



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

CANDIDATE
NAME

CLASS

INDEX
NUMBER

GENERAL PAPER

8807/02

Paper 2

18 August 2017

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CONFORMITY

Passage 1. *Susan Smalley sets out the merits of conformity and cautions about the rise of individualism today.*

- 1 “Be different! Be bold!” The rousing call to individualism is trumpeted everywhere today, from advertisements in the media to lessons in schools and even in dating advice. However, our current obsession with standing out from the crowd needs to be reined in. Conformity has gained a bad reputation and unfairly so. In the days of the Caveman, conformity may have been of survival value when interacting with other tribes of cavemen: by acting as the group did, the individual may be seen in a better light and therefore be accepted by the group, bringing benefits such as protection, food, and companionship. It is seen even in today's world that we generally get along better with people similar to ourselves. Embracing sameness can give the illusion that we are more like others as we do as they do and reap the benefits. 5
- 2 Conformity has most likely shaped the group norms which are the basis of laws we abide by today to keep us safe. Socio-political theorists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau referred to this concept of group norms as the “social contract”, the voluntary, and sometimes implicit, agreement among individuals to behave in certain ways that would bring about the regulation of behaviour and the assurance of mutual protection for members of a society. When the cavemen congregated in their groups, they would have had group norms similar to some of the laws we have today such as not to murder or even to pilfer. 10 15
- 3 Even if it is not as rigid as following the law, conformity such as adhering to socially acceptable etiquette and norms can help maintain order in today's society and, in unfamiliar surroundings or activities, can even save our blushes. For instance, someone taking part in an activity such as dancing and who has no idea what kind of dancing to do, would most likely mimic the people around and dance like them to avoid embarrassment. Everyone has done it in some way or another throughout their life but choosing to follow the crowd really is handy in the right situations. 20
- 4 People are conformist – and that is a good thing for cultural evolution. By being conformist, we copy the things that are popular in the world and those things are often beneficial to us. For example, most people do not understand how germs can cause disease – but they know they should wash their hands after using the bathroom. Our whole world is made up of things that we do that are good for us, but we do not know why nor do we need to know why. We just need to know that most people do those things. In addition, the more diversity there is in behaviour, the more likely people are to copy the majority as the increasing number of available options creates more uncertainty – and in such circumstances, a majority sends an even stronger signal as to the right thing to do. 25 30
- 5 Of course, mindlessly following the herd is not something to be encouraged but resisting conformity by being different for the sake of being different can have disastrous consequences, which is why the rise of individualism today is a worrying trend. The idea of individualism should be seen along a continuum of sorts – and perhaps we have moved a little too far to the extreme. It is this extreme that may inflate our narcissism as a society. Our individualism has run amok. We praise our children for being unique and create a sense of expectation that they can rise above the masses and “be noticed” because of their uniqueness. But they have all the same fears, sorrows, joys, and pains as everyone else and the chance of rising above the masses is miniscule in probability – we dangle a carrot that they can rarely reach. The “you are special” message does not match their reality and striving sets in. We want to meet the challenge, to rise above the others in our uniqueness or individuality regardless of the means of getting there: attention from the masses validates our arrival. This is also true at the work place, where employees wanting to stand out and be noticed may do so at the expense of organisation culture and norms, thus running the risk of destabilising the work environment and practices. 35 40 45

- 6 This desire to fight conformity to impress others backfires when we are not true to ourselves, which would end up hurting personal relationships and being insultingly labelled as “trying too hard”, “fake”, or “weird but not in a good way”. What is so wrong with good old plain vanilla ice cream which works that we have to doctor it with sprinkles, clashing colours, bizarre toppings, and serve it up in a ridiculous vessel like a test tube? When we try too hard to be different at the expense of our core beliefs and values, we lose sight of ourselves and the bigger picture. 50 55
- 7 The irony is blinding when everyone wants to stand out. We need more messages that focus on the importance of our ordinary nature, the embracing of our strengths and weaknesses, and of our humanity itself. If we attend more toward the group and our communities than our particular roles in them, maybe we – as a society – may be able to live with greater equanimity and shared humanity. 60

Passage 2. *Kristen Houghton takes a different view of conformity.*

- 1 We all know that the very best in the world do things very differently. Why else would articles be written on the habits, routines, and methods of people like Elon Musk, Bill Gates, and Steve Jobs? We study them extensively in the hope that the little adaptations we make will improve our lives and edge us closer to distinction. Doing things differently is what made these people the best in their field – it stands to reason that it would benefit us mere mortals as well. 5
- 2 We do not need to be brought up by parents who are hell-bent on raising a child prodigy to be the best. We just need to realise that the best in the field are outliers not just in their accomplishments, but also in their habits and routines. They are willing to be different even if it earned them rebuke or censure. We instinctively think we are above average and we certainly do not want to be average. Yet ironically, we want to be *normal*; we want to have the same interests as most people do. We do not want to be different for fear of sticking out like a sore thumb. Having the same interests, routines, and habits as everyone else ensures that we stay in the majority and are hence part of the “in-group”. But by design, we are setting ourselves up to be average. 10
- 3 So what is the problem with average? While there is nothing wrong about having a statistically average performance, the problem arises when we *choose* to be average – to be just like everyone else – because it means choosing to be mediocre. Being like everyone else is a guarantee that an individual will never fully develop his innate talents and strengths and by extension, will never be the best version of himself. That all but guarantees mediocrity. Indeed, conformity is the reason why many potential geniuses’ creativity never finds an outlet, why many “misfits”, in a constant effort to conform, end up depressed instead of proud of their uniqueness, and, most importantly, why so many social and political catastrophes with huge human costs happen over and over again. 15 20
- 4 The desire to have the perfect image is another way that we try to conform to what society says is normal. It is why plastic surgery (which is still major surgery, make no mistake about that) has become as commonplace today as having your teeth cleaned. Diets galore and “nutritional” cleanses are available to help us fit the size that society says we should be. What we do to our bodies borders on torture, starvation, and mutilation simply to fit in. We are blind to – or refuse to see – the dangers of conforming to one ideal of beauty. 25
- 5 Conformity does not only concern our bodies and faces; it also pervades our life choices. Our society is not tolerant of the person who chooses a lifestyle that is not considered the norm. In fact, society is forever scrutinising us and unforgiving of differences. Individuality comes in many different forms, shapes, sizes, and choices. To be intolerant of one person’s differences is to be intolerant of anything with which we do not agree or readily understand. That is not only sad but extremely dangerous. The criteria for obesity should not be measured by someone who weighs 15 pounds more than another person, a sexual preference should not 30 35

make a person an easy target for someone else's rage, and being different should not make someone strange or suspect. The worst societies thrived on communal conformity because it was, ultimately, a simple form of mind control. You were made to feel that there was something wrong with *you* if you did not think, look like, or act the same as others. Anyone who doubts the danger this poses should look back on the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis on European Jews, the Khmer Rouge on Cambodians and the Serbs on Bosnian Muslims and Croats when conformity turned ordinary people into mass murderers.

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- 6 Conformity, real conformity, has a price. You may not lose something priceless and precious when you are forced to be like everyone else. You may even be less likely (or so you think) to embrace evil just because everyone else does. But the plain fact is this: we are not like everyone else; we are as individual as our fingerprints. Acceptance of being different and of the differences of others enhances life; intolerance diminishes it. Being different is being happy with who and what we are and want to be. That is our right and the right of all people. It is conformity that is sad.

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