

RIVER VALLEY HIGH SCHOOL
JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAM 2022

GENERAL PAPER

8807/02

Paper 2
INSERT

31 Aug 2022
1 hour 30 minutes

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This insert contains the passages for Paper 2.

This document consists of **3** printed pages and **1** blank page.



River Valley High School

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Passage 1. *Des Pare discusses the merits of pessimism.*

- 1 Since ancient times, there have been evils in existence – plenty of them. Crimes, misfortunes, death, disease, earthquakes and the sheer vicissitudes of life. These circumstances gave rise to the rusted dichotomy of ‘optimism’ and ‘pessimism’, which has been so much used, and perhaps overused, in our modern culture. ‘Optimism’ was the phrase for philosophers who felt we live in ‘the best of all possible worlds’ (surely, if God could create a better one, he would have done so). ‘Pessimism’ followed not long afterwards to denote philosophers who ridiculed optimism by contrasting it with the many evils in the world. ‘If this is the best of all possible worlds,’ some asked, ‘what on earth are the others like?’ 5
- 2 However, each of these views is flawed. If there are shadows on the road to pessimism, there are dangers in the opposite direction also. If we overemphasise the power we have over our minds, our lives, our destinies, it is all too easy to stumble into cruelty. We need not look very far to see examples of what optimism, in its darkest forms, can become. When a 2008 London tower block named Heygate Estate was sold off to foreign investors, its inhabitants were first evicted then offered mindfulness courses to deal with their anxiety, so that they were themselves made responsible for their misfortunes. If we are each radically in control of our mental states, what reason is there to ask for social justice? This is the popular narrative that ‘you are responsible for your own happiness’ and is bolstered by the subtle terror of a social media regime that pushes us to broadcast our success and happiness to the world. 10 15
- 3 It is in such cases that the consoling force of pessimism reveals itself: *it is OK to not be OK*. Sometimes we fail, sometimes we run up against the hard walls of our own capacities or the world’s boundaries – and it can be consoling to be reminded that our suffering, our fragility, is not our fault. Besides, we are so quick to equate pessimism with passivity or despair, and to reject it on that basis. But far from leading to passivity, pessimism can be closely linked to activism, which is in itself acting in hope for a better future. *Hopeful* pessimism is not a contradiction, but a manifestation of the wild power that is harnessed only when life’s darkest forces are gathered into the strange alchemy of hope. 20 25
- 4 Indeed, this age is marked by ecological depletion and devastation that are taking shape all around us. Yet, this very age is also marked by the quiet, or not so quiet, desperation of the young. The same criticisms once waged against the pessimists of yore are now laid at the feet of the despairing young by those techno-optimists and advocates of progress for whom any consideration of the mere *possibility* of decline is in itself a sign of weakness, a lack of imagination – a failure of vision, most of all. And so they denounce young people’s outcries as pessimism, as ‘mere’ despair. But as Greta Thunberg said in 2018, ‘Why should I be studying for a future that soon will be no more, when no one is doing anything whatsoever to save that future?’ 30 35
- 5 Surely we can do better than give the manifestly inadequate answer (which may also be an outright lie) to assure them that all will be well – since we know there is every chance it would not be. The thing to avoid is not pessimism, but hopelessness or giving up. We can instead strive for change without any certainty other than the knowledge that we have done what we are called to do as moral agents in a time of change. If brute optimism fails, could hopeful pessimism do better? Could it be, in fact, a *virtue*? 40
- 6 This may just be the thinnest hope, the bleakest consolation – but it may also be the very thing that will serve us in times to come, as a value, and yes, an exercise of moral fervor: a fragile virtue for a fragile age.

Passage 2. *Woh Esme questions the value of cheerfulness.*

- 1 The key to optimism is positivity, and the key to positivity is cheerfulness. Universally lauded as an ideal state of mind, a quick browse through the self-help section of any bookstore announces that people are desperate to bootstrap their way to the bright side. Texts on embracing life's miserable condition do not exactly fly off the shelves. However, books on how optimism can be learned make millionaires out of their authors. 5
- 2 However, there is a fundamental difference between the classical Greek virtues of patience, justice or courage, and the modern day 'virtue' of cheerfulness, which borders on psychosis. Patience asks us to change our behaviour, but it neither asks us to feel differently nor to pretend to feel differently. Cheerfulness, on the other hand, is characterised by an *expression* of good spirits. It can lend itself to pretension – telling someone else that you feel fine when you do not. 10
- 3 Cheerfulness conceived as a virtue instead of a spontaneous feeling is not an action but an act. Whistling while you work might be worth defending, but forcing yourself to smile when you do not feel like it amounts to lying to the people around you. 'Fake it till you make it' has brutal consequences when applied to the emotions. It becomes a form of 'toxic' positivity – both oppressive and deceitful in equal measure. Cheerfulness in this form is far from a virtue; it is a vice. 15
- 4 Forced cheerfulness is a denial of life. We might want to lock out certain people from our fragile hearts, but it also keeps our loved ones out of reach. Whoever gets our cheery selves does not get our true selves. Cheerfulness also unwittingly cancels out trust. It says 'you cannot handle the expression of my feelings' and is therefore built on the certainty that others will disappoint. When we share about our grief from death or abandonment, job loss, racism and homophobia or mental health issues, we ironically have to steel ourselves for even more hurt from the bland responses of others that we must endure, for what do people offer but feeble platitudes like 'it will get better' and 'you have got this'? Still, this shows an attempt at consolation and compassion - no matter how weak - and we must have faith in people for trying. Vulnerability is a risk and a gift. 20
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- 5 Let us, therefore, consider another virtue, which could be given the old name of honesty. Instead of a smile, we would do better to wear our natural expression. It would be a sign that we are saying *yes* instead of *no* to life's sadness, anxiety, grief, loneliness and anger, among other so-called 'negative' emotions. These affirmations of life's bitterness might just make frowning – or crying – easier. In turn, these newly sanctioned expressions of negativity might make it easier to honestly discuss hardships. Our newly vulnerable selves would get to see the corresponding vulnerabilities of our neighbours. This exchange of fragility could possibly be the key to empathy, as sometimes all we want is for someone to acknowledge how awful a situation is and just sit with us. If we agreed to stop wasting emotional energy masking our disappointments with cheer, then we would be free to cue into other people's sadness. Expressions of pain exchanged between two people can be the great equaliser of humankind. Deeper connections could be made in wreckage than prosperity. 30
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- 6 Giving up a commitment to cheerfulness would mean risking judgment for being ordinary and human. If, however, we could learn to share in the misery of others rather than stick a Band-Aid on a bullet wound and send them packing, and if they could do the same for us, then we would have a shot at true fraternity. Profound human connection and communion – in other words, love – has no use for forced cheer, and is often sabotaged by false faces. If we want to love better and seek true happiness and friendship, it is time to cultivate honesty instead of cheer, to resist society's pressure to be a living, breathing smile emoji. 40
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