TEMASEK JUNIOR COLLEGE
PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION 2015

GENERAL PAPER 8807/02

Paper 2 **27 August 2015**

INSERT **1 hour 30 minutes**

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

Costica Bradatan writes about the importance of failure.

1 We are firmly in an era of accelerated progress. We are witness to advancements in science, the arts, technology, medicine and nearly all forms of human achievement at a rate never seen before. We know more about the workings of the human brain and of distant galaxies than our ancestors could have imagined. The design of a superior kind of human being – healthier, stronger, smarter, more handsome, more enduring – seems to be in the works. Even immortality may now appear feasible, a possible outcome of better and better biological engineering.

2 Certainly the promise of continual human progress and improvement is alluring. But there is a danger there, too – that in this more perfect future, failure will become obsolete. Why should we care? And more specifically, why should philosophy care about failure? Doesn't it have better things to do? The answer is simple: Philosophy is in the best position to address failure because it knows it intimately. The history of Western philosophy at least is nothing but a long succession of failures, if productive and fascinating ones. Any major philosopher typically asserts herself by addressing the 'failures', 'errors', 'fallacies' or 'naiveties' of other philosophers, only to be, in turn, dismissed by others as yet another failure. Every new philosophical generation takes it as its duty to point out the failures of the previous one. It is as though, no matter what it does, philosophy is doomed to fail. Yet from failure to failure, it has thrived over the centuries. As Emmanuel Levinas memorably put it in an interview with Irish philosopher Richard Kearney, "the best thing about philosophy is that it fails." Failure, it seems, is what philosophy feeds on, what keeps it alive. As it were, philosophy succeeds only insofar as it fails.

3 So, allow me to make a case for the importance of failure. Failure allows us to see our existence in its naked condition. Whenever it occurs, failure reveals just how close our existence is to its opposite. Out of our survival instinct, or plain sightlessness, we tend to see the world as a solid, reliable, even indestructible place. And we find it extremely difficult to conceive of that world existing without us. "It is entirely impossible for a thinking being to think of its own non-existence, of the termination of its thinking and life," observed German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Self-deceived as we are, we forget how close to not being we always are. The failure of a plane engine could be more than enough to put an end to everything. Even a falling rock or a car's faulty brakes can do the job. And while it may not always be fatal, failure does carry a certain degree of existential threat.

4 Failure is the sudden explosion of nothingness into the midst of existence. To experience failure is to start seeing the cracks in the fabric of being, and that is precisely the moment when, properly digested, failure turns out to be a blessing in disguise. For it is this lurking, constant threat that should make us aware of the extraordinariness of our being: the miracle that we exist at all when there is no reason that we should. Knowing that gives us some dignity.

5 In this role, failure also possesses a distinct therapeutic function. Most of us (the most self-aware or enlightened excepted) suffer chronically from a poor adjustment to existence. We compulsively fancy ourselves much more important than we are and behave as though the world exists only for our sake. In our worst moments, we place ourselves as being like infants at the centre of everything and expect the rest of the universe to be always at our service. We insatiably devour other species, denude the planet of life and fill it with trash. Failure could be a panacea against such arrogance and hubris, as it often brings humility.

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6 Our capacity to fail is essential to what we are. We need to preserve, cultivate, even treasure this capacity. It is crucial that we remain fundamentally imperfect, incomplete, erring creatures. In other words, that there is always a gap left between what we are and what we can be. Whatever human accomplishments there have been in history, they have been possible precisely because of this empty space. It is within this interval that people and individuals, as well as communities, can accomplish anything. Not that we have turned suddenly into something better; we remain the same weak, faulty material. But the spectacle of our shortcomings can be so unbearable that sometimes it shames us into doing a little good. Ironically, it is the struggle with our own failings that may bring out the best in us.

7 The gap between what we are and what we can be is also the space in which utopias are conceived. Utopian literature, at its best, may document in detail our struggle with personal and societal failure. While often constructed in worlds of excess and abundance, utopias are a reaction to the deficits and precariousness of existence. They are the best expression of what we lack most. Sir Thomas More's book 'Utopia' is not so much about some imaginary island, but about the England of his time. Utopias may look like celebrations of human perfection, but they are just spectacular admissions of failure, imperfection and embarrassment.

8 And yet, it is crucial that we keep dreaming and weaving utopias. If it were not for some dreamers, we would live in a much uglier world today. But above all, without dreams and utopias we would dry out as a species. Suppose one day, science solves all our problems: We will be perfectly healthy, live indefinitely, and our brains, thanks to some enhancement, will work like computers. On that day, we may be something very interesting, but I am not sure we will have what to live for. We will be virtually perfect and essentially dead. Ultimately, our capacity to fail makes us what we are. Our being essentially failing creatures lies at the root of any aspiration. Failure, fear of it and learning how to avoid it in the future are all part of a process through which the shape and destiny of humanity are decided. That is why, as I had hinted earlier, the capacity to fail is something that we should absolutely preserve, no matter what the professional optimists may say. Such a thing is worth treasuring, even more so than artistic masterpieces, monuments or other accomplishments. For, in a sense, the capacity to fail is much more important than any individual human achievement: It is that which makes them possible.

9 We are designed to fail. No matter how successful our lives turn out to be, how smart, industrious or diligent we are, the same end awaits us all: 'biological failure'. The 'existential threat' of that failure has been with us all along, though in order to survive in a state of relative contentment, most of us have pretended not to see it. Our pretence, however, has never stopped us from moving toward our destination; faster and faster, "in inverse ratio to the square of the distance from death", as Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich expertly describes the process. Yet Tolstoy's character is not of much help here. The more essential question is rather how to approach the grand failure, how to face it and embrace it and own it – something poor Ivan fails to do.

10 A better model may be Ingmar Bergman's Antonius Block, from the film 'The Seventh Seal'. A knight returning from the Crusades and plunged into a crisis of faith, Block is faced with grand failure in the form of a man. He does not hesitate to engage Death head-on. He does not flee, does not beg for mercy – he just challenges him to a game of chess. Needless to say, he cannot succeed in such a game – no one can – but victory is not the point. You play against the grand, final failure not to win, but to learn how to fail.

11 Bergman the philosopher teaches us a great lesson here. We will all end in failure, but that is not the most important thing. What really matters is how we fail and what we gain in the process. During the brief time of his game with Death, Antonius Block must have experienced more than he had done all his life. Without that game he would have lived for nothing. In the end, of course, he loses, but accomplishes something rare. He not only turns failure into an art, but manages to make the art of failing an intimate part of the art of living.