



INNOVA JUNIOR COLLEGE  
JC 2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2  
in preparation for  
General Certificate of Education Advanced Level  
Higher 1

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## **GENERAL PAPER**

**8807/02**

Paper 2

**3 September 2014**

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**1 hour 30 minutes**

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### **READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST**

This Insert contains the passages for Paper 2.

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## MERITOCRACY

**Passage 1:** *David Brooks thinks a meritocratic society helps individuals achieve self-fulfilment.*

- 1 Today's children have a way of life that entails its own character-building process, its own ethical system. They live in a world of almost crystalline meritocracy. Starting at birth, they will be called on to master skills, do well in school, practice sports, excel in extracurricular activities, get into college, build their résumés, change careers, set up retirement plans, and so on. This is a way of life that emphasises individual achievement, self-propulsion, perpetual improvement, and permanent exertion. 5
- 2 The prime ethical imperative for the meritocrat is self-fulfilment. Over the past several years the philosophers Charles Taylor, of McGill University, and Alan Gewirth, of the University of Chicago, have argued that a serious moral force is contained in the idea of self-fulfilment. Meritocrats may not necessarily be able to articulate this morality, but they live by it nonetheless. 10
- 3 It starts with the notion that we have a lifelong mission to realise our capacities. The way we realise our potential is through our activities. By ceaselessly striving to improve at the things we enjoy, we come to define, enlarge, and attain our best selves. These activities are the bricks of our identities; if we didn't write or play football or cook or litigate (or whatever it is we do well), we would cease to be who we are. In this mode of living, character isn't something one forges as a youth and then retains thereafter. Morality doesn't come to one in a single revelation or a grand moment of epiphany. Instead, virtue and character are achieved gradually and must be maintained through a relentless struggle for self-improvement. We are in an ongoing dialogue with our inadequacies, and we are happiest when we are most deeply engaged in overcoming them. 15 20
- 4 This is not a solitary process. Society helps us in two ways. First, it gives us opportunities to participate in the things that will allow us to realise our capacities: Parents earnestly cast about for activities their children will love, and then spend their weekends driving them from one to another. Good schools have extracurricular offerings. Good companies and organisations allow their employees and members to explore new skills, and great nations have open, fluid societies – so that individuals can find their best avenues and go as far as their merit allows. 25
- 5 Second, society surrounds the individual with a web of instruction, encouragement, and recognition. The hunger for recognition is a great motivator for the meritocrat. People define themselves in part by the extent to which others praise and appreciate them. In traditional societies, recognition was determined by birth, breeding, and social station, but in a purified meritocracy people have to win it through performance. Each person responds to signals from those around him, working hard at activities that win praise and abandoning those that do not. An individual's growth, then, is a joint project of the self and society. 30
- 6 In this joint project individuals not only improve their capacities; they also come to realise that they cannot fully succeed unless they make a contribution to the society that helped to shape them. A scientist may be good at science, but she won't feel fulfilled unless she has made important discoveries or innovations that help those around her. Few meritocrats are content to master pointless tasks. 35
- 7 Social contributions flow easily and naturally from the meritocrat's life mission. Football players enjoy clinics where they share tips with younger players. Parents devote many hours to coaching, or they become teachers, managers, and mentors. In the best relationships, what follows is a sort of love affair. Mentor and pupil work hard to help each other and to honour each other's effort. Most find that they glimpse their best selves while working with others on an 40

arduous undertaking, whether it is staging a play, competing for a championship, or arguing a case in court.

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- 8 In a meritocratic society, each of us has an intuitive ability to make strong evaluations of which aspirations are noblest. We do this by tapping into any of a variety of moral frameworks, which have been handed down through time and which have significance independent of us or our desires. It is necessary, then, to dig deep into what it means to be a Christian or a Jew or an American or a doctor. By this way of thinking, society's rebels had it all wrong when they tried to find self-fulfilment by breaking loose from tradition. Their rebellions created selves without roots or moral reference points. Burrowing down into an inherited tradition allows the meritocrat to strive upward.

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**Passage 2:** *Alain de Botton takes a different view of the meritocratic society.*

- 1 There is a reason why we might be feeling more anxious about our careers, about our status in the world today, than ever before and it is linked to something 'nice': meritocracy. A meritocratic society is one in which if you have talent, energy and skill, you will get to the top. Meritocracy promotes competitiveness which brings out the best in everyone. Human endowments are developed to their potential through a fierce competition for jobs, material rewards, status, and prestige. Wealth, possessions, and social mobility, all conspicuous signs of meritocratic success, can ignite ambitions to rise above one's station in life by working harder and more resourcefully than one might have otherwise.
- 2 The problem is once you get to the top, you tend to stay at the top, from clique to clique, and generation after generation. Those who climb up the ladder will always find a way to pull it up after them, or to selectively lower it down to allow their friends, allies, and kin to scramble up. The powerful are liable to manipulate systems (like school admissions processes) designed to reward merit and go to great lengths to maintain their bank accounts and their positions.
- 3 Another equally insidious problem is this: if you really believe in a society where those who deserve to succeed, get to the top, it also implies that those who deserve to get to the bottom also get to the bottom and stay there. In other words, your position in life comes to seem not accidental, but merited and deserved. And that makes failure seem much more crushing. It leads, in the worst cases, in the analysis of a sociologist like Emil Durkheim, to increased rates of suicide. There are more suicides in developed individualistic countries than in any other part of the world and some of the reason for that is that people take what happens to them extremely personally. They own their success but they also own their failure.
- 4 In a meritocratic society, those who fail have only themselves to blame: they had every opportunity but simply did not work hard enough; they had plenty of choices but simply did not make the right ones. However, not everyone has the same choice set or the opportunity to choose from amongst good alternatives. Yet, many at the top tend to assume we do, ignoring how circumstances beyond our control can affect choices available to us and the subsequent decisions we make. This is how the plethora of choices we have today can be harmful at a societal level. The more choices we have, the less empathetic we become, and the less supportive we are of public policies aimed at the lower-income and socially disadvantaged as low status comes to seem not merely regrettable but also deserved. To the injury of poverty, a meritocratic system adds the insult of shame.
- 5 The fact is that the idea that everybody deserves to get where they are is insane. There are simply too many random factors or accidents: accidents of birth, accidents of things dropping on

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people's heads, illnesses... Believing in the myth of meritocracy means successful people sometimes fail to appreciate how much their wealth and power are a function of their environment. Often those who are privileged do not recognise or acknowledge these advantages and mistakenly attribute their 'success' to individual merit alone. We need to debunk the myth of meritocracy which is harmful because it provides an incomplete explanation for success and failure, often wrongly exalting the rich and condemning the poor. 35