be the Singapore government's attempt to portray procreation as a woman's 'national service' to her country. Though the success of patriotism as a political tool may vary across countries and issues, its relevance to modern governments cannot be denied. Whether or not its exploitation should be condoned is also a moot point; its utility remains unquestionable.

One should also consider patriotism in conjunction with nationalism. The latter is a complex concept, described by one historian as the awareness of being part of an 'imagined community' of people, and feeling a sense of fellowship with other members of the nation, even if one never meets them. Nationalism is hence a prerequisite for patriotism; and patriotism, in its turn, stirs nationalistic sentiment into action. Of what relevance is this in the modern world? One has to look no further than the remnants of the Soviet Union for an answer. The revolutions in Georgia or Kyrgyzstan were not merely about overthrowing a corrupt and tyrannical government – they were the manifestation of a nation's wish for true sovereignty. Apathy may have caused some to flee, but the strength of patriotic and nationalistic sentiment caused a revolution.

Patriotism is a force that has to stand its ground against the pressures of globalisation; it serves as a tool for governments that recognise its ability to stir the emotions of the people; and it can provide the impetus needed for



acts of political change. Patriotism can hardly be irrelevant in a world in which it is the trump card in the battle against a country's brain drain, and a vote-winner in elections. Besides, not only is patriotism still relevant, it is still very much alive. Soldiers are still willing to die for their country, countries still commemorate their victory over Indonesia – in football, admittedly. One may go as far as to suggest that patriotism will remain relevant for as long as there are countries. After all, to paraphrase a line that Singaporean school children may find familiar, there must always be something that allows one to say: This is my country; this is where I belong.

**Comments:**

***Fluent and persuasive. Shows good understanding of the question and good knowledge of the subject matter.***

Essay

12

Title: "Talent matters most." How far is this true?

Name: Ang Hui Ting

Class: 1A01B

In this era of competitive rivalry and Darwinian 'survival of the fittest', it seems that every bit of help we could get in attaining success, happiness, and all else the heart could desire is imperative to our existence: 'talent matters most.' Prima facie, the question highlights the importance of talent amidst all other factors in our drive to succeed – be it hard work or timing. Yet the attempt to elucidate the unspoken question – "talent matters most – in what pursuit?" – must also be made.

In the dog-eat-dog world of savage rivalries today, talent is held reverently, put on a pedestal for all to admire. The football talents of today – Thierry Henry, to name but one – are able to break the cycle of poverty and rise from the slums of their childhood to attain fame and recognition on the football field. Without their God-given talents, it is undeniable that more than one of these football talents would have been eking out a living in the slums where most grew up. Turning our attention to the talents in the entertainment industry, we see the likes of Tom Cruise – the boy diagnosed with dyslexia – and Johnny Depp – the failed musician and at one time pen salesman – carving the path of their future with their bare talents (and perhaps a few make-up artists). Without their good looks and acting talent, these men would have probably been relegated to a life of oblivion and perhaps even poverty. In academia, the innate talent and curiosity of Albert Einstein and Sir Isaac Newton have propelled them to fame. It is incontrovertible that those two men – out of many talented and incredibly gifted scientists – have been blessed with gifts that the average Joe is denied.

Yet, talent may not be everything. The timing and opportunities the afore-mentioned talents have are indubitably essential in their making – or breaking. Had the footballers not been – fortuitously, it seems – spotted by talent scouts and football managers, it is doubtful that these men could have succeeded. Had Johnny Depp not met Nicholas Cage at the time he had, he would most probably have never entered acting as a profession – and the fabulously wealthy life he is living now would have been nothing but an unrealised dream. In politics, we see men such as Cavour and Bismarck, lauded as the men who created history by uniting Italy and Germany respectively, taking their place among the heroes of history. Yet, despite all their talents in manipulation and shrewd diplomacy, they would never have been able to achieve what they had if not for the fortuity of the occasion. All of Bismarck's talents would have been useless had the right opportunity not come along, the historian Hobsbawm postulates. The men themselves, notably Bismarck, admitted that the opportunity had presented itself – all they had to do was to have the talent and foresight to seize it. Similarly, the great leader Hitler – cruel, despotic and merciless he may be, but still, great in his ability to lead and excite nationalism and patriotism in his countrymen in a time of crisis – could not have risen to the occasion alone. For all his powerful oratorical skills and charismatic personality, had the economic crisis – the Great Depression alone triggered by the Wall Street Crash – and the weak, indecisive Weimar Republic not coincided, had Germany not undergone years of military rule and had Germans not been imbued with chauvinistic nationalism in their upbringing, Hitler could have been dismissed as a loud-talking, angst-ridden nut, for all we know.

Even President Bush cannot avoid this reality: he was not elected because he was a clever politician, but rather because the American public was tired of former President Clinton's moral laxities, and because he was the mid-western Republican with the moral rectitude that the American bible-loving public loves – perhaps even because he was the son of a former President. Sir Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity because he was sitting under the right tree at the right time of the year and day. It would have been puerile to discuss his discovery as a fluke with a bit of luck, but the truth remains that the opportunity had presented itself – and Sir Isaac Newton had had the talent to seize it. Without sounding like the expedient Machiavellian opportunist, it must be said that timing and opportunity, fortuity and luck matter, as much as talent in the equation of success. As the Book of Ecclesiasticus says, 'there is a time for every purpose under the heavens; a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to tear, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to love, and a time to hate; a time for war, and a time for peace.' May I be as arrogant as to add this – a time for failure, and a time for success. Talent matters, yes, but so does timing – perhaps even more so.

Of course one must not discount hard work – the tired cliché, 'one percent inspiration, ninety-nine percent perspiration'

equals a hundred percent success', comes to mind. There is no doubt Einstein displayed perseverance and determination in his quest for knowledge, and only succeeded through sheer grit and hard work. In this mixture bubbling in the cauldron of success, talent seems to be a mere dollop. A dollop it is – and a very essential one at that. Scientists examining Albert Einstein's brain have concluded that his brain, from where thousands of ideas and theories, formulae and inventions have sprung, is no different from all the rest of us. All of a sudden it seems as if the languishing millions of us, mired in oblivion and ignorance, have no reason for not all being Einsteins. Yet is that really true? Do we all need nothing but grit and determination to become Einsteins in our own rights? I beg to differ. The dollop of talent is infinitely important. Is it not true that the brighter students are, more often than not, the more highly motivated ones? The less gifted ones, the unlucky ones not blessed with a superior mind or an exceptional body rarely feel the drive to compete as keenly as the bright ones. Such is the difference that even economic analysis accepts this as a facet of life. Thus, does talent matter most? I hardly doubt this.

In this meritocratic society it seems as if talent is everything. It is the sine qua non for economic wealth – the quintessential innate ability and natural talent. Yet, if we see this world not as a meritocracy but rather, increasingly a plutocracy, where the wealthy get an enormous headstart in life and leave the rest languishing behind, talent seems to play second fiddle to wealth. It is incontrovertible that economic wealth – or even a basic standard of living – is the prerequisite for emerging talents. The revered painters Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo could not have continued creating great art if not for their wealthy aristocratic patrons, the Medici family in Florence. Similarly, in Singapore, it is the more affluent among us who are well versed in the arts and music – more often than not a result of the ability to purchase grand pianos and expensive violins, and to pay for violin lessons and art appreciation classes. Thus, success is perhaps not so much due to talent – but rather, boils down to the opportunities one is given.

Hence, it seems that the prerequisite of success today is a synthesis of talent and opportunity – mixed with much hard work in the process. Yet the assumption that all 6 billion individuals on the face of this planet crave success and see life as nothing but one long pursuit of economic prosperity is fallacious. This is not to say that most humans are satisfied with indigence and poverty – rather, quite the contrary – but this is to say that perhaps more of us are in pursuit of happiness and a moral life, rather than mere material gain. In such matters, talent hardly comes into the equation. The old saying goes, 'You don't have to be clever to be good', and one does not have to be talented to recognise kindness. All it needs is morality and humanity, the conscience and the heart.

Does talent matter most? Fundamentally, talent plays an indubitably large part – but so do timing and fortuity, and perhaps hard work. To a large extent, I agree that talent is infinitely important, but if the other ingredients of the bubbling cauldron of success are missing, the brew can never be complete. In another realm altogether, talent has no part to play in the pursuit of moral kindness and happiness.

**Comments:**

***An intelligent discussion. You are not always concise in your expression, but the arguments reflect maturity and thought.***



27/07/09

Essay 13	Title: Do moral standards impede the progress of science?
	Name: M. Aditya Class: IS03C

definition of terms Moral standards may be defined as the beliefs and values of society, and science as the process of explaining and utilising what occurs in nature. As such, it must be said that moral standards ~~do not~~ <sup>do not</sup> direct conflict with science do initially impede the progress of the latter but can only delay it in vain rather than arrest its march permanently.

arg: subjectivity of morals The tussle between science and morals is ancient and it is the result of fundamental differences between the two. Science is based on objective observation and analysis of Nature and the universe, concerned primarily with exposing how the universe behaves and exploiting this in a practical way. Morals, however, define how man and his universe ought to behave, and are therefore subjective. Morals are closely related to cultural factors, such as religious beliefs. As such, it would appear that an emotional chain would hold Man back from continuing his pursuit of scientific knowledge. This was, and still is, the case in many parts of the world. Since as early as in the Middle Ages, the Church, the most tangible bastion of morals, has sought to quell scientific research and discoveries it has deemed heresy. eg. When Galileo Galilei, the famous Italian astronomer, attempted to use his telescope to show that the Earth revolves around the Sun, the Church rejected his findings, declaring that the Earth was the centre of the universe. It had resounding support from the people of the era; for who was prepared to accept such a major paradigm shift? A similar situation occurred when Charles Darwin proposed his Theory of Evolution – his assertion generated an immediate outcry from those who believed that Man and all living beings were created in six days by God. Thus it is true that, at least initially, every new scientific finding potentially faces resistance from the moral voice of society.

Stand: morality may initially impede science Yet the fundamental nature of morals cannot be ignored: morals are relative and ever-changing. What appears sacrilegious to the moral code of one community at one point in time may be perfectly acceptable years later. It is worth noting that Galileo eventually won due to scientific evidence, but this was also due to more relaxed moral standards. arg: ever changing nature of morals. It is no longer a crime against the Church to proclaim that wherever the centre of the universe may be, Earth is nowhere near it. This, of course, is not the only example of science overcoming moral barriers – for these barriers may be modified or removed altogether for several reasons. Hitler, during his reign over Germany, did this to great effect. Using pseudo-Science and Social Darwinism to assert Aryan superiority over all other races, he managed to make the creation of a growing stockpile of weapons perfectly acceptable to the German community. In the battle between science and morals, science – for better or worse – won. arg: morality removed altogether

arg: morals are culturally and temporally relative. Science is global. Science will prevail over morals for another reason: while morals are culturally and temporally relative, science, by process and practice, is global. The global area is so diverse that few countries and communities share the same moral codes, beyond certain basics. Hence a school in Dover, U.S.A., which requires students to be taught the theory of intelligent design side by side with that of evolution, finds itself up against widespread resistance. Intelligent design is the theory that Man and his body must have been designed by a creator as they are too complex to have evolved from random mutation. This theory, as a more scientific-sounding cousin of the faith-based Creationism Theory (which identifies the creator as God), has been rejected by the scientific and secular community as a Trojan horse to teach religion in American schools. Significantly, even pro-religious President George W. Bush has called for an equal and fair assessment of the issue, rather than rooting for the potentially religious, morally loaded side of intelligent design. Thus much of America has shown itself not to have the same moral bias as the school board in Dover, at least where evolution is concerned. The theory of evolution itself is considered one of the best-supported scientific theories in existence, having come a long way from its rejection decades earlier.

arg: progress of science diff in diff places Meanwhile, as the United States ponders over the stance to adopt on stem cell research and cloning, South Korean scientists have made great, unimpeded strides in the field – they were the first to successfully clone a dog earlier this year, and regularly claim to have cloned a human baby. Thus, while the progress of science was impeded in America, it continued its march in a different part of the world – this is a direct result of, and testimony to, the global nature of science as compared to the geosocially dependent nature of moral standards.

arg: necessity of science for progress Yet an even more important factor in determining whether science will overcome moral restrictions is the question of necessity. Where science is deemed vital to the survival and prosperity of a community or of Mankind, it will

progress; where it is deemed a threat, it will be resisted. Thus, the atomic bomb was given the green light sixty years ago by a President who wanted to quickly end a bloody and devastating world war; moreover, the Americans feared that Germany would discover the atomic bomb first – a chilling prospect for the proponents of world peace. Scientific research into the bomb was not restricted but strongly supported in this instance. Curiously, however, nuclear technology is frowned upon today in some quarters due to its potential to destabilise the same peace whose reign it brought about last century. What was once a key for the survival of democracy is now a direct threat to Man's continued survival. In this whole saga, moral standards have not had much influence – the killing of thousands with the bomb in 1945 was but a secondary issue to those who feared the consequences of continued full-scale war against the Japanese juggernaut. <sup>the only way to power is that destroy everything it needs</sup> Once more, science had prevailed over moral concerns – for what help are morals when the very existence of the community that propagates them is at stake? <sup>arg- science ensures to survive of men which p's over moral</sup>

In conclusion, while science is objective and global, moral standards are relative, ephemeral and largely expendable when the situation requires it; therefore while morals may attempt to slow 'wrong' scientific progress, their attempts will invariably falter at the end – especially when the 'wrong' becomes a 'right'.

**Comments:**

**Cogent arguments. You managed to move away from the banal. A commendable effort.**

22/1/07

Essay	14	Title: Do moral standards impede the progress of science?
		Name: Koh Pang Wei      Class: IS03K

Do moral standards impede the progress of science? In a nutshell, the answer is unequivocally, a resounding 'yes'. In theory, of course, this is vastly untrue, as science should and must adhere to the relevant (and reasonable) moral and ethical standards in order to progress; for what is progress if it occurs at the cost of devolution into immorality and depravity? However, the definition of 'morals' has always been tricky, and unfortunately, we are living in an era where the 'morals' pertaining to science and technology are regrettably unreasonable, and ironically, immoral. Consequently, moral standards do impede the progress of science, for these 'moral standards' are more akin to unreasonable and unjustifiable demands than anything else.

As justification, we first examine the issue of testing and experimentation on animals, and in particular, <sup>cutting open 2 bodies of living animal in order to do medical test</sup> vivisection. For years, hordes of people have actively campaigned against cosmetics testing on animals, as they feel that it is an immoral act that harms the animals. I firmly believe, that this is true, and that such cosmetics testing is deserving of public odium. After all, what progress to science or humankind is there to be gained from cosmetics testing on animals? However, a smaller group of people has been protesting against the use of animals in clinical trials. They claim that such experiments are immoral, that they violate 'animal dignity' – whatever that is – and the arguments that they use are so ludicrous that they actually would be humorous if the context in which they were used was not so serious. A typical one runs like this: 'The injection of HIV into chimpanzees is unethical, for you are causing unwarranted suffering; the benefits of doing so do not justify this means.' Yes, it is unethical to torment the chimpanzees, but it is indubitably more unethical to let the millions of people afflicted with AIDS around the world die. In a sense, the 'moral standards' used here are themselves immoral; for who would call the effective abandonment and killing of AIDS sufferers anything but immoral?

Another common argument deals with how vivisection violates animal dignity and hence is guilty of breaking a moral standard – some people claim that performing experiments on animals reduces their dignity. The same people overlook the fact that millions of animals are being slaughtered for food, and unless one's idea of 'dignity' is being served up on a 2 piece chicken meal at KFC, the dignity of animals has never really bothered mankind. Evidently such moral standards stem from ignorance and foolishness, and are definitely impeding the progress of science, for scientists worldwide cannot perform vivisection in peace over fears that the dignity of the laboratory rat is being violated.

More importantly, the moral standards employed to fight against the field of embryonic stem cell research are severely trespassing on the grounds of progress, and are undoubtedly beyond the pale. Embryonic stem cells are pluripotent precursor cells that are harvested primarily from aborted fetuses and unused embryos, and they possess a remarkable range of therapeutic powers. Indeed, recent clinical trials with such stem cells have been successful, and have enabled scarred cardiac tissue to heal again and a previously paralyzed man to regain motor control. There is no alternative treatment in sight, for adult stem cells are notoriously problematic and dangerous for the patient.

What, then, is responsible for the death of funding, and the restrictions imposed on embryonic stem cell research? Of course, the answer is dubious moral standards; their proponents, having partially restored 'dignity' to the cow and the chicken, now try to give 'dignity' to a small clump of dividing cells; all at the cost of the lives, and happiness, of many others. The most common moral argument used here states that human embryos should be respected, and accorded the relevant dignity. To this end, a ruling was passed at the Warsaw Convention stating that embryos after 14 days old may not be used as it is a violation of human life; doing so would be ethically wrong and definitely immoral. However, we must note that the 14-day mark is completely arbitrary; the foetus only develops a brain when it is 6 weeks old, and prior to that, it is no more 'human' than a clump of skin cells is. To deprive scientists of access to proper embryos, in such a pointless fashion, is undoubtedly an impediment to the progress of science and society. This is as science has much to gain from embryonic stem cell research; Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, and Huntington's Chorea, are among the major diseases of the world that can be cured via the use of stem cells. Is it moral to deprive those suffering from thalassaemia, a hereditary blood disorder, of stem cell treatment? Is it actually a 'moral' thing to do, to deprive the children of such people the chance at a sickness-free life? Evidently, the progress of science has come to a standstill in this respect, after being hindered by purported 'moral standards'.

This is not to say that morals have no place in the world of science, and that they always hinder progress. As mentioned, progress is only progress when it does not happen at the expense of our morals, for when we lose sight of what is right and what is wrong, we become mere beasts; who can say that that is progress? Moral standards, such as the ban on cosmetics testing on animals and the prevention of human experimentation without prior consent of the subject, should and must be put in place to prevent 'Frankenstein science' and such from happening. For example, I would hardly consider the testing of potentially lethal drugs on clueless hospital patients as moral, nor as something that science can benefit from. Morality, when it is justifiable and not as abstract as 'animal dignity', serves as a check-and-balance system for science that has to be put in place for science to progress.

All of the 'moral standards' presented so far, with the exception of cosmetics testing on animals, are perfectly unjustifiable. That a clump of cells in one's womb has the potential to become a baby after 9 months of arduous gestation is no reason not to experiment with it, not when the lives of many others are at stake. As Peter Singer, a Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University, says, this would mean that we have to treat every single spermatozoon and ovum as sacred, for they do have that potential to become human. Is this reasonable? Hence, I firmly believe that these 'moral standards' are not truly moral standards, in the sense that they do not have any ramifications on morality; instead, they are founded on ignorance, grounded in a reluctance to change and be open-minded, and result in poor attitude towards issues such as stem cell treatment. This invariably results in a lack of progress in science.

In theory, moral standards are perfectly justifiable; and in theory, moral standards further the progress of science. In practice, however, most of our moral standards are perfectly unreasonable; and in conclusion, just as the progress of science was impeded when the Church (in a rather ridiculous move) proclaimed that Copernicus and his heliocentric view of the solar system was 'immoral' for going against the literal interpretation of the Bible, the progress of science today is most definitely impeded by the many (dubious) moral standards that we have implemented today.

**Comments:**

*This is well argued, and you've made a strong case against some of the misapplications of moral standards. Apart from perhaps more planning to straighten out your script, this is an excellent effort.*



Essay <b>15</b>	Title: Is there any value in popular culture? Name: Stefanie Chan      Class: 1A01B
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Popular culture, it seems, is ingrained in all of us. Though the inner critic inside us may abhor, despise and wish to annihilate it from our planet altogether, it is inescapable. The infiltration of 'pop culture', as it is more commonly known, into our society, is evident from its influence on every art form invented by Man: television, the film and music industry, and others. It is hence necessary to take a step back and evaluate the value of pop culture, to ascertain if this monolith in our midst is worth the place it occupies in society today.

The era of bubblegum pop originated in the mid-1990s with the likes of Britney Spears and the innumerable boybands which erupted in a wave to flood the music industry. Most critics would agree that this wave was as welcome as a virus: it is happy, lighthearted but frivolous and with absolutely no artistic value to speak of, sacrilege to the very name of music. Critics mourned the day when Avril Lavigne won an award at the Grammys, declaring the decline of the previously eminent award.

However, it is precisely the recognition of the value of pop in our society that enabled Lavigne to win the Grammy. The influence of it is visible on MTV and teenagers everywhere; it provides an outlet for teens with pent-up frustrations to deal with the undeniably difficult process of growing up. The problem is that the adult critics seem to have forgotten what it was like to be an adolescent, to weep into one's pillow at night listening to a lovelorn singer's whining. There is emotional value in pop culture, though some may find it to be rather superficial.

A similar example is that of the television show "Desperate Housewives", and the numerous Emmy nominations it received this year. Though the premise of the show was simple, and the plot not particularly original nor outstanding, it was something which enabled people to enjoy a temporary reprieve from the harsh and ominous realities of life. Therein, perhaps, lies the value of popular culture: through its very essence of being frivolous and lighthearted, it allows for an escape from the grimness of this post-9/11, post-December 25<sup>th</sup>, post-July 7<sup>th</sup> world. Life would be too depressing if we did not have some form of relief once in a while, to let ourselves go and not be too serious.

In economic terms, the value of popular culture is enormous. Billions of dollars are spent every year on the entertainment industry, a large proportion of which comprises popular culture. The paycheques of celebrities alone are proof of the economic value of pop culture, and the amount of media paraphernalia manufactured is staggering. Though this spending is good for the economy, it raises the question of whether the money could be put to better use someplace else. The economic value of pop culture is invaluable, but one wonders if it should be placed above all else: is its value positive?

On a moral level, in recent years it seems to be that sex and violence have taken top priority in the list of components that make up popular culture. This is especially so in the case of movies, where the two appear to be used in an increasingly gratuitous manner. This may perhaps be argued as a necessary evil in the cause for liberalism, but there is a fine line between liberalism and outright depravity. As a result, parents' concerns have increased exponentially and there has been a call for tighter guidelines on censorship. What is the cost of its artistic value?

Popular culture presently has a place even in the political arena, as evidenced by the caricatures of prominent world leaders such as US President George Bush in cartoons and other such media. Arguably, the political value of pop culture lies in the fact that people are able to garner more knowledge about the world that we might previously not have been able to have access to, or simply because we have been too sedentary to make the effort. We see this in films such as "Fahrenheit 9/11" and "Bowling for Columbine", the political documentaries created by Michael Moore. They allow viewers to see the points of view of political activists, and as a result become more politically involved themselves.

In conclusion, the degree of elitism present in dismissing all of pop culture as having no value is unnecessary and of no value in itself. Just because something is deemed as being part of 'popular' culture, it does not automatically exclude it from the ranks of being valuable to society or the individual. Though it would be idealistic and naïve to say

that pop culture is a wholly positive influence, its value in society is indubitable. Popular culture should be acknowledged as having its own unique value, rather than being dismissed without further consideration about its impact.

**Comments:**

***Good – systematic and coherent discussion. Shows maturity of thought. Views are sensible, balanced and address the question very effectively.***

Essay

16

Title: Liberty or security? To what extent should individual freedoms be sacrificed for the sake of national security?

Name: Tan Yi-Xun

Class: 2A01A

'When fighting monsters, be careful lest you become a monster yourself.' Almost 200 years on, Nietzsche's words of warning are as resonant as ever, with governments all over the world passing legislation to restrict civil liberties in the name of security. Yet the supporters of the Patriot Act in the USA and the mooted anti-freedom laws in the UK would do well to keep Nietzsche in mind. In my opinion, there is no excuse, either practical or moral, for sacrificing liberty on the altar of supposed security, as these measures are both unacceptable in principle and counter-productive in practice.

Proponents of these restrictions draw from a suspiciously Orwellian lexicon – they refer to 'faceless enemies', a widespread 'war on terror', and the 'overriding necessity' of exchanging freedom for security. The essential argument is that the evolution of legal systems today, with their regard for the liberties of Man as sacrosanct, is outdated and ill-suited to battling the scourge of terrorism. It seems that detention without trial, lives without privacy and the inability to speak freely are somehow 'necessary' to stem the growth of terror.

Yet in William Pitt's words, 'Necessity is the excuse for every infringement of human liberty. It is the plea of tyrants, it is the creed of love'. This argument is truly an 'excuse' – it has little basis in reality. Our current legal systems evolved from the libertarian constitutions of the 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century, yet these 19<sup>th</sup> century libertarians, as 'The Economist' rightfully points out, faced their own terrorist threat, the anarchists. Like today's jihadists, the anarchists conducted bombings and even assassinations, murdering aristocrat and commoner alike for their cause. Yet the libertarian constitution survived – in fact, countries like Britain which did not impose draconian measures in the name of security experienced the most rapid recession of terrorist activity, in contrast to Spain, where tough legislation only met stiffer opposition. In today's world, every major terrorist act since 2000, be it 9-11 or the London bombings, has occurred primarily due to intelligence failures rather than excess liberty. Thus, it is convenient for hawks in administrations worldwide to tout cuts in freedom as a remedy for security issues, when in reality the link between the two is, at best, tenuous.

Nevertheless, insistent hawks declare that the government's overriding responsibility is ensuring security. To use their language, they claim that even if only one life is saved and one grieving mother appeased, draconian measures are worth their cost. However (obviously myopic moral argument aside), their proposition is predicated upon the fundamentally flawed premise that sacrificing freedom will aid their cause. It is hugely regrettable when any life is lost, but we must not allow irrational grief to blind us to the counter-productive political retardation that governments seek to impose. Domestically, once the state withdraws its guarantee that the rights of the individual are above question, there is a reduction in the incentive for citizens to cooperate with the state. After all, if the government can (even if it does not) tap my phone calls, throw me in jail without a free and fair trial, or censor my speech, what life is worth protecting? The most striking example of this can be seen in the aftermath of the London bombings. Immediately after the terrible act, there was universal condemnation of the terrorists. Britons, white and black, Christian and Muslim, were united in a rare show of solidarity. Yet the subsequent anti-free speech laws and the restriction of travel have splintered British society. These draconian measures imposed in the name of society have probably undermined it by alienating the Muslim community as seen by their virulent criticism of the British government's policies. This is especially important given the Islamic slant to modern terror which makes the British Muslim community Britain's most valuable ally – or most dangerous enemy.

*restricting civil liberties allow terrorists to succeed in causing massive disruption to people's lives*

Furthermore, this leads to international repercussions in the quest to quell terror. Even in the hugely unlikely event that all restrictions on liberty are channelled domestically towards anti-terrorist ends, these manacles are likely to be perceived as hypocrisy on the part of the developed countries. Even George Bush recognises that this is a war of 'hearts and minds'. Thus our most potent weapon in our arsenal against terror is not firearms but an ideology of liberty and self-determination. Hence, any compromise on freedom is, by extension, a defeat for the free world, and a victory for the very agents who undermine our security. Guantanamo Bay, with its sleep-deprivation torture routines, persistent refusal to allow the detainees access to a fair trial, and its long-running interrogation, has been an embarrassment for the developed world, and subsequently a major engine fuelling Muslim resentment. Thus when liberty is lost and draconian measures take its place, our moral position ceases to be higher than that of the jihadist's

– repression becomes the language of political discourse and terror is therefore made the most valuable currency of political exchange.

Perhaps the only argument from the hawks that has any validity to it is the fact that people voluntarily want to sacrifice their rights, and they point to Bush's re-election as evidence for this. However, this is a myopic view that exaggerates the reasons for his re-election. Bush won the re-election on the crest of a strong economy, steady image, and a wave of patriotic euphoria and jingoistic flag-waving due to the Iraq War. Yet there was a disjunction between the promises of his anti-terrorism bill, the Patriot Act and the delivery of this false palliative. Now, American approval ratings are low, and one major reason for this, besides the mounting casualties in Iraq (which is in part due to the aforementioned alienation), is perhaps the most dangerous consequence of sacrificing liberty: abuse.

If government were perfect, then restricting individual freedom might at least be neutral. However, Big Brother has a tendency to use instruments intended for other purposes in unrelated fields. This slippery slope is technically known as scope-creep – and it is ongoing. The Patriot Act, touted as an exclusively anti-terrorist bill, has been used to prosecute computer hackers, preachers, and even drink-drivers. This, on the surface, might not seem like a bad thing. Yet it sets a precedent for the growing tentacles of the state. Under the Patriot Act, it is now technically possible to monitor someone's personal computer on the pretext of his drink-driving, clearly a power too great for the state to wield due to its gross infringement of basic privacy. Sacrificing freedom in the name of security is, more often than not, making liberty subservient to the purposes of the state, allowing it to bestow or deny freedom at its whim or fancy, instead of being an inherent and inalienable right.

In conclusion, society is a composite of its parts, and the lowest denominator is the individual. Hence, liberty, in particular the legislation guaranteeing individual liberty, must be protected on both moral and practical grounds, in the long-run enabling us to ensure our security. The developed world is currently faced with a choice. One path empowers the individual and, by extension, empowers society against terror. The other path is a dead end for freedom and for us – as William Pitt eloquently declared: where freedom ends, there tyranny begins.

**Comments:**

*From start to finish, this has been a most persuasive argument, felicitously expressed with great economy. There is nothing much to add to this excellent piece of work, except that you should briefly explain how empowering the individual aids in the war against terror.*



Essay **17**

Title: Is it possible for a country to embrace globalisation while remaining true to its roots?

Name: Samantha Yeo Class: 2S03J

Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the world's largest political body, so aptly and profoundly commented, "Globalisation is a fact of life." Indeed, Mr Annan's insight very much parallels the role of the United Nations today – a platform for leaders to chorus in unison that which is glaringly obvious. Perhaps it is because of its simplicity that his statement is true too. The scourge of war, along with rapid advancements in transport and telecommunications, has made the lowering of barriers to trade and transport ever more rampant. Together with the UN, regional bodies have worked as effective tools for trade liberalisation and cultural exchange, creating the global village of today which, by default, is embracing globalisation in almost every conceivable way.

The "roots" of a country most intuitively refer to its culture – encompassing practices and value systems which have evolved over decades, and are therefore deeply ingrained and far less mutable than ever-changing political or economic concerns. Yet, with the bubble of free trade has come the hyper-dominance of America, and in turn a new wave of cultural imperialism. Accomplices to this rampage have been the Internet and satellite television – choice venues for promoting the irresistible vibes of MTV and product placement opportunities for massive American multi-national corporations (MNCs), such as Nike and Pepsi-Cola. VS Naipaul once infamously remarked that the culture of the West "fits all men". Indeed, it is hard to see how anyone can resist the temptation of grease-laden fast food, when Yum! Brands, parent of KFC, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, opens three new outlets everyday, with one of them being in China. Even poor Chinese peasants are falling prey to the lure of American-style type I diabetes, obesity, and promiscuity – a debasing of traditional roots which any country should find hard to be proud of.

Another evident result of a world without barriers has been the massive mobility of people, creating a phenomenon of migration which is now more serious than ever. Thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreements (NAFTA), border control between Mexico and America was relaxed significantly, causing waves of mostly illegal emigration out of Mexico. Associated with this have been sharp rises in drug trafficking and kidnapping, with the situation reaching such dire conditions that the states of New Mexico and Arizona have recently been forced to declare a state of emergency. With the expansion of the European Union too, Germany and Britain have suddenly been flooded with an influx of Estonians and Poles, demonstrating the Darwinian instinct to ensure survival by moving to more favourable conditions. It is impossible for a country to hold on to its roots when its roots are translocating to where the grass is greener.

The last reason for cultural compromise is co-related to the pressures of so-called "trade liberalisation" as advocated by globalisation. Due to the rise of intra-regional trade, many countries are verging on isomorphic cultural homogeneity in order to maximize common markets. A prime example is how the success of NAFTA has depended on the convergence of American, Mexican and Canadian consumer taste and demand. In contrast, Japan has found it increasingly difficult to integrate itself within the South Asian trading zone of Hong Kong, China and Singapore, due to her close-minded protection of her unique heritage and traditions. In addition, we have the World Bank – imposed Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) which demand that developing countries privatise and remove subsidies for native farmers, as such, allowing the massive intrusion of MNCs in return for granting developmental aid. Thus we see how increasingly, countries are being forced to abandon their roots in order to achieve the economic benefits of embracing globalisation.

However, it would be equally myopic to claim that all aspects of culture in all countries are being compromised for the sake of globalisation. There are many heartening (and also, extreme) instances of how globalisation has, in fact, created a new trend of cultural protectionism and a "return to roots" phenomenon.

The first thing we have to recognise is that cultural differences are the product of centuries; they are born from common experiences and carry significant historical baggage – such as that which is shared by Yugoslavians and Russians. On the very fundamental level, while we can change our political inclinations or our preferences in music or fashion, we cannot change our genetic and cultural make-up; a Russian can reject communism but not become Estonian – and this is the basic glue for social tradition and heritage. In fact, globalisation has intensified our awareness of these differences and commonalities, and is the precise reason why countries are realising the need to protect

their cultural identities. This explains Japan's "Asianisation" in response to American import tariffs and France's recent support of her native film industry, promoting "Amélié" and "Taxi" in synchrony with placing quotas on overseas DVD imports. Embracing globalisation has made countries more wary of protecting their roots.

Next, we must recognise that globalisation has today created a world order in which national boundaries are no longer the discrete demarcations of culture, but are being replaced with the imagined commonality of "civilisations". As proposed by Samuel P. Huntington, "The fault lines of civilisations are the battle lines of the world". Civilisations engender the same moral differences which unite countries, but are not restricted to geographical barriers – with the Internet promoting loyalty to cults and religious groups anywhere around the world, we witness now a revival of religion – *La revanche de Dieu* – and a rise in neo-fundamentalism. The dominance of the West is largely to blame for the countering emergence of non-western loyalties – the London bombings being an excellent illustration of how extremists may no longer feel the physical connection to their native ethics but still wholeheartedly reject the systems of their new residence. The "return to roots" phenomenon is now more evident than ever.

Cultural protectionism extends beyond social changes too, and today countries have admirably attempted to stand up to the economic pressures of globalisation. China's fierce pegging of the *yuan* has been responsible for a period of exponential growth and has demonstrated, until recently, a defiance of international trends in favour of her people's well-being and financial systems.

The environment also constitutes a major part of local heritage and history, and has recently been the focus of many conservation efforts aimed at restoring biodiversity to global wildlife hot-spots. Puerto Rico's constitution of a buffer zone around protected rain forests has drawn much eco-tourism, and its impetus to do so as a condition of global developmental aid has proven how embracing globalisation can, in fact, lead to the protection of native roots – be they literal or symbolic.

In conclusion, while it is easy to blame globalisation for cultural imperialism and the resulting homogeneity it has created, this would be a very superficial allegation if left at that. Increasingly, we are seeing efforts to conserve and protect cultural differences, which have moved in tandem with trade liberalisation and global interconnectivity. This is an admirable defence of what binds us on our most basic level, and heartening evidence that it is, in many ways, possible for a country to embrace globalisation while remaining true to its roots.

**Comments:**

**Well-argued. Balanced, well-analysed.**

Essay

18

Title: Is it possible for a country to embrace globalisation while remaining true to its roots?  
 Name: Samantha Walker-Smith Class: 2S03J

There is an old saying, "To know where you are going, you must first know where you came from". In this modern age, with countries becoming increasingly interconnected and international boundaries being blurred, this saying has become even more relevant. For it is true that for a country to embrace globalisation – to take an active part in and benefit from the exchange of goods, ideas and technology across national boundaries – it must also have a solid foundation from its history and heritage, and remain true to its roots, be they cultural, religious or social.

Globalisation is by no means a recent phenomenon, but has been occurring since the dawn of civilisation. In the past, however, it was harder for countries to embrace globalisation while remaining true to their roots and background. For example, in history, the conquering of a weaker nation by a stronger empire (a form of globalisation as it involves the transferring of ideas and trade across borders) would result in the loss of the conquered nation's background and traditions. This is evident in the expansion of the Roman Empire where they accepted their new ruler's ideas and traditions. This is evident in the expansion of the Roman Empire where various nations such as Britain (and the Britons living there) had to abandon their own traditions and mainly take Roman ideas in order to benefit from their rule – changing religions from druidism to Roman traditions and losing many of their cultural traditions.

In more recent times though, the loss of one's roots due to the acceptance and participation in globalisation has decreased. On the surface, it would appear as though countries and people across the globe are becoming increasingly homogeneous. With the advent and ease of global communication – the introduction of satellite telecommunication, the Internet and televisions across the world – as technology spreads worldwide through many countries embrace the Internet and televisions across the world – as technology spreads worldwide through many countries embrace globalisation, we seem to be fast developing into a certain kind of person following the same kind of trends. Now, with the spread of Americanism and the dominance of large franchises such as McDonalds, everyone across the world can communicate with one another in English (now known as the universal language), eat a hamburger or surf on the Internet practically anywhere in the world. Many people would see this as a loss of one's roots to globalisation. How can an indigenous culture or family business unit stand up to the large-scale Westernisation and the power of multi-national corporations (MNCs)? These people would be right in some cases, such as Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries, where globalisation and the presence of large companies have destroyed local businesses and traditions; or in Australia where globalisation's influence and movement of people into Australia have all but destroyed the Aborigine's culture.

However, despite the examples stated above, it is indeed possible for countries to have the best of both worlds – to embrace globalisation and its benefits as well as to embrace their own roots and heritage – as long as they are willing to work for it and make an effort. Singapore is an extremely relevant example. It is a small country in a competitive world, yet it has managed to attain (according to a recent international survey) the honour of being the world's most globalised nation, as well as maintaining its national heritage and identity. This ability is due largely to the good governance that Singapore possesses, as well as the willingness of its people to contribute to the country. Singapore, by opening its doors to foreigners and international relations (signing a Free Trade Agreement with America and contributing actively in rescue missions such as the recent Tsunami relief efforts in Aceh), is embracing globalisation and reaping the benefits of economic progress (an extremely high GNP per capita) and high standards of living. Singapore has also remained true to its roots and actively embraces them, with many museums dedicated to its heritage, traditional celebrations conducted across the island on religious holidays such as Chinese New Year, Deepavali, and last but not least, the annual celebration of its independence, where the people of Singapore remember the past and take pride in their history.

In addition, many other countries around the world also behave in a similar manner. Other examples include Switzerland – where the multiracial and religious heritage of the country is celebrated with many festivals, and yet the country still manages to provide the highest GDP per capita in the world and globalisation occurs on a large scale with much international investment. A final example is the UK, a member of the G8 and a huge player in global relations, yet its people are still fiercely proud of their history and have memorials and celebrations to commemorate special events in their history.



Some people may ask: what about those countries whose growth is due to tourism and foreign investment? Surely they would lose their roots to globalisation? Ironically though, it is actually globalisation that helps to preserve the cultural heritage of many of these countries. For example, Hawaii, known as a tourist destination, is an attraction for its cultural background, and many tourists visit the country in order to watch performances by locals. The same is true for the Aborigines – the interest of the global community in Aboriginal history has helped to preserve what is left of their culture and roots, which are, incidentally, the roots of Australia. Hence it can be seen that globalisation, far from threatening a country's roots, can actually help to preserve them and allow its people to take pride in them.

It is sad, however, that too much emphasis on the maintenance of the country's culture, religion and heritage, can be detrimental to the advancement of that country and the degree to which it embraces globalisation. For example, many Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia or Yemen still stand fast by their age-old traditions. In a recent survey, more than 1.5 million women in countries such as these suffer genital mutilations due to these traditions; the award-winning book "Princess", written by a member of the Saudi Arabian royal family, also serves to show that very little has changed in these countries – religion is still paramount and discrimination against women still exists in many forms. Countries such as these, embracing their traditions and heritage so greatly, have problems embracing globalisation, which involves the changing and abandonment of certain customs and practices. They also have difficulty attracting foreigners and investments as they are still 'stuck in the past' and are economically unstable. Thus it can be seen that remaining too tied to one's roots can hinder the embracing of globalisation.

In conclusion, it must be said that globalisation and pride in a country's heritage need not be mutually exclusive, and in fact cannot be so if the country wishes to advance. Instead, a balance must be struck, with the country encouraging exchange of trade and ideas with the world, yet at the same time advocating the preservation of the people's heritage. This balance can only occur when the government and people recognise this need and work together, for a national identity must be established before a country can take an active part in globalisation and advance.

**Comments:**

***Well written. Good organisation; succinctly expressed. Arguments are balanced and sensible.***



Essay

19

Title: War will soon become a thing of the past in an increasingly interconnected world. Do you agree?

Name: Sng Yi Zhi Eugene

Class: 2S06C

The world today is becoming increasingly interconnected. Beginning in earnest with the Industrial Revolution and gathering pace after World War II, globalisation has increased trade, made borders more porous to the exchange of culture and, to a lesser extent, people. With this has also come the advent of multinationals, huge corporations spanning continents. The features of such an inter-connected world have indeed reduced the likelihood of war. It is, however, far from being a foregone conclusion that was to be relegated to the annals of history.

An inter-connected world will stave off war in several ways. In many cases today, no one country may go to war with another without harming its own economic interests. Mutual funds marketed in one country could well be invested in stocks from all over the world. Very often, governments themselves may be dependent on other countries for their economic survival. China exercises a certain amount of leverage over the United States in being a significant buyer of US bonds and Treasury Bills. Calling in those loans could result in the collapse of both the United States' markets and world markets. Multinational corporations with operations based overseas and markets to exploit may form a significant lobby, as will special interest groups. Not only will a potential aggressor find it costly to wage war due to its numerous interests abroad, it will also face opposition from within the country, opposition that will come from groups who find their own economic interests compromised.

The threat of war in East Asia is reduced by the dependence of the Chinese, Japanese and Taiwanese economies on each other. North Korea is held somewhat in check by its need for power, food and investment from its neighbours. The unprecedented level of economic inter-connectedness has never been appreciated in the past, and certainly not dreamt of before David Ricardo's thesis on comparative advantage. The economic integration of world economies can be seen as a large obstacle to war.

Beyond economies, however, the increasingly globalised nature of the world may reduce the incidence of war through social and cultural means. The Westernisation of other cultures may have resulted in a decrease in diversity. It has also given people the world over a common standpoint from which to view issues. We are more alike now than we were before, even where distance and ethnicity separate us. This likeness may bring ambitions and interests together and reduce the occurrence of war. Indeed, the growing economic and political power of China as well as the spread of its culture may see Sinofication in years to come, bringing countries together, whether by design or not. Or it could bring about a pronounced clash of civilisations, as from a more specific perspective, the same predicted power that led to the spread of culture (first the radio and television, and then the Internet) plays an active role in preventing and ending wars. The levels of communication allowed by globalisation allow peace activists (among others) to communicate with their counterparts all over the world. Where local demonstrators and opposition have failed, perhaps global ones will succeed. The media, and its capacity to reach large audiences, have succeeded in ending wars before. A case in point would be the skilful use of the media by the Vietcong to spread their messages abroad. Ultimately, this led as much to the withdrawal of American forces, as did the lack of progress in the war. The interconnectedness of the media and the increased understanding we have of each other will eventually lead to a reduction of differences, reducing the ease of getting the populace to accept war.

Politically, nations have come closer together as well. The two prime examples of this are the European Union and the North America Free Trade Area. While founded on economic benefits, they will lead to political as well as social integration as economic boundaries dissolve and markets and peoples merge. Neither has proven their capacity to work as a unit. They, however, point the way towards a future where linked governments have no cause for war with each other. The United Nations remains the model for a global environment (one where differences may be resolved peacefully and interests taken care of). Barring unwise unilateral movement by its members, it can foster inter-connectedness through diplomacy and may yet prove a solution to future strife.

Given that the world is becoming more interconnected, and wars increasingly undesirable and avoidable, why does the threat of war still exist? In recent times we have seen civil war in Chechnya, Congo and the Ivory Coast. Interconnectedness may reduce international disputes but it will not affect local strife. Where the world has enough

political will to end such conflicts, solutions are possible. Such collective will, however, is limited at best and conflicts continue.

Competition for resources and vested interests may yet prove to be a cause of war between countries. It is not by accident that Iraq possesses large known oil reserves. It is undeniable that economic and political interests led the United States to invade Iraq in the 2004 Iraq war. With the current record oil prices and consumption set to increase, wars may be caused by a competition over scarce resources.

Potential flashpoints remain, such as the Taiwan Strait and North Korea. Where countries are keen to exert their political power or protect their interests even at the cost of economic and military repercussions, war may prove to be unavoidable. The shift in power from the Atlantic to the Pacific may not go smoothly. China and India are now developing, and in the next century will surely become the next superpowers. Will the United States allow this to happen peacefully? Messages from the current administration and conservatives in the United States suggest not. If war were to break out as a result of this, it will likely be a global one and no amount of inter-connectedness will prevent it.

Therefore, the increasing inter-connectedness will reduce the incidence of war. It is, however, overly simplistic to assume that such interconnectedness will result in aligned goals between nations. While large-scale repercussions of war are now greater both in breadth and severity, overriding issues may still cause war to occur in the future.

**Comments:**

*A cogent, well-structured argument, fluently expressed. An incisive and insightful answer to the question, though more evidence to support your points is needed. However, given the time constraint, you have done a very good job of answering the question. Keep it up, Eugene!*

Essay <b>20</b>	Title: War will soon become a thing of the past in an increasingly interconnected world. Do you agree? Name: Yvonne Guo      Class: 2A01B
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With the definitive ending of the Cold War in the year 1991, the president of the world's leading university vetoed the appointment of a professor of security studies because he felt the need for one had disappeared. "Hallelujah! We study war no more because war is no more!"

A decade later few would share his enthusiasm. For while the increased interconnectedness of our world has naturally created more opportunities for diplomacy and an increased public awareness of global affairs, it has at the same time created a paradigm in which war – conflicts between states and civilisations – necessarily generates political and economic repercussions in surrounding countries. No state can afford to be neutral in this world where cultural allegiances are more pronounced than ever.

The single most important force uniting the different cultural identities that make up our world is western imperialism, a process which has lasted two centuries and whose effects we still experience. In 1900, for example, 84% of the globe was directly or indirectly controlled by the British, French, Dutch and American empires. Post-World War Two, this political influence was given an economic dimension when, in 1947, the United States created an economic order – the Bretton Woods system – using its dollar as the benchmark. Countries such as Ethiopia which resisted western imperialism for a long time faced dire consequences as a result; countries such as Japan and the Asian Tigers which embraced this economic order prospered.

Therefore, at the start of the twenty-first century, people are more confused than ever, and it is precisely these conflicting cultural allegiances which are the potential impetuses for war – conflict between the states of civilisations. The Islamic resurgences in Turkey and Iran, two hitherto "Westernised" Muslim countries, are testimony to the increased individual consciousness of cultural identity. This identity is reflected in the political and economic spheres and it is in these two areas that conflict is inevitable.

In "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order", Samuel Huntington compellingly reduces political conflicts between states to a simple psychological phenomenon: the need to belong and to thereby exclude, for "there can be no true friends without true enemies." The age of western economic and political dominance is not over, but the emergence of likely challengers has ensued, along with anti-western sentiment. People identify most strongly with their language, history, customs, and religion; for much of the world these had been kept separate, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from "western" influences, and certainly among Asian and Islamic states which have been economically and politically enabled, there is an overwhelming desire to return to that glorious past. Terrorist attacks on the US, then, can be seen as an attempt to assert cultural superiority over a perceived intruder.

War is also made more likely because of the increased politicisation of this increasingly interconnected world. More so than ever there is an atmosphere of mutual distrust and suspicion in the international political scene, where ideals such as "liberty", "freedom" and "democracy" carry no meaning of their own but rather are used as economic and political leverage, as can be seen in the United States' international dealings. Moreover, the emergence of nuclear stockpiling in the wake of the Cold War has endowed the world with a tool for self-destruction. The proliferation of offensive weapons, both ideological and actual, necessarily generates a defensive response from parties feeling threatened, and attack is usually the best form of defence.

However, it may also be true to claim that it is precisely this prevailing atmosphere of mutual suspicion and fear among states that enhances the effectiveness of diplomacy and peace movements. For man, arguably, is a rational being with the ability to exercise self-control and to judge when events are getting out of hand. In "The Long Peace", J L Gaddis points to nuclear proliferation as the definitive factor in preserving "peace" between the superpowers during the Cold War, with neither wanting to risk annihilating the world.

Moreover, institutions such as the United Nations and its subsidiary branches, for example, ECOSOC, have put in a tremendous amount of effort in peacemaking operations and in providing assistance to underdeveloped nations in

the hope of creating a world order characterized by peace. In the recent G8 summit it was even decided to write off the billions of dollars of Third World debt to help in their development, thus potentially neutralising a hotbed of anti-western sentiment, for the Group of 77 (G77) countries have been in recent years relatively vocal in their complaints about having been excluded from the western economic "world" order.

Public awareness is also an important factor to be taken into consideration when evaluating the prospects for peace. It is undeniable that people around the world are increasingly educated and concerned about global affairs; in democracies populations have the right to take to the streets and protest over their government's foreign policy, as the Americans and Europeans did during the Vietnam War, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The effectiveness of peace movements may be limited, but it is arguably an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon, and a force which governments intent on precipitating war or conflict will increasingly have to reckon with.

In conclusion, to speak of "war" having become a thing of the past is indeed a naive contention; what have become "things of the past", though, are western hegemony, public apathy, and cultural subjugation. The consequence of these forces being replaced by a more powerful consciousness of political and cultural tensions is a higher probability of international conflict. While the two world wars of the last century have quelled for the moment further demands for a global war, conflicts – political, economic, and especially social – persist and are the order of the day. The world has returned to the "Tower of Babel" age, where mutual misunderstanding within a group of people in close proximity divides them more than ever and obscures the fundamental moral similarities they share.

**Comments:**

*A very persuasive discussion – I like the way you've organised your arguments and the very good language facility shown here. I enjoyed reading this – there is a well-sustained argument throughout the essay.*



Essay <b>21</b>	Title: War will soon become a thing of the past in an increasingly interconnected world. Do you agree?
Name: Aparna Sanjiv Ayar	Class: 2A13B

The Hobbesian hypothesis is that man is inherently evil; numerous philosophers and writers such as George Orwell have gone on to espouse the view that the natural state of man is to be at war. While this is dismissed as pessimistic by some, current events – be they the Islamic jihad or renewed Sri Lankan violence – show little evidence to contradict the hypothesis. The astonishing fact that, on average, a landmine maims a person somewhere in the world once every hour, is solid evidence of man's undiminished capacity, and indeed his desire, to inflict harm on other human beings.

Globalisation, and the resultant "increasingly inter-connected world", is cited by many as a reason for war to become increasingly a part of history rather than of the present. Human migration, foreign direct investment, the enormous global financial market and information technology have established mutual interests for countries around the globe, such that the impetus for war is somewhat diminished – for example, the existence of vast American business interests in China means that the US is less likely to engage in conflict with China than it would have been, say, fifteen years earlier.

In many senses, globalisation has increased economic wealth in most of the world. The South Asian economies have undoubtedly benefited from foreign investment, technological diffusion and offshore outsourcing. As Jagdish Bhagwati's book "In Defense of Globalization", as well as numerous global polls by the World Economic Forum indicate, the citizens of most developing countries have very positive views about globalisation. Therefore, another argument for the decrease of human conflict is born – countries, being less poor than in the past, have more to lose from diverting resources to military purposes and this increased opportunity cost of war is likely to also diminish the impetus to go to war.

However, the World Economic Forum polls show that negative sentiments about globalisation are stronger in Western developed countries, indicating that the propensity of these countries to go to war is likely to be undiminished by increased inter-connectedness. The fact that American military expenditure is 33 times as much as the combined military expenditure of the "rogue states" demonstrates this quite simply.

Furthermore, United Nations studies show that, while globalisation has increased the overall economic wealth of countries, it has widened the income gap in most countries, and this is cause for worry because the destitute are often illiterate, easily influenced by strong ideologies, and have nothing to lose from war except their lives. The Islamic fundamentalist suicide bombers have shown the world that they are not afraid to sacrifice their lives for a "greater course", misguided though it may be.

Perhaps the character of war will be changed by the increasingly inter-connected world. Samuel Huntington's belief is that there will be a clash of civilisations rather than of nation-states. In many ways this is true, as evident in the clash of pro-American Western civilisation with Islamic civilisation, and in the conflicts of Jewish civilisation, which are manifest in the state of Israel. However, Israel is a cultural rather than a political nation. The irony, of course, is that the United States has been a strong supporter of the Israeli state, and also, as Kishore Mahbubani argues in "Beyond the Age of Innocence", the United States triggered the unity of the Muslim world, by sponsoring the mujahideen and sending Saudi Arabian fighters into Afghanistan in the 1980s to fight the Soviet invasion. Evidently, the clashes of cultural pride will not be changed, and if anything, a global world has increased the desire to assert and protect one's heritage and individuality. Therefore, just as the telegraph and the wireless radio contributed to the formation of huge alliances during the world wars of the twentieth century, the sophisticated communications technology of the twenty first century will knit shared heritages more closely together and cause the polarisation of the world that has characterised much of the war-torn twentieth century.

Finally, although the diffusion of nuclear technology throughout the world may lead to a situation like the Cold War where the threat of nuclear holocaust prevented countries from engaging in military conflict, to some extent this has become a fallacy of aggregation. As more countries have the technology, they are less threatened by similar technology.

in the possession of their enemies, and this makes them less cautious about stepping on toes. Little wonder that Iran's nuclear program is such a concern to the United States, because nuclear weapons, by providing a fall-back option, embolden countries to engage in conventional warfare, as they have been doing in conflicts around the world.

Thus, while an increasingly interconnected world may provide reasons for some countries not to go to war, it does not erase the fundamental reasons for conflict and in fact provides more options in war. War is therefore unlikely to become a thing of the past.

**Comments:**

***A well-considered essay. Elaborate on this view that the inter-connectedness of countries provides the potential for more war to occur.***

Essay <b>22</b>	Title: Blogging and podcasting have little worth beyond allowing the individual to indulge in narcissistic exhibitionism. Do you agree?	Name: Mark Tan	Class: 2A01B
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To the uninitiated, blogging and podcasting might seem to be a selfish, and indeed, self-indulgent method of imposing one's opinions on others – with the insulation provided by anonymity, 'bloggers' or 'podcasters' as they are so called proceed to gripe about anything and everything. Perhaps popular opinion views these individuals as social pariahs, unable to shake off the stigma of society and yet still desperately trying – trying for their very own fifteen minutes of fame. A shot in the dark? Perhaps.

Yet, as seen from recent articles on 'blogging' and 'podcasting', or, in slightly more technical terms, web-loggers, featured in our very own Straits Times, blogging has gradually been assimilated into Singaporean culture, or, more specifically, been inculcated into the identity of youths. Similarly, with the recent opening of our very own podcasting station, one can expect no less than a veritable explosion of its popularity here.

Perhaps the key question to ask at this point of time is – 'what are blogging and podcasting?' Admittedly more familiar with blogging than podcasting (since the latter is a relatively new phenomenon), I will dedicate more time to the dissipation of the idea that it is merely a hobby carried out by individuals in love with themselves. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that these arguments can be similarly applied to podcasting as well.

Blogging, or weblogging, is a term coined in the mid 90's to describe an Internet log (hence web-log) of an individual's life. The traditional function has always been one similar to that of a diary or journal – a personal record of an individual's experiences, and his perceptions and opinions which are formed as a result. Yet with the increasing penetration of the Internet into our everyday lives, what was formerly an intensely private online journal has evolved (and here some people prefer to use the word degenerated) into a poster of the person's life, an online advertisement.

Modern 'blog junkies', as some are disparagingly termed, are thus perceived to be alienated individuals desperately seeking either, or both, recognition and attention. But most blogs have remained fundamentally the same! Surely it is unfair to lambast these bloggers for being shameless attention seekers simply because they have secured an audience doing pretty much the same thing as they have always done before.

Certainly, though, bloggers must have an inclination towards openness and must take some pleasure in others reading about their lives. Yet perhaps now, more than ever, blogging (and podcasting as well) has shifted from one primarily focused on oneself into a more outward looking form of writing – where both the reader and his comments are taken seriously. It follows that blogging has become less narcissistic, not more, as the question implies. It might be exhibitionistic to the extent that bloggers enjoy divulging little tidbits of personal information, but to term it narcissistic is perhaps too strong.

Undeniably, then, blogging must have an intrinsic value to the 'blogger', as podcasting must have for the 'caster' – some satisfaction derived from the imposition of one's individuality on others; yet to assert that this is the sole source of utility, the be-all and end-all, and the alpha and omega, of blogging is definitely going too far. It reflects a consciousness devoid of careful reasoning, and is too shallow and narrow-minded to be taken seriously.

Since blogging and podcasting have become so prevalent in society, it is logical to say that blogging serves a social function alongside its primary one. In fact, in certain instances, such as class blogs, the value comes not so much from the individuals recording their dalliances, but rather because it is a medium for communication, and a convenient one at that.

Moreover, blogging has very much become a social activity. The existence of blogging communities – such as L.E.W.D and tomorrow.sg must testify to the fact that what was previously an insular activity has become one in which a blogger can meet like-minded individuals. To those who think that these 'blogging kabals', as they are so termed, are merely motley collections of computer geeks and there is merely a tenuous, if any, personal connection between

them, they once again commit the sin of overgeneralisation – judging by photos on blogs by authors like Injenue and Sky on their get-togethers, they are certainly a closely knit bunch. Blogging serves as a means of connecting individuals in a medium which seems to have the negative effect of imposing an artificial distance between people – this must have a certain value, even if it is ephemeral.

Most importantly, though, it is precisely because blogs are a reflection of the individual, and because podcasting is, likewise, an extension of everyday experiences, that it makes both such accurate indications of society's undercurrents. Blogs that are so entirely isolated from the flow of public opinion and from the hubbub of everyday life will never secure a readership beyond that individual's clique because they are so dissociated from the others. It is in blogs – those written by, for example, XiaXue, or Rockson, or even the notorious Sarong Party Girl-blogs charged with the current of social opinion and the force for social change, where the greatest and most significant measure of their worth is seen and where blogs become social commentaries. Rockson's article on the recent NKF saga (found at [www.rockson.blogspot.com](http://www.rockson.blogspot.com)) is no doubt littered with a litany of profanities and peppered with jokes, but underlying all this humour is a serious critique of the charity organisation – perhaps made more relevant because it is so distinctly Singaporean that it reflects the unexpressed views of the layman. Blogs and podcasts must be able to strike a chord with their readers, to transcend the personal and touch the public, if ever they are to fully fulfil their potential as an agent for social progress, and here their worth is not so only to the individual, but, perhaps more importantly, to the community as a whole.

Therefore, to those who disparage blogs as being trite and insignificant, to the flammers and flagellators who dismiss podcasts as highly personal, self-indulgent and thus irrelevant to the mainstream, I say that their myopic nature does not see the potential of these media. The statement underestimates the value of blogs and podcasts and in so doing, relegates and marginalises it to the periphery of society where it can fulfil no other function than cathartic, self-serving ones. To prevent this tragedy, and to avoid the subversion of an individual's right to have an impact on society, the resounding clarion call of the blogging community is this: Don't flog the blog.

**Comments:**

*Quite an impassioned argument. What are the advantages of the blog and podcast for the audience here? This deserves a closer look.*



Essay **23**

Title: "The more we know, the more we know what we do not know." Is this true of scientific research today?

Name: Jonathan Yap

Class: 2A01B

The idea of 'non-knowledge' – that not-knowing is a form of knowing too – is a strain of thought that has persisted from Socrates to modern day philosophers. Socrates famously wrote, 'Wisest is she who knows she does not know', which is an exposition not only on the value of modesty, but also a philosophical statement about the profundity of an awareness of one's limitations. This has been sustained by French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who contends that we will never achieve complete knowledge, but can aspire to further human understanding by pointing out the absences and omissions in human thought. Scientific research demonstrates this essential irony, for the one tool that we have assumed, since the Enlightenment, will bring us certainty has in fact provoked greater ambiguity. The light of science has made us all the more aware of the surrounding darkness.

Science has always been a crude tool, and its history is one of changes and corrections. Just as it was once taken for granted that the world is flat, many of the prevalent 'scientific' beliefs that we believe to be concrete may in fact have little scientific basis. Newtonian physics, once regarded as absolute truths, has been proven not to hold at high levels of speed outside of earth's gravitational conditions – even Newton's 'Laws' are not absolute. Stephen Hawking recently rescinded his earlier theory regarding the nature of black-holes, and scientists are beginning to find faults with Darwin's Evolution Theory. Science has been a continual process of refining human thought, and this entails an awareness of our short-comings rather than a belief in our scientific wisdom. As human knowledge has grown, we are increasingly forced to come to terms with our ignorance and inability to comprehend the hidden forces behind the universe – this, in itself, is a furthering of human knowledge. It is in fact a healthy process – the state of not-knowing, as Socrates wrote, brings us closer to wisdom. It is crucial that we do not take knowledge to be absolute, so that human understanding will not be static but instead will continue to evolve and develop. A complete belief in the rationality of science is, in fact, irrational.

This is reflected in the very nature of science – it is a method, an approach, an attitude, not an omnipotent system. Scientific thinking involves scepticism not only of new strains of thought but also of conventional ones that are taken for granted. Moreover, the scientific method is designed not to verify truth, but to detect untruth. Take, for example, a simple experiment to test if a copper wire conducts electricity. If it does conduct electricity, it cannot be concluded that all forms of copper conduct electricity – only this one has been proven to do so. Likewise, if it does not conduct electricity, it cannot be concluded that all copper does not conduct electricity. Science is a method to test specific circumstances instead of a system that draws complete conclusions. This has been advocated by Carl Sagan, who wrote that 'absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.' Even if we cannot prove that something exists, we have to make provisions for the possibility that it does exist, only we lack the scientific tools to verify its existence. As such, the continuation of scientific research will always be a labour to approximate the truth even though we will not, because we cannot, find it.

Modern scientific developments such as cloning and genetic engineering have also stumbled into another lightless region – that of human morality. Scientific progress into these areas has revealed that even as we find out more scientifically, there is much within ourselves that we do not know. Are we willing to integrate clones into our society? Can we accept that we can manipulate the very substance of life? How far can we go in our attempt to change what we are born with? Our attempts have yielded no answer – except that we do not know. In a sense, controversial scientific developments are great social experiments, forcing us to look inward and test our consciousness of what it means to be human. The technological answers have been found, but the theological ones have not. The more science empowers us, the more we will find ourselves without moral, ethical, or religious compass. Perhaps, just as with scientific testing, we will never know where to draw the line between 'right' and 'wrong'. The US Congress has prohibited stem-cell research for now, but this is a postponement of a judgement that it will eventually be forced to make. The light of science has shown us the obscurity of our humanity – science has given us more questions that we cannot answer. It has shown us what we do not know of the world, and of ourselves.

**Comments:**

***Cogent arguments. An interesting read – the scope of discussion is wide enough.***

Essay <b>24</b>	Title: "Criminals deserve a second chance too." Comment.
	Name: Felicia Toh      Class: 2A01B

"Criminals deserve a second chance too."

That offenders should be allowed a 'second chance' to reintegrate themselves into society, to attempt to make amends that at least, partially, nullify and negate their wrongdoing and contribute toward betterment of society – such may be the consensus shared by the more humanitarian among us. However, this statement does not merely argue for the permission or allowance of a second chance; it purports that criminals 'deserve' that second chance, that they have a rightful and legitimate claim on an embracing society, or, in courts of justice, a parallel claim on less severe pronouncements. In addressing this question, we have to first examine the grounds that a criminal may have in demanding that renewed passport into society, then assess the likelihood of this 'second chance' being perverted or abused. Of course, how convincing an argument it is will depend upon the severity of the convict's crime, which necessarily influences the appropriate severity of its consequences.

Supporters of the "Yellow Ribbon" project founded in Singapore are likely to argue for empathy and sympathy. "We all make mistakes" is likely to be the catchphrase of the campaign, which urges us to empathise and reach out our hands in open, undiluted warmth to our fellow citizens. However, the fanciful façade of the cheerful ribbons may in reality mask a truth that is less simple, less forthcoming, and more amorphous. The above statement rests on a tacit assumption that the rest of us in society, that is, the non-criminal, law-abiding (or law-evading) portion of society, are awarded second chances in the secular world, be it the workplace, school or sports. However, stories of executives who have made a mistake in the corporate sector and lost their jobs as well as a second chance for future employment in that same area are not uncommon, and thus that tacit assumption that all have second chances and, therefore that "all" should include criminals, is technically flawed.

As mentioned earlier, the severity of punitive measures depends upon the severity of the offender's crime. It is true that all humans are fallible, and slip into moments of folly that upon later reflection look "like acts of madness, when the initial impulses have faded away", as writer George Eliot notes. Seventy percent of thefts in Singapore are carried out by teenagers – those below the age of eighteen and probably still in school. It is unfortunate then, that young lives are blighted so early in life, and understandable that they should be awarded a second chance for reconciliation and reintegration into society.

The next question is the likelihood of the offender abusing his 'second chance' and inflicting further harm on society. This would be tantamount to the judicial system releasing a criminal and giving him free rein to commit more crimes by blindly releasing him again to society. In the United States, eight out of ten persons sentenced to death are recurrent offenders. Thus, if the offender tends to be recalcitrant and unrepentant, allowing the second chance would be highly detrimental to society – in short, if criminals are likely to abuse that second chance, they do not deserve that second chance.

There are several reasons as to why harsh measures are imperative when dealing with severe 'law-flouters'. Firstly, a system that is soft on punishment and generous with leniency may be considered as limp, ineffective, even corrupt. A Chinese proverb along the lines of 'kill one to warn a hundred' still rings true today. It is important that a law system acts sufficiently as a deterrent against future crimes, toward potential law-breakers. If 'second chances' are allotted easily as though all criminals unquestioningly deserve it, the judicial system would lose its potency. An appropriately harsh system is thus necessary as a bulwark against recalcitrant offenders.

Another argument is that of justice. If a murdered victim does not have that second chance in life, on what grounds should a murderer be given a second chance to find acceptance in society, even to life itself? Consequences have to be meted out in accordance to the severity of the crime, as mentioned earlier, and thus if the seriousness of the crime demands it, the offender has to be justly stopped with an appropriately punitive measure, and not be allowed a second chance.

Thirdly, as John Stuart Mill states, society has a right to self-defence. A crime is an infliction of harm on our societal body, and thus we, on the whole, and not the excluded offender, have the right to self-defence and the right to demand suitably harsh measures to prevent yet another attack from a recalcitrant offender. It follows naturally that the second chance should not be given to safeguard ourselves from potential harm. The onus of the law system is to identify the sheep from the goats – the repentant from the unrepentant – in order to decide who deserves the second chance. Obviously, this is subjective and not easily accomplished, thus the complexity of this issue.

There is often a gap, however, between the generosity of the court and the generosity of society. The Yellow Ribbon project aims to close this gap through education campaigns precisely because it identifies this problem. Even if criminals receive the second chance they deserve, in courts of law, society may still harbour remnants of distrust toward an ex-offender, thus isolating him in a 'second prison' from which there is no easy release. There is a necessity, I feel, for the alignment of societal and judicial notions of minor crimes and just punishment, before criminals are allowed to fully enjoy or approve the generosity of the court in giving a lighter sentence, or a second chance. This alignment, like the whole gamut of other issues, is similarly ambiguous, and can be created by the continued efforts of governmental and non-governmental organisations, such as the aforementioned 'Yellow Ribbon' society. An exact line may perhaps, never be drawn, but we still need to work towards it, so that those criminals who deserve a second chance really receive that second chance, full and unalterable; while those criminals who forfeit their second chance through grossly unpardonable acts, face their consequential punishment.

**Comments:**

*One of the very few essays on this topic that I've enjoyed reading! You've taken a thorough look at the question and have examined the implications well. Perhaps, a look can be taken too at how this second chance could benefit society and whether it is in line with other aspects of life in society (you mentioned this briefly in paragraph 2).*



Essay <b>25</b>	Title: Is elitism ever justifiable?
	Name: Neo Zhengwei Brian Class: 2S06D

There is often much grumbling when the topic of elitism is brought up in many a casual discussion. Complaints of unfairness and injustice have become almost synonymous with the word. Indeed, elitism – the placing of emphasis on those who perform well, especially relevant to the field of academic study, and granting these “elite” more opportunities in life to excel as compared to someone not as academically inclined or technically competent in his particular field of concern, has been a lightning rod for debate over and over again.

Indeed, the negative implications of elitism have not been lost on society, more so in performance-driven Singapore. However, it would be a huge injustice to deem it as never justifiable. Much as we may loathe the arrogant pompous peacock that passes our way ever so frequently, these products of our elitist system have, rather ironically, often been the driving force that propels our nation to further heights. At a national level, elitism has provided countries with the human talent they need to keep up in the never-ending rat race for superiority amongst nations. To many nations, not least in geographically-constrained Singapore, human talent is a resource that defines their ability to innovate and progress. In order to attract the brightest and the best to Singapore’s recently launched Biopolis, the government has no choice but to be elitist. It would be completely illogical to pick anyone but the most innovative of scientists to work in our laboratories. These products of elitism drive our economy, sell the brand name and products of Singapore to the world, and propel the nation to greater heights.

Besides, at the societal level, elitism allows us to groom and pick only the most capable and efficient amongst the population to lead the community, be it in the capacity of a politician, grassroots leader, school councillor or prefect, or even a class monitor. It is necessary to select the more academically inclined and give them the extra opportunity and guidance to excel, to groom them to be ready in the future to serve the nation. There are no two ways about this. If an elitist policy did not apply, there would be a compromise in standards of leadership in a society, thus affecting the future of the nation, organisation or group. The granting of scholarships, for example, is said to be elitist, but it cannot be pragmatic to award scholarships to any man on the street who desires it if he cannot prove himself to be worthy. Elitism ensures that those who are acceptable of being worthy have the opportunity and the means to do so. Elitism is therefore necessary to provide only the best leadership for a society.

More apparently, elitism can benefit people at the individual level. While all people may be similar, the same cannot be said of their potential in various disciplines, be it in academic study, sports, technical dexterity or music. It would be logical to select the elite in these fields and give them more attention, to grant them added opportunities to fully realise their potential, and develop them into the “elite” that they can be. As a well-known Chinese idiom goes, we should “teach each student according to his capacity”. It is illogical to subject both a musical dunce and a potential Mozart to the same music lessons. Surely there must be an avenue for the future Mozart to realise his full potential, or else his talent would go to waste. The streaming of students into different ability bands, as is done in Singapore, is such a way. The Gifted Education Program identifies students with high calibre and a more challenging curriculum is provided for them, along with many more opportunities. While this may not and often does not go down well with the rest of the population, it is the way forward, and it can only be fair that those who do well in their field of practice or study be allowed to develop to their fullest potential. Such is the reality of elitism.

Still, given all the above, there has been by far a large proportion of disgruntled people bemoaning the ills of elitism. Elitism, they say, smacks of injustice, and it denies the majority of equal opportunities. It is unfair and marginalises the so-called “non-elite”. Indeed, they are right to say that elitism grants more opportunities to succeed to certain people. However, it is unfair to say that such opportunities are unfairly given. In order to make up part of the “elite”, one would have already proven himself to be worthy, be it by excellent grades or a strong showing in a competition or aptitude test. All would have had the opportunity to be part of this “elite”, but having failed to prove one’s worthiness, it would be, ironically, a great injustice to claim that those who have proven themselves to be worthy are given unfair advantages.

The attitude of the “elite”, our products of this system, has been called into question time and again as well. The elite,

having been granted such a status by virtue of their school, course of study or scholarships, often become big-headed and snobbish, people complain. They view themselves as being brighter, more capable and superior to their "normal" counterparts, and are not able to empathise with the views and feelings of the latter. Given that these elite are to be groomed as the future leaders of our society, by distancing themselves from the majority of the population, they are effectively hindering their own ability to lead the very people they are meant to serve. This concept of elitism, therefore, breeds a culture of superiority and is detrimental to society, the detractors claim. While one would suspect that much of the complaints are fuelled by jealousy as much as they can be fuelled by a desire to correct an evil as they view it, one has to admit that, sadly, there may be some truth in it. Elitism does instill a sense of pride that one is "superior" to others. This cannot be condoned, as more will be expected from the elite. If such mindsets are built in stone in our future leaders' minds and hearts, the future of our country is in jeopardy. In this, much as elitism is serving its purpose, there is inevitably an ugly side to it as well.

However, the sole reason why breeding the culture of superiority means that elitism should be shelved is clearly a myopic one. One has to concede that elitism is neither perfect nor exemplary. However, to dismiss it as "never justifiable" would be to shoot oneself in the foot. It would be akin to scrapping a gleaming Mercedes Benz just because the front tyre was punctured. Elitism is serving its purpose, as it has been through the years. As for the shortcomings, the government has been taking measures to correct it. For example, the introduction of community service for students allows such students to integrate with the society at large and be a part of it. It is through these that the culture of superiority can be countered. Though it may still exist, steps are being made in the right direction.

We can see in all this that elitism, though not perfect, has its benefit. Certainly, it can be justifiable, even if not entirely all the time. It is important, however, that we take active steps to refine the system, to bring about progress for society.

**Comments:**

*Whether elitism is justifiable also depends on which system the elites are from. In a democratic system, the elites rise up after going through different levels of rigorous testing, but in non-democratic systems, other criteria may apply – e.g. by birthright.*

Essay **26**

Title: Discuss the appeal and value of poetry in our modern society.

Name: Eugene Thong Class: 2A01A

Modern society has a duality to it. Although it heralds advancement and progress, it also brings with it a sense of isolation and immense pressure, deadening and numbing us as sentient beings. It is fast-paced and anything considered irrelevant, useless, or obsolete is quickly discarded. The survival of poetry is hence a testament to the appeal and value of poetry in our modern society, for both the poet and the reader.

Perhaps the most basic function of poetry is the fact that it provides an outlet for expression. It is an instinctive need for us to express ourselves, and poetry has allowed us a medium in which we have articulated our thoughts for centuries. This desire to give an opinion, or share our experiences, is especially relevant in modern society, where people clamour to offer their thoughts and want to be heard.

Modernity also often suggests to us to look towards the future, and this may lead to negligence of the past. Yet history is important because it reminds us of who we are, and nourishes us with an understanding of how we came to be what we are today. Poetry is part of this history which has a deep-rooted cultural value. For example, the Indians have the Vedas and the Mahabharata as part of their heritage, while the English have Chaucer and Shakespeare to stay rooted to – all the while looking forward to the future as well.

Poetry is closely associated with the aesthetics because it appeals highly to the senses. For instance, sound in poetry is essential: onomatopoeia is a literary technique in English literature that mimics the sound of an animal call or any other action. It is hence something more fundamental that speaks to our more basic parts, and may ground us and prove to be a respite and relief from the garbled and convoluted signals that modern society bombards us with. In fact, poetry may, through its rhythms and cadences, be considered musical, and music has been considered the greatest art form because it speaks directly to our heart. One may be able to appreciate the poem without necessarily knowing the language. Poetry engages us visually too: an example is shape poems. Guillaume Apollinaire, a French poet, is also known for his calligrammes, a type of visual poem that is more intricate than the average shape poem. Thus, poetry serves an aesthetic function that soothes and fascinates us amidst the humdrum of modern life.

Furthermore, poetry provokes our intellect. It conveys ideas through precision of diction, and enlarges our imaginative sensibility. The accuracy of words required to write a good poem demands a masterful grip of the language, as well as vigorous skill and thought. Poetry debunks myths, and aspires towards the truth and the heart of the matter. For example, Wilfred Owen, a war poet, says in his poem 'Dulce et Decorum Est', that it is a lie that dying for one's country is always a beautiful thing – because the gore that one encounters in war is purely visceral, and shows no beauty in the deed of killing. It is hence little wonder that Samuel Taylor Coleridge once famously remarked that 'poetry is the best words in the best order'.

In addition, poetry, as Wordsworth opined, is 'emotion recollected in tranquillity'. This not only alludes to the previous notion of intense adroitness with the language, but also points to the fact that it expands our capacity to feel. The process of writing a poem is not simply ranting and lamenting our sorrows; neither is it an unabashed gushing about our joys. It is disciplined – but not restricted and fettered – emotion. This is in line with the idea that it provides us with an outlet for expression, as it allows the poet an opportunity to share his feelings. But poetry is also concerned with the reader, for it teaches the reader to sympathise with, and understand, other fellow human beings, by interpreting the poem with not only thought but also compassion. It thus brings our feelings to the surface, and teaches us, simply put, to feel. This is acutely valuable in the modern era, which may at times be harsh, demanding, and placing overemphasis on thought or the abstract.

Poetry, most importantly of all, connects people. In 'The Bell Jar', Sylvia Plath (or Esther Greenwood, the narrator in the novel) asserts that poetry survives because when one is falling down, one can turn to a good poem for comfort. In the novel, moreover, this is contrasted with the idea of advancement and science (perhaps representative of modern society), which serve no such function. In this sense, the poet's experiences are shared with the readers and the most remarkable thing of all is that these experiences, through poetry, transcend both geographical distance and

time. Poetry connects us in an increasingly isolated modern society, and this is why it survives, and will continue to do so.

**Comments:**

***Excellent work – highly persuasive, with insightful commentary on the value and appeal of poetry in our age today. There is effective use of quotations and examples. An engaging and sophisticated response to the essay question. Keep up the good work, Eugene!***



Essay **27**

Title: "Religion is becoming irrelevant in our secular world today." Discuss.

Name: Andrea Ong

Class: 2A01B

The days have passed where people could rely on religious faith as a source of empowerment and sanction for their words and actions. In the past century alone, the world has undergone immense technological, political and socio-economic change. It has been torn apart and reshaped by wars of increasing devastation; it has seen the demise and birth of eminent nations and superpowers; it has witnessed the rapid improvements that have taken standards of living and scientific knowledge to new heights. This, arguably, is the age of man – when human beings have reached their full potential to control their environment and their lives. In the face of such advancement, religion – the belief in a higher, supreme being and thus in a deterministic universe – does appear to have become obsolete and worse still, irrelevant. However, I believe that religion's place in the human psyche and social consciousness is one that is hard to replace and it is, in many ways, essential to the way humans function.

It cannot be denied that the progress of mankind has brought with it growing challenges to the concept of religion. Central to this is the incredible progress in science and technology over the centuries. Science has given man the powers of life and death; the cloning and gene technology developed in recent years allows the replication of human life, while the research begun during the nuclear arms race in the Cold War era has resulted in the development of weapons capable of slaughter on an unimaginable scale. At the same time, science has shaped the way people think – the discovery of the atom and theories such as Darwin's survival theory of evolution, together with the development of positivist philosophy and the belief that the knowledge of a phenomenon can only be validated with sensory experience, has created the certainty that all events have a logical cause that can be proven as well as a deep-rooted suspicion concerning the 'unscientific', mystical mumbo-jumbo of religion. Religion is thus rendered incongruous with the modern way of life; if man can take the place of God in creating life and death, if there is proof that God did not in fact create the world and neither is he capable of miracles that can now be explained with science and logic, it therefore follows that man has no more need for God.

Another crucial process in the secularisation of the world and its movement away from religion is the great political and economic change that has transformed the world. The historian Eric Hobsbawm speaks of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as an age of capitalism, and indeed the spread of capitalist ideals – the free market and consumer sovereignty – only serves to reinforce people's belief that they have the ability to determine what they consume and the ability to accrue wealth on their own merits. At the same time, the spread of liberal democracy, all the way from the age of Enlightenment to the present when the ruling superpower prides itself on its ideals of freedom and democracy, has also cumulated in today's belief in the right of man to control the course of his life. Man has been empowered by scientific and sociopolitical change, and it is arguable that set against the ascendancy of man, religion and the belief that one's fate is determined by a higher power must inevitably fade. One can perhaps point to the current issues challenging the authority of religious tenets and organisations – abortion, homosexuality, women's liberation – all issues to do with previously disenfranchised sectors of society – as evidence of the conflict between religious ideals and the changing modes of thinking and perception in the modern world.

However, one cannot discount the great influence that religion wields over people's lives. In many cases, religion has become synonymous with reactionary forces – the platform that Islamic fundamentalism campaigns on is a clear example of this: the fundamentalists oppose the imposition of Western ideals and so-called decadence on their societies. Even in America, the supposed bastion of liberal ideas and loose morals, the recent presidential election saw a reassertion of power of the religious right – people who oppose issues like abortion and homosexuality based on religious reasons.

Yet this only goes to show the relevance of religion to society. Religion is intricately linked to the values and culture of a people, and indeed religion can play a hugely positive role in clarifying ethical and moral issues for many people. It can also be argued that in a fast-changing society, religion provides comfort and solace by offering concrete ideals and beliefs to hold on to. One can look to a prior period of intense change – the Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – for an example of this: at the cusp of this era that promised an overturning of religious beliefs, the philosophers Comte and Feurbach – radical thinkers for their time – still emphasised the importance of religion, as

manifested not so much in rigid faith but a 'love' and consideration of human good in ensuring society's progress. Perhaps it is this aspect of religion that will remain in today's secular world.

**Comments:**

*This is a pertinent discussion, well organised and fluently written. However, the last paragraph would have served better as a separate argument rather than as the conclusion as there are quite a few good ideas that could be further elaborated on. Nonetheless, this is an effective and succinct essay.*

Essay **28**

Title: "Religion is becoming irrelevant in our secular world today." Discuss.

Name: Rebecca Yeoh

Class: 2A01B

Religion has always been an integral part of mankind's history – from the ancient worship of Zeus to the modern day, much publicised Scientology. Based on historical evidence, there is little reason to believe that this tradition of men should change. Religion has always been there to provide answers, provide emotional support as a moral guidepost and as the recognition and worship of a higher power. Those needs of humanity have not changed. The question we then need to ask ourselves is, in an increasingly secular society, have these needs changed, and if they have not, have we found new ways of satisfying them? This essay will argue that this is not the case, as the needs have not changed – we still need answers, a higher power and a moral guidepost. While science can replace religion in some of these holes, religion remains relevant in that only it can satisfy the emotional needs of mankind.

The newspaper seems to greet the public day after day with news of religion becoming decreasingly important in society – students in France cannot wear religious symbols to school, *tudungs* in Singaporean schools are banned. Europe, home of most modern day western religions, is, according to most statistical evidence, becoming increasingly secular. The State in most European countries no longer makes decisions based on religion – all these facts appear to point to religion becoming obsolete as the world gets more secular.

It is not just the world that is changing to become more secular – religion itself has evolved, becoming apparently more inclusive. The best example of this is Christianity – arguably a religion only for the Jews as God's chosen people; its character has evolved from being exclusively Jewish. It appears that not only is society placing less importance on religion, religion itself is placing less importance on itself, becoming increasingly diluted as it becomes more inclusive. It seems reasonable to suggest that the dual momentum of the changing nature of modern society along with that of religion, will eventually lead to the replacement of religion with secularism.

There is already evidence of this change – there are increasing arguments for science and technology being the new religion. In some senses, this is accurate, as it seems to fulfil at least some of the purposes of religion. Science aims to provide the answers to many of the questions that religion used to account for, such as the beginnings of man and the creation of the universe. In the secular world, especially at state level, many spurn the religious answers to these questions in favour of the rational scientific arguments. A point would be the widespread beliefs of the theory of evolution as opposed to the theory of the creation of Adam and Eve. Science appears to be replacing religion by disproving many of its beliefs. By showing that at macro and micro levels, many laws of cause and effect do not seem to apply, science appears to have refuted the Christian belief that everything has a cause, and the first cause is God. It also seems to provide an alternative to the traditional gods – many mathematicians believe that the explanation for the universe will be found in the Grand Unifying Theory, and that the higher power that religion advocates will, in fact, be a mathematical equation. If this is the case, science appears to be the alternative to religion in modern secular society, fulfilling both the roles of providing answers and belief in a higher power.

Hence, there is a strong argument for the irrelevance of religion: at the state level especially, religion plays a very insignificant role. However, at the individual level, things are not quite as simple. The state does not have the emotional needs of the individual, and this is where science is found to be lacking. While it may be able to provide answers and rational explanations, it cannot account for the emotional need on the part of humans to believe in a consciousness bigger than themselves. Studies have shown that the human being's brain is wired for belief in a higher power – a kind of religion gene. The inclination towards religion appears to be intractable to our nature – while a select group may fight this instinct in favour of rational thought, historically we can see that regardless of science's ability to provide more accurate answers and prove religion wrong, people will still turn to religion. Despite Galileo and Copernicus proving the Church wrong about the Earth being the centre of the universe, Christianity still remains a powerful influence on the individual level. Clearly, rational answers are insignificant and cannot replace the emotional need for religion.

Furthermore, history is not a straight line of continuous progress, but is much more like a pendulum. While Europe appears to place decreasing importance on religion, America, founded on principles of freedom of all things, including

religion, seems to be swaying the other way. Just as humanity returned to religion after the Age of Reason, it is arguable that in Europe, the pendulum has reached one extreme, and as it advances, it will, like America, begin to swing the other way. Religious belief in America is strong, with over 60% believing in miracles, and their President being a "born again Christian". Perhaps, rather than progressing beyond religion, Europe will eventually swing back this way – historical evidence certainly seems to suggest it, in the fall of the secular beliefs of ideologies such as Marxism.

Lenin referred to religion as "the opium of the masses". Perhaps this is true; however, the question here is not whether God exists, but whether the need still does. In an increasingly technological world, Marx's alienation and Durkheim's anomie still exist, and if any, have intensified. While science is sufficient at the rational level for now, it does little to fulfil the emotional, psychological and moral need for religion, and perhaps the latter is now more necessary than ever. For this reason, this essay argues that rather than replacing religion, the increased use of science has increased emotional alienation at the individual level, and hence, more than ever now, the masses need their religious opium.

**Comments:**

***A persuasive argument.***



Not solely on political history!  
- economic history  
- cultural history

28/7/07

Essay <b>29</b>	Title: What is the use of studying history when history keeps repeating itself?
Name: Jennifer Poh	Class: 2A01A

"History has repeated itself, yet again": many may find themselves saying this, at some point in their lives or other. Indeed, standing at the beginning of a new century and looking back, we sense that history has gone through predictable cycles of war and peace. Revolutions often occur in the same fashion, and the outbreak of war, in the same manner, conforms to the same set of conditions and actions. This might lead one to conclude that history has lost its use. The implication of the question "What is the use of studying history when history keeps repeating itself?" is that history, being a repeated cycle of events, has become boring and more importantly, there are no lessons to gain from studying history. As a history student myself, I certainly do not agree with this.

- ① For one, there are other uses of history, even if history were to repeat itself. I study history for the intellectual challenge and stimulus. To quote Plato, history is studied due to one's passion for "knowledge" and the intellectual challenge. Indeed, there are areas in history that are intriguing. Causation, for instance, is a much-debated area of history. The conflict between those who see history as a series of chance events and those who view history as a progression, pointing to the inevitability of certain occurrences in history, can never be resolved. Exploring the debate between these two diverging ways of viewing history, is, in my opinion, a mental challenge and something some might take delight in doing.
- Eg. I point to the example of historians' debate regarding the cause of WWI. Many subscribe to the view of WWI being caused by a cumulation of tensions since the previous decade, for instance when Britain, France and Russia entered into a Triple Entente and Italy, Germany and Austria entered into the Triple Alliance, hence dividing the world into two armed camps, thus necessitating the confrontation of both camps. However, Sir Geoffrey Elton attributes the start of WWI to the breakdown of railway timetables! The challenge, in looking at the same history and coming up with two different ways of viewing and explaining it, is one that many studying history relish engaging in.
- ② Furthermore, there is a group of post-modernist historians who are in constant search for the "truth" in history. To them, "the study of history amounts to the search for the truth", as said by Sir Geoffrey. Indeed, for centuries, there have been historians who dedicated their lives to the search for the Holy Grail in history. They recognise the inherent bias when historians write history and hence attempt to find "what actually happened" (Elton) in history, by studying the historian, in conjunction with studying history. The use of studying history is thus to constantly uncover new truths on past events. But what is historical truth?
- ③ For the layman, there is still a use in studying history; history does not get boring though it may keep repeating itself. The definition of history here must be questioned: history is not merely limited to that of political history. Cultural history, for instance, is one of great relevance to those interested in culture. My classmate, for instance, who is very interested in art, fashion and culture, did a study of Nazi cultural life and propaganda and contrasted it with that under the Stalinist regime. Each cultural history is resplendent with its own glories and individuality and this makes the study of cultural history very interesting. The Annales historians, for instance, focus on geography and the study of civilisations. Thus, history does not only refer to the history of culture or of civilisations (social history), which in itself is interesting and useful.

The assumption in this question is that history repeats itself. Does history really repeat itself? In my opinion, the occurrence of every event in history is unique. Historians such as A J P Taylor, for instance, look at history as one based on the Chaos Theory and Cleopatra's Nose Theory. He views history as that made of many small trigger events, for instance, Mussolini's use of the Miscalculation of the king. Essentially, there are no patterns to history and if history is a patchwork of chance events, then it would be impossible for history to repeat itself.

In addition, there is another school of historians that views history as a progression. Marxists, for instance, view history as a progression to Communism and historians like Fukuyama believe that history is the progress of man towards liberalism. If history were a progression, then every event in history would serve a different purpose in the progression and thus, no event would repeat itself.

Fundamentally, I believe that every event, past and present, comes about due to various reasons; the reasons for WWI and WWII are vastly different if we consider the details of their occurrence. Thus, as such, I believe that it is a sweeping statement to say that history does in fact repeat itself.

Finally, there is an inherent contradiction in this question precisely because history repeats itself. Because history repeats itself, there is a case to be made for us to learn from the mistakes of the past. For instance, learning from the experience of the Cold War, we now know the destructive effects of a nuclear arms race, as evidenced by the Cuban Missile Crisis and the near outbreak of a nuclear war. This has helped in the preservation of peace today, as countries sign various peace treaties. Economic history, for instance, provides us with a better solution to economic problems today. For instance, the world in the 70s took up monetarism with great gusto due to the failure of Keynesian methods. Therefore, it is precisely because history repeats itself that we must study history.

In conclusion, as a student passionate about the study of history, I believe that there are a vast number of uses for the study of history, even if we assume that history repeats itself. In fact, as argued by many historians, history does not actually repeat itself. And as Theodore Zeldine, a historian, said, while historians are 'court jesters', they are also 'soothsayers'; apart from studying history for interest, history must be studied precisely because it repeats itself.

**Comments:**

*Excellent use of references to historical events and the views of historians. This is a very comprehensive coverage of the essay question; a cogent argument was presented with originality and sophistication. Keep it up, Jennifer! Well-done.*

Take a break from reading all these worthy GP essays and read a poem instead!  
It was written by Pek Li Jun, a Humanities student in the class of 2005.  
It's about the meaning of our universe – if there is any, that is!

The story behind this poem makes interesting reading. I set my class a routine poetry comparison exercise involving two poems dealing with the old question: 'Who made the world?' One of these poems said confidently that God made it all; the other was not so certain, seeing God, instead, as a figment of man's desperate imagination. Here are the two poems in full.

## I

*Source unknown*

Who turns his eye on nature's midnight face,  
But must enquire – 'What hand behind the scene,  
What arm almighty, put these wheeling globes  
In motion, and wound up the vast machine?  
Who rounded in his palm these spacious orbs?  
Who bowled them flaming through the dark profound,  
Numerous as glittering gems of morning dew,  
Or sparks from populous cities in a blaze,  
And set the bosom of old night on fire?  
Peopled her desert; and made horror smile?'  
Straight comes the answer – He, whose potent word,  
Like the loud trumpet, levied first their powers  
In Night's inglorious empire, where they slept  
In beds of darkness: armed them with fierce flames,  
Arranged, and disciplined, and clothed in gold;  
And called them out of chaos to the field,  
Where now they war with vice and unbelief.

## II

*'Jodrell Bank' by PATRIC DICKINSON*

Who were they, what lonely men  
Imposed on the fact of night  
The fiction of constellations  
And made commensurable  
The distance between  
Themselves their loves and their doubt  
Of governments and nations;  
Who made the dark stable  
When the light was not? Now  
We receive the blind codes  
Of spaces beyond the span  
Of our myths, and a long dead star  
May only echo how  
There are no loves nor gods  
Man can invent to explain  
How lonely all men are.

*Li Jun duly handed in her piece work. To be honest, her answer was no more than reasonably satisfactory but on the back of her answer she had scribbled the wonderful poem below. At the end was a note addressed to me, telling me that she had been 'moved', as they say, from her reading of the two poems to write a statement of her own position on the matter. This was, in fact, far more interesting than her formal response to the question.*

*Why do I tell you all this? For one simple reason. To encourage you to see beyond the sometimes prosaic demands of the syllabus and to feel free to respond in ways that, in some instinctive sense, seem right or appropriate even though not really orthodox. You never know, out of it may come something like this, something that is indeed 'excellence'.*

**Mr Geoff Purvis**

Who can say firmly, concretely what  
 Exists behind the veil of earthly existence?  
 The intangible divine possibility seems to nudge  
 Some slightly, lightly, easing one toward the precipice  
 Of belief. I teeter on the edge, wanting  
 To feel more strongly, waiting for the push  
 That topples me over, the fall that comes before  
 The faith; gaze with envy at the staunch believers  
 Who hear and see Him in crystalline fragments of life  
 Brimming with conviction, elevated by this exclusive  
 Entry into the behind-the-scenes of worldly stage.  
 At the other end of the spectrum (of colours, a promise  
 From God that the world would never be destroyed  
 By rain, say His children) are the self-help subscribers,  
 Striding towards a future of their own construct,  
 Skyscrapers made possible by tools and machinery,  
 Made possible by science and technology, made possible  
 By man, who is the measure. Look around and see  
 The same rainbow – that is caused by  
 “The refractive dispersion of sunlight in drops of rain or mist”,  
 No fanciful fairytales for them, thank you very much.  
 Nature is a present handed to the scientist,  
 Artfully wrapped in coloured paper  
 Bows and butterflies with flourishes of ribbon,  
 Which logic and research can undo unravel  
 Reduce all mystery to reason.  
 I am a hybrid of extremes, with neither's certainty  
 Righteousness shining like a halo  
 Neither's grip on their religion of Christianity or  
 Science. Treading in the still waters between  
 The banks, waiting for an absence or presence to be felt.

**Pek Li Jun**  
**2A01A/2005**



## Autobiographies

Two of my Christmas readings have been autobiographical: *Untold Stories* by Alan Bennett, and *Teacher Man* by Frank McCourt.

If you go into Kino or Borders and look for the biography section, you will be disappointed. There isn't one. But go into a Waterstones in Britain and you will find that biography is a large and prominent section.

Could it be that there is a cultural difference here? That in the east, the individual history, especially written by the individual himself, is regarded as unimportant or even distastefully self-advertising, the individual being important only as a dutiful family or clan member? It is tempting to see the phenomenon of biography as a product of the protestant reformation, the new idea that the individual has a personal relationship with God, without need for mediation by priest or church. This makes the individual, and the story of his life, quite central and important.

For a taste of this peculiar western phenomenon, *Untold Stories* will serve well. Alan Bennett is a familiar figure on the British cultural scene; known mainly as a playwright and before that as a member of the daring 60's review *Beyond the Fringe*, full of satire and absurdist humour, he has always looked like a caricature schoolboy, and he still does somehow, although he must be nearly 70. His series of television monologues, *Talking Heads*, is often a literature set book. His latest play, *The History Boys*, has been a great success and is being filmed. He wrote *The Madness of George III*, a film which was shown in Singapore.

*Untold Stories* consists of diary entries, anecdotes and some more sustained pieces of narrative, including his successful battle with cancer. It includes the detailed stories of his family members, such as his mother who suffered from mental illness. There is frank reflection on his experience of being gay; his life, whether routine as he claims or dramatic as it occasionally becomes, is always a thoroughly examined one. For example he made a very successful play out of the story of a woman who lived in a van in his drive.

Frank McCourt is also more famous for other works, in his case *Angela's Ashes*, the story of his desperately poor childhood in Limerick. *Teacher Man* tells the story of his adult life until his retirement from teaching. It was at that point that he finally had time to write, starting with *Angela's Ashes*, then 'Tis (Irish dialect for 'it is'), followed by *Teacher Man*. As far as I can see, he is honest about the teaching experience. He insists on bringing out the significance of the numbers, for instance:

If you asked all the students in your five classes to write three hundred and fifty words each then you had 175 multiplied by 350 and that was 43,750 words you had to read, correct, evaluate and grade on evenings and weekends. That's if you were wise enough to give them only one assignment per week. You had to correct mis-spellings, faulty grammar, poor structure, transitions, sloppiness in general.

His teaching career is in New York and the book gives a good impression of the racial and cultural mix there. The book is full of characters and humour, especially among the pupils. The exchanges between students and teacher may seem outrageous in Singaporean eyes, but they are actually quite typical of western schools. The pressures and stresses of adult life are well portrayed in the brief account of his failed marriage. Frank McCourt's own endearing character is a large part of the pleasure of the book, whereas with Alan Bennett, despite the homeliness, there is a critical and intellectual edge which keeps you emotionally disengaged. Both books are a pleasure to read in their different ways.

**Mike Evans**  
**Former Head of English**  
**Raffles Junior College**