

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission Template

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Summary:

The essay argues for a return to a more historical and philosophical rationale for advancing society in which it is not implicitly understood that 'progress' means 'technological innovation'. The belief in modern society that bliss is to get what we desire, and what we desire is unproblematically understood as 'individual preferences' rather than something which can change through moral education, so that we take it for granted that we can have whatever we desire at any given time in the local 7-11, is one of the reasons why we are facing catastrophe through overproduction.

Essay:

"Faced with today's food and energy crisis, how can society improve its well-being?"

A societal *sense of history* is required, it is the only way humanity will survive. In the modern world, it has been lost. I should like to open this essay with some quotes;

"The destruction of the past, or rather the social mechanisms that link one's contemporary experience to that of earlier generations, is one of the most characteristic and eerie phenomena of the late twentieth century" - Eric Hobsbawm, Historian

"The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarcely one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. ... For the first time in human history, overproduction will become a problem. -Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto

"It is not a trivial question. What we are talking about is how one should live"-Plato, founder of Western civilization

Together these quotes represent the failings of the modern world; growth has become a synonym for progress; tradition is seen as antiquated and backwards; how one should live is no longer a question for the modern man, a good life simply *is* a good material life; no one is asking, 'how ought we to reduce the world's population', but rather, 'how can we make everyone equally well off, bring everyone to the same standard'. In this essay I shall argue that the answer to the last question is 'we cannot', unless we mean 'bring *down* to the same standard', and the reasons I take to be reflection on the other statements: the earth cannot support an ever growing industry, a good life is not even primarily material, and we have to again link the present to the past in order for us to properly care for the future. We can no longer see ourselves as living in some sort of permanent present, separate from our environment and our fellow human beings, aiming at maximising our own welfare. We live in society, our lives are inextricably linked with the lives of others, and this in many ways is what gives value to our lives. If we realise that, we have gone a long way towards a better future.

No doubt technological innovation can take us far. But innovation and growth must be sustainable, and sustainable means that it needs to be such that the resources required

in production can regrow before the productive growth is completed. We do not cut down a whole forest, if it cannot regrow unless we save one fourth. And we do not use more wood than that that is possible. We need to get away from the dangerous notion that we want things *now*. When good life, if only implicitly but no less real, became the same thing as high material standards, progress became only a matter of means. If we innovate, we shall live better lives. The humanistic disciplines could be sacrificed on the altar of technology; we already had the answer to what constituted a good life, why listen to philosophers or historians? If they cannot add material value to our lives, they're a waste of money—and money is after all the ultimate appeal. Yet progress means *process* at least as much as *product*; the process of getting somewhere, of refining, of living one's life through such projects, that gives meaning to one's life. Yet somehow the final *product* became the focus of attention, as if we would all live good, comfortable lives if only we could jump this one last technological hurdle, create the perfect society in which everyone can have what they desire. And desire was always thought of as a product of 'human nature', uneducationable apparently.

The West needs to cut down on industry—innovate certainly—but more importantly take steps towards an understanding that we as individuals are not separate from other 'individuals', from our countries, or from the world. To waste would not have occurred to our forefathers, and one may say that that is because of the circumstances in which they lived, and of course in a sense it was. But the reasons they had not to waste have not disappeared; indeed, they are more urgent. We can no longer expect to find everything from all corners of the world, fresh, in our local 7-11, all hours of the day. We must again live with the seasons, learn how to develop and perfect ourselves rather than indulge in the escapism of therapy shopping, computer games and television; but we may just learn that that life is no less enjoyable than the one we leave behind. We may have to learn how to cook or make a sandwich rather than buying them pre-packed in plastic at Mark's and Spencer's, but this may not be an entirely bad thing. The rest of the world should stop aspiring to Western selfishness, to the ideal of 'everything now', and the West needs to remember what values got them where they are in the first place. Greed, *pleonexia*, was both in Aristotle as in scripture the vice whose counterpart was the virtue of justice. And yet greed came to be the center of the modern way of life. The maximisation of profit led industry, and people were led to believe that self-interest was in everyone's interest. Even if it is in human nature, we should not nurture it. We should nurture *the opposite* desire. The realisation that we are one with each other, with nature, should not be hard to see. If we are to ever solve the problems of food and energy, to ask questions about how to live must be the first step, not to take how to live for granted and see the solution in terms of means. The first task is to link the human experience back to nature and history; to make us understand how we are a part of this world. How it could have been forgotten, I do not know.