Practical Philosophy and a Perspective on Oppression and Liberation in Malaysia

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Abstract

In Malaysia, a complex web of oppression spans political, socio-cultural, and economic spheres. This multifaceted oppression manifests in various ways, ranging from explicit violations of human rights, such as excessive use of force against marginalized groups, arbitrary detentions, and suppression of dissenting voices, to subtler yet pervasive forms like microaggressions and entrenched systemic biases.

This essay explores the fundamental pillars perpetuating an oppressive culture through the lens of Paulo Freire's "banking" pedagogy, examining its presence in education systems, workplace dynamics, policies, and mainstream media. It also explores an alternative educational approach—Freire's "problem-posing" model—while advocating for a framework called Practical Philosophy. This essay proposes Practical Philosophy as an adaptive framework that augments Freire's ahistorical model, acknowledging the intersectionality that defines oppression in Malaysia, where multiple oppressive experiences often intersect. As such, this essay advocates the use of Practical Philosophy as a means to pave the way toward a more rational, equitable, inclusive and liberated Malaysia.

MALAYSIAN
PHILOSOPHY society

In Malaysia, a complex web of oppression persists across political, socio-cultural, and economic spheres. These oppressions manifest in various forms, from blatant transgressions of human rights such as excessive use of force by authorities against marginalised communities, arbitrary detentions and the stifling of dissenting voices, draconian laws, to subtler yet pervasive microaggressions and systemic prejudices. The nature of oppression in our country is one that is characterised by intersectionality, where experience of oppression can compound. This essay argues that a variety of tools including education, workplace culture and policies, and mainstream media are used to keep the web of oppression alive.

The essay references Paulo Freire's "banking" pedagogy, arguing that these tools, namely education, workplace culture and policies, and mainstream media are never apolitical in nature, and are used to sustain oppression in our nation. The contention is that policy changes alone might not suffice to break the web of oppression. It is imperative for all Malaysians to participate in collaborative dialogue and inquiry to collectively advocate towards dismantling this web of oppression. And Freire's problem-posing model of education and Practical Philosophy emerge as suitable mediums to instigate this transformative action and societal change.

This essay is structured into two sections. The first discusses the concept of oppression and underscores the fundamental pillars perpetuating an oppressive culture in Malaysia, drawing insights from Freire's seminal work, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and the "banking" model of education. The second section explores the "problem-posing" model of education introduced by Freire, and advocates for the integration of Practical Philosophy as an adaptive framework that augments Freire's ahistorical model, offering pathways towards a more reasoned, equitable, and inclusive Malaysia.
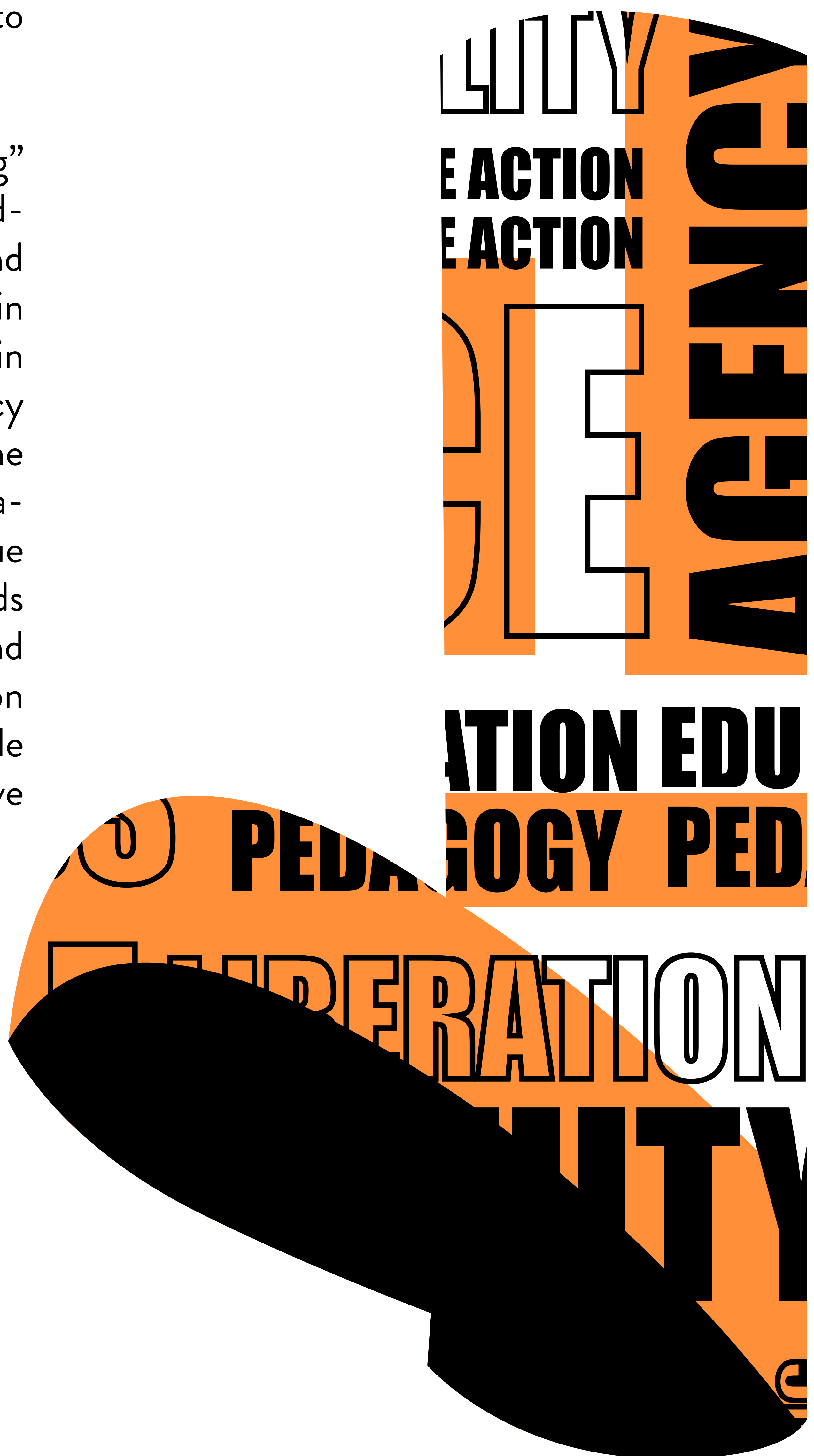
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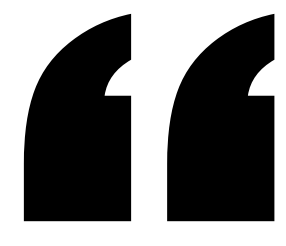
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> **Oppression happens when "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person.**
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> Paulo Freire

Oppression happens when "A" objectively exploits "B" or hinders his pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person" (Freire, 2005, p. 55). It involves the subordination of a social group from a privileged group, for instance, oppression towards women, LGBTQI communities, minority ethnicity, citizens in poverty (Taylor, 2016, p. 520-521). Oppression interferes with one's vocation to be a more fully human or person. It extends beyond overt displays involving violent forces or criminalization, permeating through subtler forms such as preventing free expression, perpetuating discrimination within legal frameworks, and pervading daily life experiences.

Consequently, oppression can manifest across diverse social contexts, ranging from interpersonal interactions—like misgendering or unintentionally derogatory remarks aimed at people of other races—to systemic levels where political leaders inhibit free speech among the populace (Corey, 2003).

Oppression in Malaysia has historically manifested across political, economic, and socio-cultural realms (Mar'i, 1988). Politically, Malaysia's governance and freedom of expression have recurrently faced scrutiny, limiting the agencies and liberties of the populace, through draconian media laws and the limitation of rights of certain communities such women, LGBTQI, indigenous and migrant groups ("Freedom of Expression," n.d.). These measures not only sustain the economical and socio-cultural oppression against specific communities, but also keeps the broader population in a state of disempowerment, unable to advocate for themselves and others. While platforms like social media have made it easier for advocacy for change, perpetual instances of government intervention to take down content and accounts that challenge status quo impede meaningful dialogues necessary to break the web ofoppression in our country.[1]

Economically, specific social segments, including LGBTQI communities, migrant workers and women, as well as individuals occupying certain disadvantaged intersectionalities continue to encounter unequal opportunities and discrimination in employment ("More than 50% of Malaysian Women," 2020; Nathesan, 2017; Yeoh, 2017; Parasuraman; "LGBT+ Employees," 2023; Pereira & Benedict, 2019). Moreover, certain workplace environments perpetuate authoritarian practices that curtail workers' freedoms (Goh, 2023). Longstanding issues pertaining to ethnic disparities persist from pre-Independence eras, characterized by contentious and discriminatory policies (2022 Country Reports, 2022).
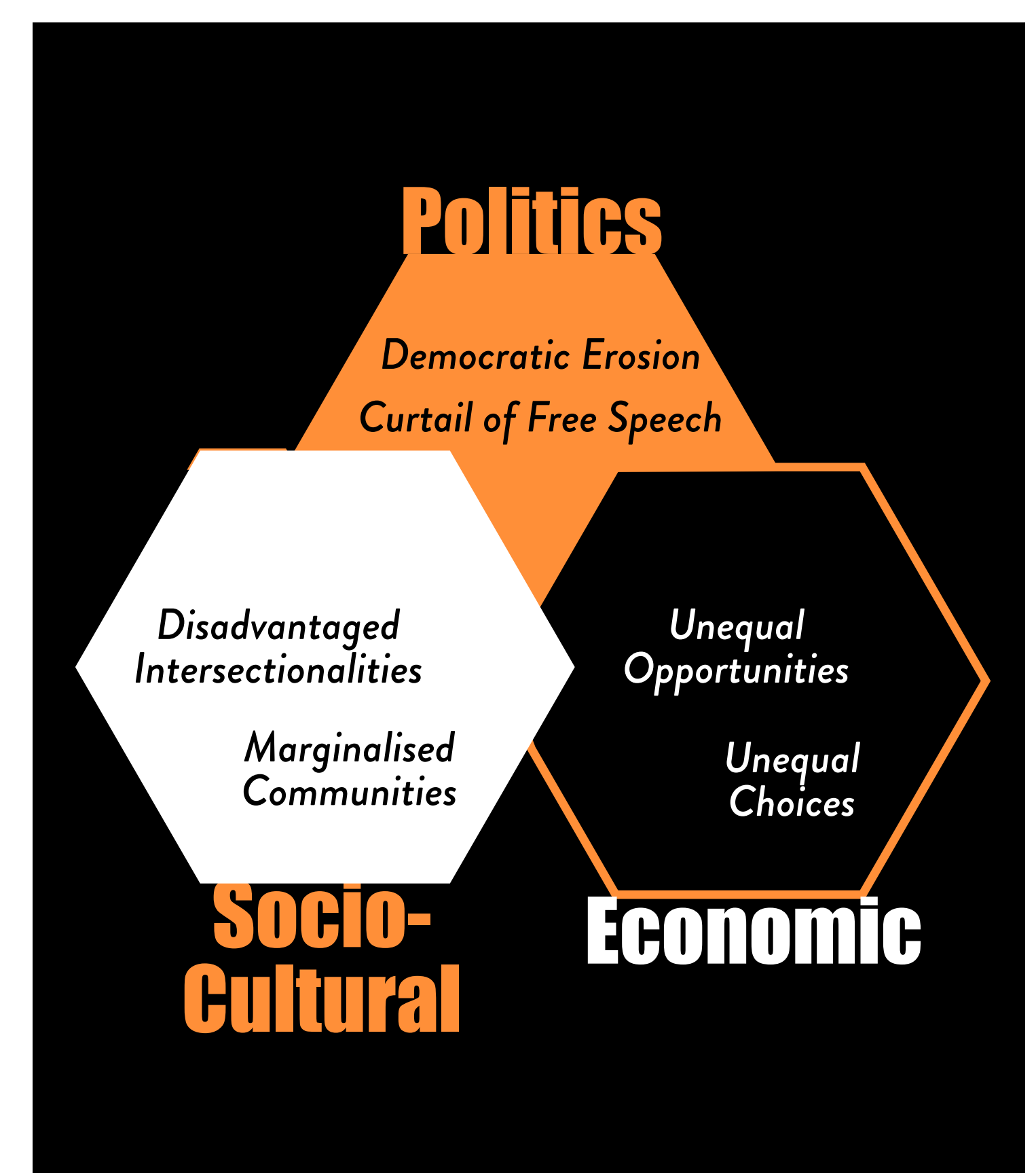
1.1 Freire's "Banking" Model and Liberation

Oppression in Malaysia finds its roots in a complex interplay of historical colonialism, the intricate fabric of our multi-ethnic society, and the nuances of our less-than-democratic political landscape.[2] This essay is not intended for an exhaustive exploration of the causes of oppression. Instead, its focus is on, firstly, understanding the entrenched mechanisms that sustain and perpetuate oppressive structures, and, secondly, the solutions to dismantle these structures as the first step to foster a more just and equitable society.

In articulating this contention, I argue that Freire's "banking" model serves as a pertinent framework to detail the manner in which the different mechanisms operate as instruments to perpetuate and reinforce the existing oppressive structures.

[2] It's been argued that leaders in our country have been favouring an 'Asian democracy' over the Western liberal democracy where the former places a strong emphasis on values and the latter on rights and liberties. In the case of the former, negation of the rights of the people can happen to justify to protect the rights of the community or maintain political stability, resulting in an oppressive state that bears semblance to an authoritarian regime. See Freeman (1996), and Gomez and Sundaram (1998), pp. 114. Furthermore, Malaysia is categorised as 'Flawed Democracy' Malaysia is classified as a 'Flawed Democracy' in the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence, indicating limitations in its political participation, infringements on civil liberties, and insufficient checks and balances within its political systems. See Democracy Index, (2022).

Freire's Banking Model of Education
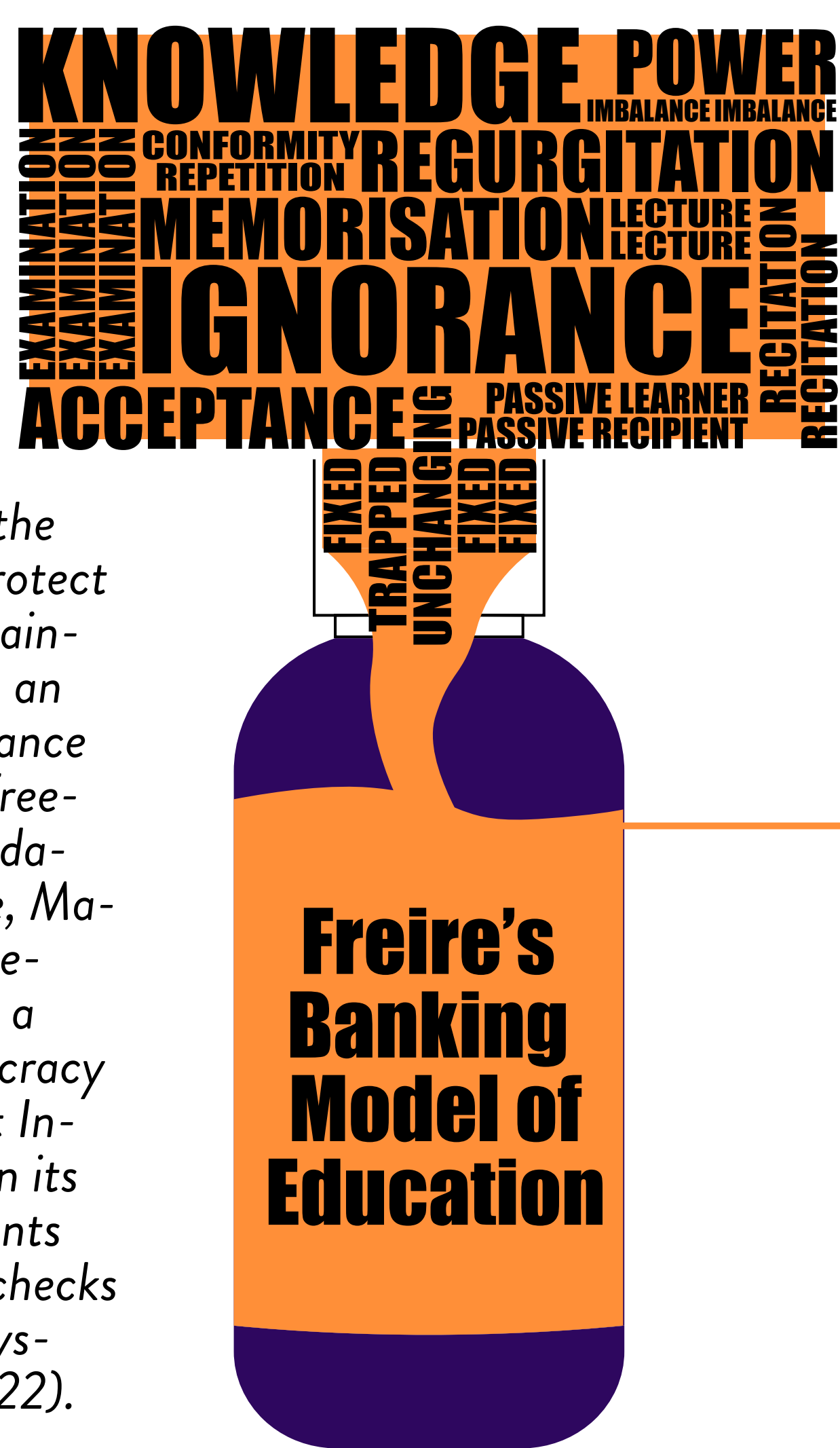
I further argue that Freire's "banking" model extends beyond education, entering societal pillars such as employment structures and mainstream media. These tools are used to keep oppression alive in our country.

Freire's "banking" model is an analytical framework of education that was spurred by the oppressive regime and environment in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 1960s.[3]

He vehemently criticized the traditional educational model for its inadequacy in fostering an egalitarian and democratic society. Instead, he argued that this model was not only unsuitable but also wielded as a political tool to perpetuate oppression. In this model of education, the receiving party or students are "containers", "receptacles" to be "filled" by the teacher or oppressors. Education, according to Freire, was reduced to an act of "depositing" knowledge into individuals who were expected to mechanically "receive, memorize, and repeat" it. The role of a teacher, Freire contends, is to "fill the students with the content of his narration-content which is detached from reality, disconnected from the totality that engendered them and could give them significance" (Freire, 2005, p. 71).

The key tenets of Freire's "banking" model of oppression can be laid out as follows:

1. The "teacher" or "subject" is an authoritative figure with control of the narrative of the knowledge.
2. The "student" is equated as an "object", regarded as powerless, ignorant and without reasoning capacity.
3. Materials being taught or information being disseminated is "static" and "detached from reality".
4. The materials being taught contain "contradiction" with the external reality (Freire, 2005, p. 71-75).

In Freire's view, this "banking" model of education perpetuates oppressive structures in a society through power imbalance, cultivation of values like ignorance and submissiveness, and beliefs that reality is unchanging and fixed.

[3] Paulo Freire wrote "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" in the late 1960s and published it in 1970. The context in which Freire developed his ideas was deeply influenced by the post-World War II period of decolonization in Brazil, characterised by authoritarian regime, social inequalities, educational disparities and colonial legacy. However, Freire's views and frameworks are largely ahistorical and can be extrapolated to other forms of oppression that exist throughout history. See Gadotti (1994).

Liberation in Freire's view can be understood as a transformative process that not just involves freeing individuals and communities from explicit forms of oppression, but also an emancipation from the mental, social, and cultural constraints that limit human potential. Central to this idea is 'critical consciousness,' which is the ability to critically analyse and grasp the social, political, and economic forces that shape their lives (Freire, 2005, p. 167-183). Similarly, liberation in our country involves critical awareness of the oppressive structures that limit the agencies of the populace, and collective action towards dismantling the tools that uphold oppression.

1.2 "Banking" Model in Malaysian Education System

The Malaysian education system serves as a reflection of Freire's "banking" model, recognizable to any individual who has navigated its corridors. Despite considerable strides in science and technology, the system's foundational structure remains entrenched in a paradigm reminiscent of our colonial past (Ahmad, 1998, p. 463). More specifically, we still follow the footsteps of our British colonisers whereby examinations stand as the linchpin of learning, mirroring Freire's depiction where teachers wield absolute control over the narrative of knowledge while relegating students to the passive role of mere recipients, devoid of agency, critical thinking, or empowerment.[4]

Cartoon by David Horsey on Hearst Newspaper in 2010.

In Malaysian educational settings, a stark power imbalance prevails, granting teachers authority over the narrative and teaching methods, occasionally resorting to coercive measures. This atmosphere may have cultivated a pervasive culture of fear within educational institutions, eroding a child's innate enthusiasm for learning and stifling their natural curiosity.[5]

To illustrate how this model of education dampens critical reasoning, let us look at how the moral subject (Pendidikan Moral) is taught. To pass the subject, the only skill required is to memorise the definitions of 12 moral values during primary education and 16 during secondary education.[6] This singular focus on memorization, ingrained within the grading rubric, begs the question: how do we expect students to be moral individuals when all they are taught is a set of moral values that they are ready to forget the moment they "release" them in the exams? There are sufficient justifications for the subject to be scrapped, or at the very least, modified, but yet, its endurance throughout the decades raises eyebrows (Alwyn Lau, 2022; Ho, 2023).

With rising needs and demands of society, there were attempts to enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills in higher education. Our country implemented two mandatory subjects, namely 'Philosophy and Current Issues' and 'Appreciation of Ethics and Civilisation' as new components within the general modules or Mata Pelajaran Umum (MPU) for public university students. Regrettably, concerns have arisen regarding the inadequate teaching quality of these subjects, largely attributed to insufficient training and resource allocation (Ang, 2019).

The product of an education system as such may be the creation of a generation of students who are more likely to conform, to be predisposed to embracing an unchanging reality, and to be ready to be told what to do – a perfect specimen of oppression.[7] This is the sad reality, and yet we wonder why young employees nowadays have poor critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Hunter, 2022; "Why Can't They Think Critically," 2014; Education System Not Producing Thinking Graduates, 2012).

According to Freire, this kind of education model "serves the interests of the oppressors" to keep the people oppressed. As he put it, "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them." (Freire, 2005, p. 72)

The situation in Malaysia is compounded by the legacy of the vernacular schooling system, a vestige of the British colonial era's "divide and rule" strategy aimed at preventing unified dissent (Shanmugavelu et.al, 2020).[8]

These schools are divided based on ethnic or cultural lines, which include Chinese Vernacular Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina, SJKC) which uses Chinese as the language of instruction, Tamil Vernacular Schools (Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Tamil, SJKT) which uses Tamil as the language of instruction, and Religious or Islamic Schools (Sekolah Agama Rakyat, SAR). The existence of vernacular schools may further reinforce ethnic identities and hinder the development of a unified national identity.[9] The utility and the need of abolishing the vernacular school system has been revisited time and again due to its divisive nature (Tay, n.d.). Efforts have been made to transition away from this system materialized through initiatives like the "Vision Schools" project, envisioned to promote multiculturalism and racial harmony.

[4] While the abolishment of PT3 (Form 3 assessment) and UPSR (Primary 6 assessment) exams suggest a departure from a full examination-oriented education, exams remain a common practice across various levels of education. Furthermore, transition from an examination-oriented education to a student-oriented learning is still facing push backs from parents.

Within this framework, schools organized along ethnic lines, using native languages as mediums of instruction, are situated together in one compound, sharing facilities and occasionally collaborating on certain school activities.

However, despite its noble intentions, the vision of the "Vision Schools" project only came to life for a short period because of lack of proper training of teaching staff, absence of culturally responsive classroom pedagogy, and the general reluctance from the public (Malakolunthu, 2009, p. 127-131; "Mahathir Moots Reviving Vision School Model," 2018).[10]

It could be said that the entrenched nature of ethnic divisions within Malaysian society has been normalized to such an extent that alternatives to the long-standing system face significant resistance among the people. It appears that the journey toward liberating oppressed minds in Malaysia faces formidable obstacles, especially when societal acceptance of other races is a challenge, let alone the pursuit of common goals for collective liberation.

[5] Even though there are now guidelines for caning students at school, caning hasn't been fully abolished, and there has been a recent incident on caning that has resulted in injury. See Leong (2023). Student's eye injury sparks debate on corporal punishment in Malaysian schools [NSTTV], and Guidelines to Follow on Caning (2019). See also The Problems with Our Local Education System (2020).

[6] Ahmad (1998) argues that the Moral education was intended to be taught using a problem-solving method rather than through imposition. However, practical challenges, such as the necessity to avoid reference to personal beliefs and cultural sensitivities, have resulted in teachers resorting to simply restating what is already in the textbooks. See Ahmad

[7] Exposure to an economy focusing on routine production activities in childhood and adolescent years can have positive correlation with workplace obedience attitudes. See research by Campanile and Chor (2017).

[8] The "divide and rule" tactic was not only employed in education, but also across various sectors from geographic segregation and administrative policies, to economic and job segregation, exploiting existing ethnic, cultural, and religious differences among the population to strengthen British control. For instance, the Malays were often involved in administrative roles or traditional agricultural activities, the Chinese commonly employed in tin mining, construction, and commerce, and the Indian commonly employed in the plantation sector (rubber, palm oil, etc.).

[9] Liberation requires dialogue among the people, unity and organization, which vernacular schooling systems inhibit. See Freire, (2005), pp. 65, 172-178.

[10] Dr. Mahathir talked about reviving the Vision school model, while being aware to respect the opinions from the people. See Mahathir Moots Reviving Vision School Model While Keeping Multi-School System (2018).

1.3 "Banking" Model in Malaysian Workplace

> **"**
> **Saya Yang Menurut Perintah.**

> **"**
> **Saya Yang Menjalankan Amanah.**

Once we exit the government education system, we then face a workplace environment where oppressive regimes persist, notably within the public service sector. Here, a corporate hierarchy governs operations, emphasizing top-down decision-making and bureaucratic processes. Employees find themselves confined to following orders and executing tasks that are "deposited" by employers, cultivating a culture of compliance and stifling individual initiative (Rosslina, 2011; Thompson, 2023). For instance, civil servants in Malaysia used to sign off official government letters with "Saya yang menurut perintah" ("I who obey orders") in Malaysia (Chu, 2018). Even though this practice has been scraped, authoritarian measures such as extensive surveillance, clock-in and clock-out systems and rigid dress codes persist in the workplace, promoting a passive and compliant approach to work that mirror a 'banking' model.

Within Malaysia's public employment sector, doctors endure some of the most pronounced dehumanization and oppression.

The hierarchical structure in Malaysian healthcare mirrors that of Freire's "banking" model, casting junior doctors as passive recipients of instructions, expected to comply without question due to their temporary status, easily revocable by those in authority. Contract doctors, specifically, are viewed merely as tools serving governmental interests, with minimal say in decision-making processes. Their grievances and demands for basic human rights and fair treatment, evidenced by strikes (Hartal), are met with threats of termination of their contracts. The harsh reality includes minimal compensation for exorbitantly long working hours, unpaid overtime, uncertainty regarding career pathways, and reports of bullying and harassment, creating a toxic workplace culture (Kwan, 2021; Sirat, 2023). Such conditions fundamentally undermine the humanity of these individuals who dedicate themselves to securing the well-being of others, reflecting aspects of Freire's "banking" model in their operation and reinforcement of hierarchical control.

1.4 "Banking" Model in Malaysian

The pervasiveness of Freire's "banking" model extends to the daily lives of individuals within Malaysian society through mainstream media. Here, the media functions as a conduit where authorities deposit information and propaganda into the public psyche. Dissenting voices, conversely, encounter severe repercussions, effectively reaching a dead end. The authorities in Malaysia wield substantial power to craft narratives that permeate the collective consciousness. Numerous instances, from imposing the 'Fake News' Law during the COVID-19 pandemic—allegedly to control the narrative—to manipulating public opinion during elections through alliances with local press entities, exemplify this control. (Gomez and Sundaram, 1998; Peter, 2021).[11] Particularly insidious is the manipulation of the narrative surrounding the 1MDB scandal, showcasing financial mismanagement and corruption within the state investment fund (Kit Siang, 2017). These instances of manipulations of information echo the control exerted by a teacher over the flow of information in Freire's "banking" model of education (Lahiri, 2018).
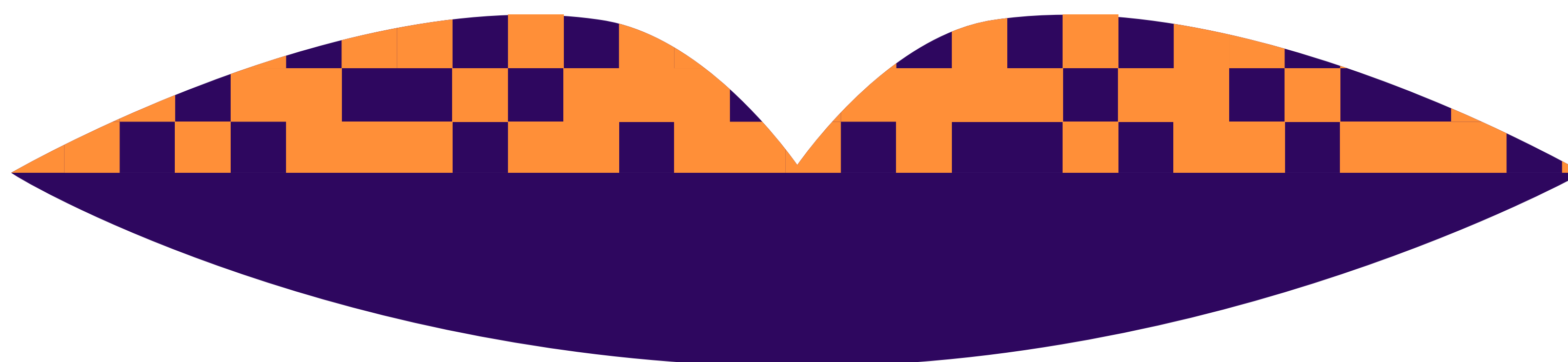
Much like Freire's "banking" model, the people assume the role of the students in his model—silenced and discouraged from engaging in critical questioning or inquiry. Malaysian authorities continue to use draconian media legislations like the Sedition Act of 1948, the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (CMA), and the Printing Press and Publications Act (PPPA) to quell dissenting discussions and purportedly "restore public order".[12] These laws specifically prohibit any speech deemed seditious and are often wielded against individuals expressing opinions considered sensitive, particularly those related to race, religion, or royalty (Human Rights Watch, 2021; "You're on Human Rights Council," 2021).

Furthermore, the Penal Code, Sedition Act, Peaceful Assembly Act, and Communications and Multimedia Act in Malaysia incorporate excessively broad and ambiguously formulated clauses, granting authorities extensive leeway to investigate or detain individuals for a range of activities or expressions deemed unfavorable by the government.[13] Those daring to voice dissent have faced condemnation and imprisonment, mirroring the disciplinary measures of school days, where students were caned for contravening the teacher's directives ("Malaysia: Free Speech Under Increasing Threat," 2021; "You're on Human Rights Council," 2021; Freedom of Speech, n.d.; Alhadjri, 2021).[14] Hence, the purported protection of freedom of expression under Article 10 of the Constitution of Malaysia, guaranteeing citizens the rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and association, remains more symbolic than substantive ("Constitution of Malaysia," 1963).

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[11] Malaysian politicians are known to use 3M's (money, media and machinery) to sway opinions and gain political footing and control. See Gomez and Sundaram (1998), p. 130-134.

[12] As per the government's official statistics, there were 692 investigations conducted by the police between January 2020 and June 2022 under the Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA). These investigations led to 87 prosecutions, encompassing artists, performers, and political activists. See Freedom of Expression (n.d). Malaysia is rated "partly free" in The Freedom in the World report, with similar ratings to countries like Nigeria, Lebanon, Singapore, Armenia, Nepal and Hong Kong. See Freedom in the World Report (2023).

[13] For instance, content that is 'indecent', "obscene', 'menacing', offensive', or has 'seditious tendency' is prohibited. See clause 211 in Communications and Multimedia Act 1998, and section 3 in Seditious Act 1948.

Even more troubling is perhaps the encroachment on free speech in the realm of academic freedom. Views that cannot be circulated encompass expressions of unapproved political stances, open criticisms of the government, and sentiments that might incite racial or religious disharmony.[15] In Malaysia, all university faculty members and students are compelled to pledge allegiance to both the monarchy and the government (2022 Country Reports, 2022). Additionally, students are prohibited from being affiliated with any political parties according to the University and University Colleges Act (Laws of Malaysia, 2006; Gomez and Sundaram, 1998, p. 135). These restrictions not only constitute a severe violation of fundamental rights but also undermine the very essence of scholarly pursuits and hinder intellectual growth.

As a result, because of the repeated hindrance to voice out and failures of solidarity, the people may have come to fatalistically accept their inferior position and internalise the belief that they lack the capacity for independence and liberation.[16]

Taken together, policies and cultures in education, workplace, as well as media in Malaysia perpetuate a power dynamic favoring those in power at the expense of the populace. This in turn serves as a catalyst for various forms of oppression within the broader community. These mechanisms contribute to and reinforce racism, sexism, and the oppression faced by marginalized communities like the LGBTQI individuals. And without given much choice, individuals participate dutifully within these systems at every juncture of their lives – from the formative years as students to their roles as employees and citizens – all designed to keep Malaysians silent, lacking curiosity, and fearful of change. As such, I argue that liberation in Malaysia should be understood as an inclusive goal between diverse races, religions, genders and identities, towards greater freedom of expression, justice and equality.

[14] *Fahmi Reza, a famous artist in Malaysia has been jailed multiple times due to creating "obscene" and "intent to annoy a person" art and social media content. An opposition member of parliament Maria Chin Abdullah has been sentenced to jail for pointing out the country's sharia laws discriminated against women on April 25, 2019. In October the Ministry of Home Affairs banned three publications for being "detrimental to morality." 46 individuals were arrested for defamatory statements that were seen as insulting towards the country's royalty. Multiple journalists, activists, and leaders of peaceful protests have been held criminally liable in recent years. The recent investigation of #Lawan protest organisers under the Sedition Act have also infringed basic human rights and freedom. These are just a few of a plethora of instances where free speech is censored in Malaysia. See Malaysia: Free Speech Under Increasing Threat (2021), Freedom of Expression (n.d.), Alyaa (2021), and 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Malaysia (2022).*

[15] *The Ministry of Home Affairs maintained a list of more than 1,700 banned publications as of November 2020. See 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Malaysia (2022).*

[16] *In a survey done by the Merdeka Center for Opinion Research (2021), 60% of respondents believe that the government still needs to exert control over the media to prevent political destabilization. See Trust in Media (2021).*

FREE SPEECH

EQUALITY

2. The Pedagogical Antidote to Oppression

2.1 The Alternative to the "Banking" Model of Education

In the second part of the essay, I will explore an alternative to the "Banking" model of education proposed by Freire, a critical pedagogy known as the "Problem-Posing" model that can serve as a tool to drive liberation. I will evaluate the applicability of this model within the Malaysian context, as well as propose the infusion of elements from Practical Philosophy and Socratic Dialogue to refine and tailor Freire's model, aiming to harmonize it with the education system, workplace and daily lives of Malaysians.

PROBLEM POSING MODEL
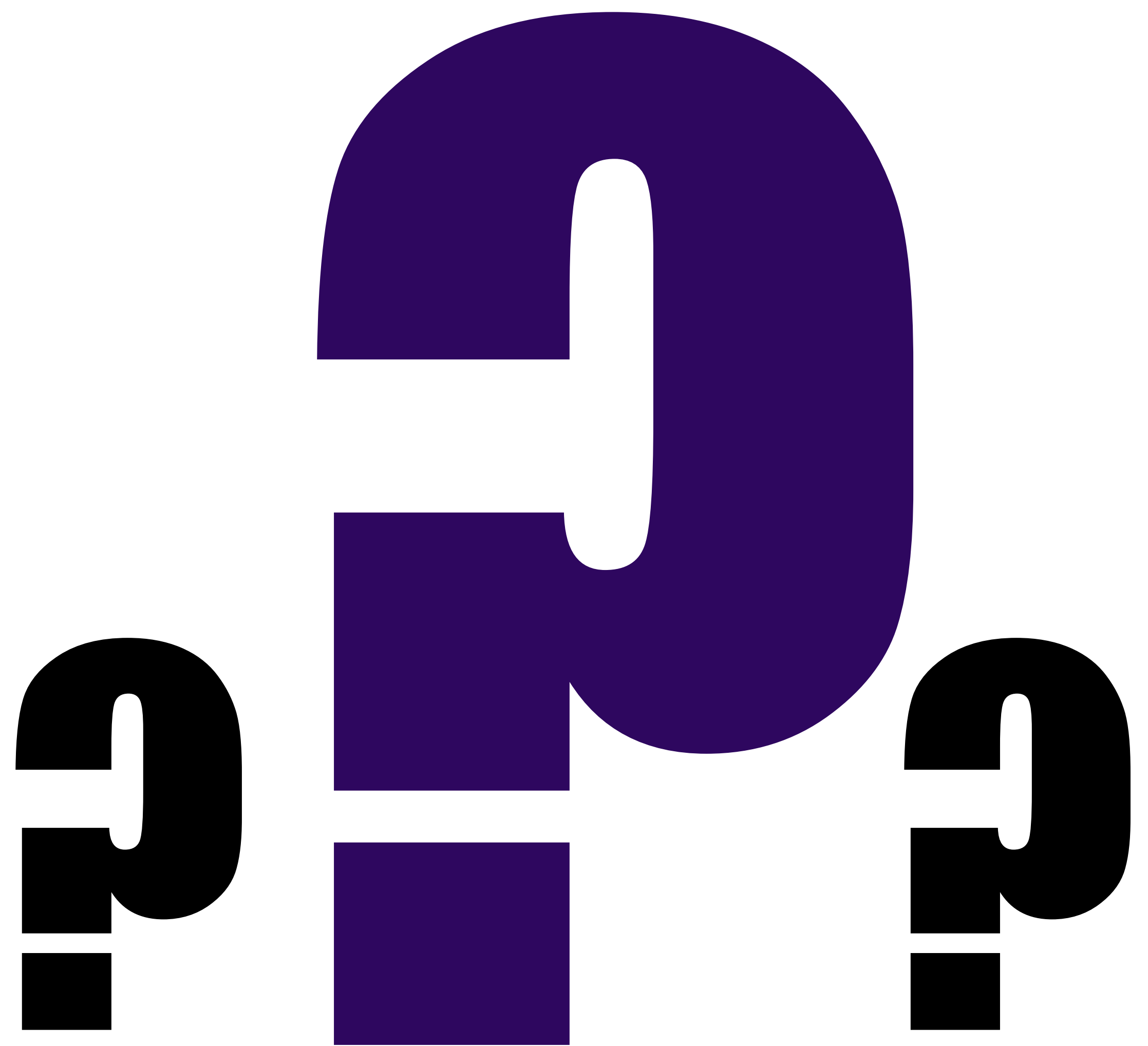
Unlike the Banking model of education, the Problem-Posing model of education fosters empowerment rather than perpetuates oppression. In this model, the student–teacher relationships are reconfigured. As Freire put it, "The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach. They become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow." The teachers and students now constitute what Freire described as 'student-teachers' and 'teacher-students' relationship; it is no longer one characterised by power imbalance, but rather a collaborative partnership where both parties are equal "co-investigators" of the reality. Central to the Problem-Posing model are principles of communication, dialogue, and inquiry. Unlike the stagnant and obsolete topics prevalent in traditional pedagogy, this approach pivots towards addressing current and pertinent issues. Subsequently, students are empowered to actively shape their understanding of reality and knowledge, rather than absorbing what is being taught to them like a sponge (Freire, 2005, p. 80-86).

The "problem-posing" model of education can be illustrated in three main phases:

- Pre-literary: Teachers or investigators observe the histories, habits, behaviours, languages and local conditions of the students, and identify "generative themes". At this stage, "codification", the process of creation of stimulus for discussions where "generative themes" and chosen words are encoded takes place.[17]

- Literary: Students participate in "decoding dialogue" called "thematic investigation circles". Here, students frame reality as a problem, critically engage with the relevant materials that have been presented, question previous assumptions or "perception" and power structures, and collaboratively explore the various meanings and interpretations that can be derived from it.[18] Here, students become aware of the political and social reality represented in their lives.

- Post-literary: Reflection and reiteration take place through identification of important themes and translation of insights into didactic materials by teachers or investigators (Freire, 2005, p. 111-114, 116-124).

A component integral to Freire's Problem-Posing model is the concept of Praxis,[20] the amalgamation of "reflection and action". Freire asserted that critical inquiry and dialogue, while pivotal, are insufficient alone to constitute a liberating educational paradigm. Praxis underscores the imperative for individuals to actively engage with their reality, identifying systemic issues and undertaking concrete actions to challenge the status quo. In this sense, the Problem-Posing model is not just a pedagogical method, but rather a revolutionary tool that serves liberatory objectives, such as cultivating a 'critical consciousness' among the oppressed (Glass, 2001, p. 20).

[17] Codification usually involves sketches, photographs or oral representations that are relevant to the situations and felt needs of the students.

[18] Recommended materials are newspapers, op-eds, research papers, social media content that are relevant to current social issues. In Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (2005), the experimenter used newspapers as the material to be critically investigated. "Generative themes" in Freire's view refer to fundamental issues or topics within a community or society that hold significance and have the power to provoke critical dialogue and action.

[19] Didactic materials can include taped interviews with experts on the recognised themes or subjects, and relevant reading and discussion materials. See Nelson and Chen (2023) for their application of Freire's Problem-Posing model of education within English Language Teaching for young learners.

[20] The undertone in Marx's critique of Feuerbach and the philosophical tradition's tendency to "merely interpret the world in various ways" without "changing it" is evidently reflected throughout Freire's work, particularly in his emphasis on Praxis. See Marx & Engels (1978), pp. 145.

PRAXIS
Reflection + Action

2.2 Considerations Regarding Applying Freire's Problem-Posing Model within the Malaysian Context

Freire's critical pedagogy, while powerful, might not readily accommodate the dynamics of oppression that arise from the intersection of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and ideology in Malaysia. Universal depictions of oppression and a linear depiction of relationship between oppression and liberation might not fully encapsulate Malaysia's realities, given our breadth of intersectional identities and oppressive experiences.

Because of intersectionality, specific individuals or social groups can simultaneously experience compounded positions of both oppression and dominance (Ellsworth, 2001, p. 311-312). For instance, an individual who holds privilege within the racial "ladder" can concurrently experience a disadvantaged position within the gender "ladder", as exemplified by a Malay middle-class woman in Malaysia. On the other hand, an individual positioned at an advantageous level in terms of economic status and gender "ladder" might concurrently occupy a disadvantaged position in the racial "ladder", as seen in the case of a Chinese male (Samarasan, 2020).

However, it would be unreasonable to expect Freire to contextualize his arguments based on specific intersections of voices that were not prevalent during his time. Freire did acknowledge "the object of oppression is cut across by such factors as race, class, gender, culture, language, and ethnicity". And he intended for his framework to be universal, applicable across historical contexts of oppression (McLaren & Leonard, 1993, p. 167-174).[21] Yet, Freire's universal and ahistorical framework would only work in principle, but not in practice in the Malaysian context. These intersectionalities call for a deeper examination and adaptation of pedagogical approaches to effectively address the multifaceted nature of oppression in our country. These intersectionalities call for a deeper examination and adaptation of pedagogical approaches to effectively address the multifaceted nature of oppression in our country.
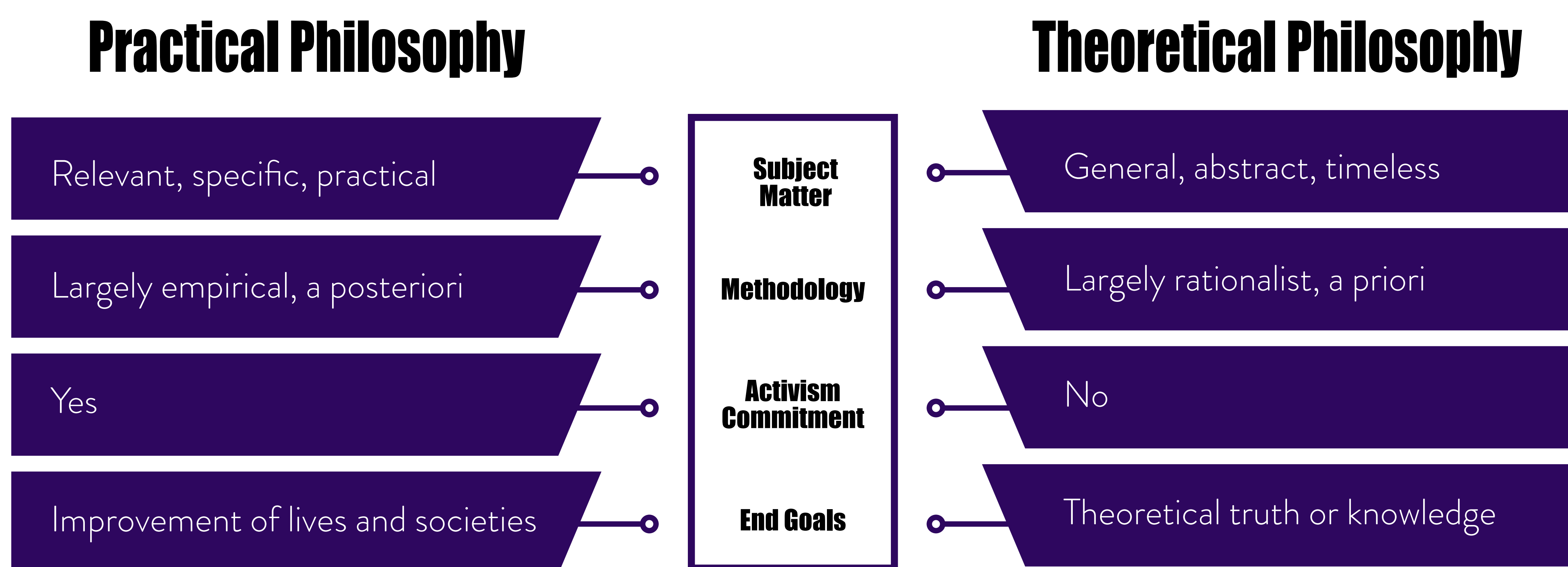
In the upcoming section of the essay, I will propose solutions to the above-mentioned in Freire's Problem-Posing model. Additionally, I will introduce Practical Philosophy as a methodology similar to Freire's Problem-Posing model, and show how it is adapted for application in the context of Malaysia.

Intersectionality

Compounds

Oppressive Experience

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[21] *A Dialogue with Paulo Freire between McLaren and Freire, Freire responded to McLaren regarding the criticisms of his view.*

2.3 Practical Philosophy: An Adaptation of Freire's Problem-Posing Model

Practical Philosophy is a subdivision of philosophy that deals with problems of practical concern.[22] Unlike its counterpart, Theoretical Philosophy, which usually deals with metaphysics, ontology, epistemology, logic, and theology, the subject matters dealt in Practical Philosophy are topics that are relevant, specific, practical to the context and time of the society, particularly, topics pertaining to "human action, life, praxis, creations, and organizations" (Stevenson, 1970, 259-260, 263; Rasmussen, 2017, p. 4-9; Mendieta, 2008). Practical Philosophy also involves the use of philosophical skills and techniques to achieve practical end goals such as guiding individuals towards virtuous living and fostering social change through philosophical reasoning and dialogue.[23] For instance, the philosophical arguments explored in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics and Politics not only purvey truth but also to affect action towards human flourishing and good governance (Barnes, 2000; Porubjak, 2018). And Socrates, who is known as the paradigmatic figure of Practical Philosopher, always employs Socratic Dialogue as a means to guide individuals to live a more examined life. Socratic Dialogue is the common method employed in Practical Philosophy discussions ("What is Practical Philosophy?," 2020; Stevenson, 1970, p. 266). It is a kind of argumentative conversation between two or more people in which the participants discuss critically about the nature of a subject matter, aimed at challenging and dissolving one's existing understanding of a concept and achieving greater knowledge or understanding (Nordquist, 2019; Heckmann, 2022). Socratic Dialogue is also employed in Theoretical Philosophy, but the dialogues in Practical Philosophy are generally more significantly informed by empirical findings, which departs from the more abstract, rationalist and a priori approach in Theoretical Philosophy.[24] Finally, advocacy and activism is a central component within Practical Philosophy. Philosophical reasoning is often used to advocate for policy changes and societal reforms aimed at dismantling oppressive systems (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 9-11). To summarise the distinctions between Practical Philosophy and Theoretical Philosophy:

Practical Philosophy   Theoretical Philosophy

Practical Philosophy		Theoretical Philosophy
Relevant, specific, practical	Subject Matter	General, abstract, timeless
Largely empirical, a posteriori	Methodology	Largely rationalist, a priori
Yes	Activism Commitment	No
Improvement of lives and societies	End Goals	Theoretical truth or knowledge

[22] Practical Philosophy is often used interchangeably with "Applied Philosophy", which is more commonly known within the field of Philosophy. Within Practical Philosophy, two distinctive methodologies stand out—Applied Philosophy and Philosophy in Context. Applied Philosophy, embodying a top-down approach, harnesses existing philosophical theories to tackle real-world issues. Conversely, Philosophy in Context adopts a bottom-up perspective, initiating investigations with philosophical problems and subsequently formulating views or explanations. This distinction primarily hinges on the approach employed rather than the subject matter itself. See Thompson (1983). Two Types of Practical Philosophy. pp. 12-15. Practical Philosophy can also be used to refer to philosophical techniques such as reflective practice, personal philosophical thinking, philosophical counselling, socratic dialogue, and workshops and courses. See What is Practical Philosophy? (2020).

[23] The Malaysian Philosophy Society, serving as Malaysia's official entity dedicated to Practical Philosophy, defines Practical Philosophy as serving the end goal as striving to enhance quality of life and drive societal transformation. See About Us (n.d.).
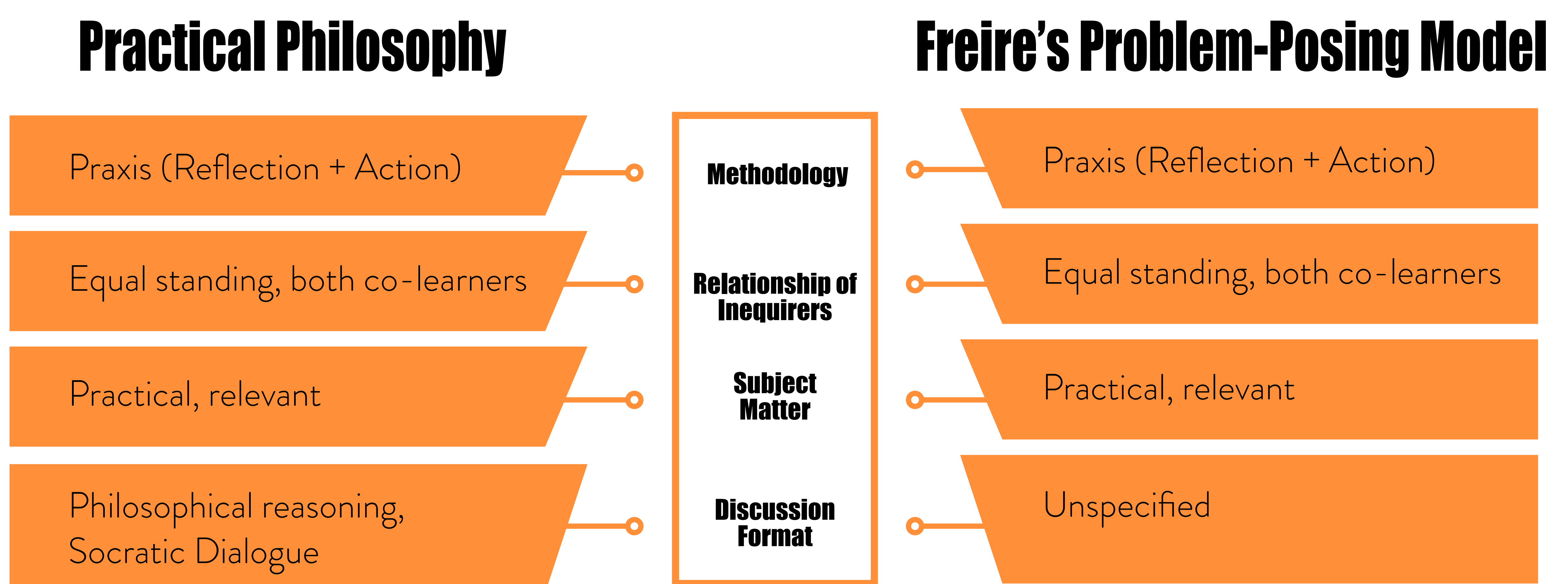
[24] Note that this does not mean that Practical Philosophy does not employ rationalist methods, such as reasoning, deduction and logical analysis in their arguments. In fact, Practical Philosophy often incorporates both rationalist and empirical approaches. For instance, discussions on ethics often involve a mix of empirical observations of human behavior and rationalist principles derived from logical reasoning or philosophical frameworks.

2.4 Comparing Practical Philosophy and Freire's Problem-Posing Model

Practical Philosophy shares many similarities with Freire's Problem-Posing model of education. Both approaches focus on addressing practical and relevant problems pertaining to praxis and everyday life, and prioritise collaborative dialogue as the cornerstone of learning and inquiry. Both models also emphasise the "co-creation" of knowledge through a two-way process of inquiry where there is no power imbalance (Knezic, 2010, p. 1105).

One notable difference is that Freire's model does not specify the methodologies involved in the collaborative dialogue, presenting challenges when the dialogues involve participants with intersectional identities. I assert that the methodologies and principles of philosophical reasoning and Socratic Dialogue found in Practical Philosophy aptly address this gap. Moreover, while Freire's model primarily operates within the realm of education, Practical Philosophy extends beyond these boundaries. It is often perceived as a way of life applicable across various social spheres, transcending educational confines. This broader applicability positions Practical Philosophy as an effective tool to address oppressive mechanisms operating beyond the educational domain, such as those entrenched within workplaces and media landscapes.

So, comparing Freire's Problem-Posing Model with Practical Philosophy:

| Practical Philosophy		Freire's Problem-Posing Model
Praxis (Reflection + Action)	Methodology	Praxis (Reflection + Action)
Equal standing, both co-learners	Relationship of Inequirers	Equal standing, both co-learners
Practical, relevant	Subject Matter	Practical, relevant
Philosophical reasoning, Socratic Dialogue	Discussion Format	Unspecified

2.5 Practical Philosophy as the Tool for Liberation in Malaysia

To restate the problem, Freire's universal pedagogy faces challenges adapting to the intricate dynamics of oppression shaped by intersecting factors like race, gender and class. In dialogues like these, it is difficult to see how there can be clear collective action and liberation because these compounding intersectionalities can result in defensive talks and potential conflicts in liberatory goals. I argue that the methodologies and apparatus employed in Socratic Dialogue within Practical Philosophy can serve as the tools needed to allow intersection of voices to be heard and be meaningfully channelled as the impetus for collective action and liberation in Malaysia.

To do so, let us first explore how Socratic Dialogue is structured. In a Socratic Dialogue, six main types of questions are being asked:

- Clarifying: Asking for clearer explanations or understanding.
- Probing Assumptions: Challenging existing assumptions.
- Probing Reasons: Delving deeper into evidence and reasons.
- Exploring Viewpoints and Objections: Assessing validity or reliability of arguments, anticipating objections, and discussing alternatives.
- Evaluating Implications: Explorings consequences and implications.
- Reflective: Encouraging reflection on the meta aspects of the discussion, questioning the questions and exploring applications ("6 Types of Socratic Questions," n.d.).

Socratic Dialogue

1. **Clarifying**

2. **Probing Assumptions**

3. **Probing Reasons**

4. **Exploring Viewpoints & Objections**

5. **Evaluating Implications**
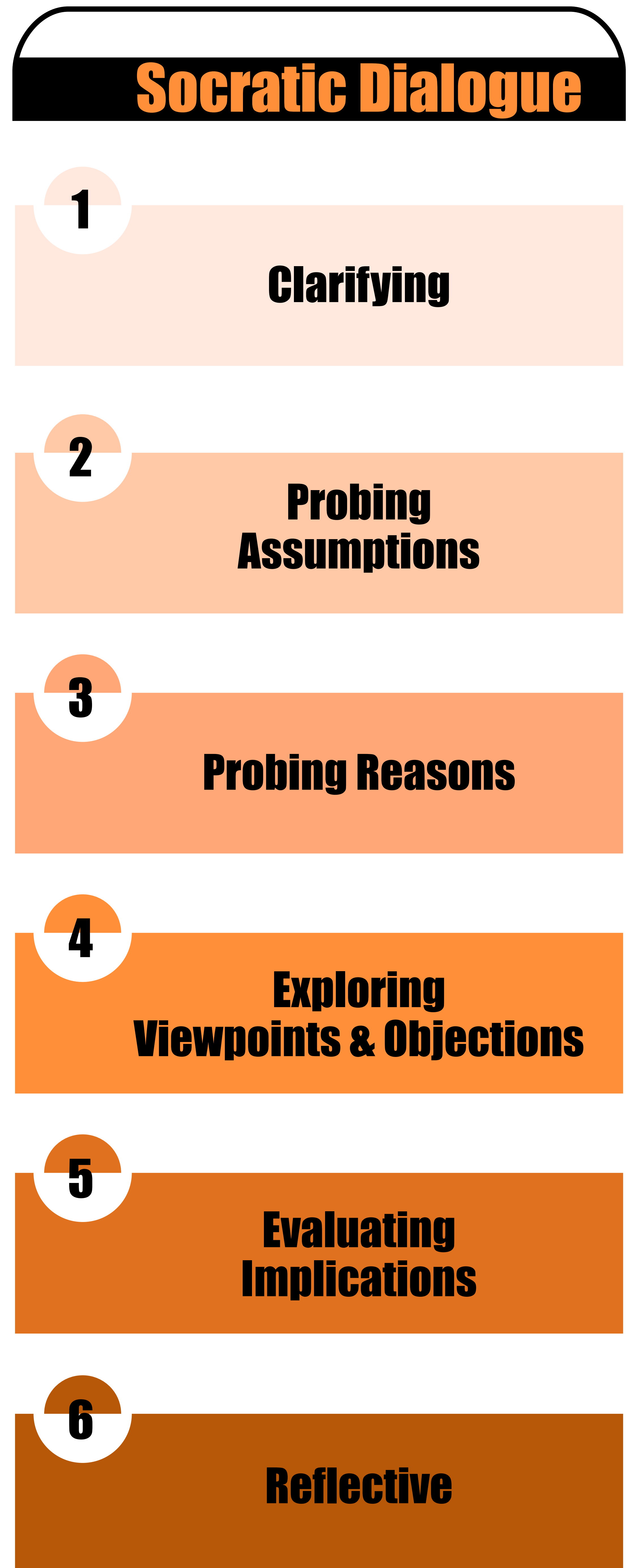
6. **Reflective**

I will highlight the critical significance of the "probing assumptions", "exploring viewpoints and objections", "evaluating implications" and "reflective" phases within Socratic Dialogue. These stages play a pivotal role in meaningful and action-oriented dialogues, especially among intersecting identities.

In Freire's model, the participants are first presented with a codified discussion stimulus that is believed to best represent the problems, "limiting situations" and "generative themes" of the local community.[25] These "limiting situations" and "generative themes" necessitate an abstraction that may not encompass all intersections of identities and voices. Socratic Dialogue, on the other hand, which does posit such a requirement, allows discussions to begin from a neutral standpoint, focusing on the immediate practical problem while ensuring all intersections of voices are heard. Furthermore, Socratic Dialogue begins with participants challenging existing preconceptions and assumptions. This further involves applications of philosophical rules such as active listening, striving for consensus, and principle of charity (Marinoff; Feldman, 1998).[26]

These elements inherent in Practical Philosophy which are not present in Freire's model can better promote integration of diverse voices within a context of plurality and intersecting identities.
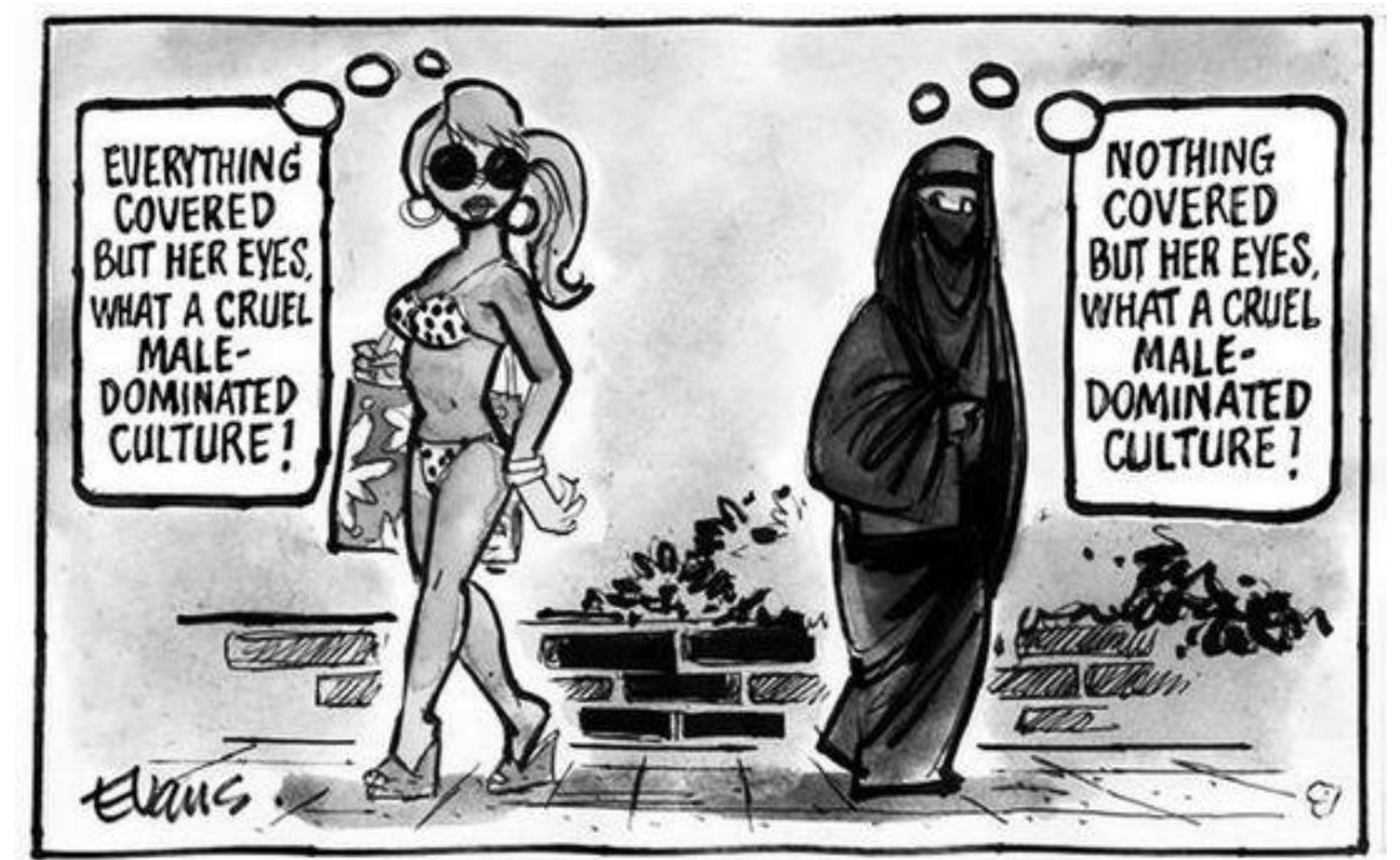
Cartoon by Malcolm Evans

Socratic Dialogue

To elucidate, consider a Socratic dialogue addressing the topic of feminism and sexism in Malaysia. Initially, prompts guide participants to clarify concepts like "gender," "woman," "feminism," and "femininity." This then encourages participants sharing their experiences or reasoned deductions on womanhood. The perspectives offered by a transgender woman, a Muslim woman, and a non-Muslim woman, for instance, would diverge significantly. And because of this, their differing experiences of oppression can influence varying perceptions of liberation, sometimes in conflict with each other. For instance, a non-Muslim woman might assert that clothing choices contribute to objectification and harassment, viewing liberation

[25] In Freire's view, "limiting situations" are socio-economic, political, and educational conditions that oppress individuals or communities.

[26] Principle of charity in Philosophy involves interpreting someone else's statement or argument in the most rational, reasonable and sympathetic manner possible. See Feldman (1998).

Conversely, a Muslim woman might perceive liberation through modesty in attire, conflicting with non-Muslim perceptions. Meanwhile, a transgender woman might see liberation as societal recognition and equal rights to present herself affirming her gender identity, potentially clashing with religious teachings on gender roles. In discussions involving intersecting identities, it is imperative where the discussion guides the participants to challenge their existing beliefs and assumptions, as well as embrace diversity in viewpoints. Here, the principle of charity encourages non-Muslim individuals to interpret the Muslim participant's viewpoint with charity by considering the value she places on modesty as a means of empowerment and agency, rather than assuming it as a restriction imposed by her religion, as well as challenge their existing assumptions on the Islamic religion.

The second half of Socratic Dialogue involves participants evaluating the validity and coherence of their arguments, delving deeper into the implications and feasibility of individual viewpoints, as well as exploring applications of their ideas. This exploration involves scrutinizing various conceptions of liberation, aiming for consensus through rational reasoning while upholding individual agency. The emphasis on collaboratively evaluating the soundness and implications of viewpoints and arguments allow the participants to recognise any logical fallacies and weaknesses in their arguments from perspectives distinct from their own, promoting inclusive advocacy and appreciation of diversity of voices. A common strategy in Practical Philosophy (especially discourse related to justice) to facilitate a discourse with multiple and intersecting identities is the use of a hypothetical veil of ignorance, a framework proposed by John Rawl where participants to momentarily set aside morally contingent factors such as their gender, race, abilities, preferences, wealth, or social status to engage in critical reflection of an issue or topic that extends beyond the confines of immediate experiences and identity-based discussions.[27]

This allows for a more impartial and objective examination of conflicting viewpoints on liberation ideals. By temporarily suspending personal identities and biases, participants can analyze the arguments based solely on the merit of philosophical reasoning and ethical principles. Through the hypothetical veil of ignorance, individuals can collectively strive to find common ground and solutions, or even plurality of solutions that uphold autonomy and respect for diverse identities, without the interference of subjective biases.

As we have seen so far, the specific apparatus in Practical Philosophy can facilitate dialogues focusing on building shared experiences among heterogeneous oppressed groups, which is crucial in a nation that is already divided along various lines. What we need is a space where individuals from various backgrounds can understand each other, for a true liberation in Malaysia is one that starts from embracing diversity and inclusivity, and focusing on inclusive advocacy.

[27] Applying the principles of John Rawls' justice theory, participants could engage in a thought experiment where they conceptualize a fair society behind a 'veil of ignorance,' unaware of their own identity. Rawls argues that this approach prompts them to select policies that are inherently "fair." This exercise might lead to agreements on principles that respect the autonomy of individuals while considering diverse cultural and gender perspectives. See Rawls (2001).

To facilitate this transition, a fundamental overhaul in Malaysia's educational paradigm is needed. The current schooling system warrants immediate replacement with an educational model centered on fostering philosophical and critical dialogues designed to challenge and dismantle deeply-rooted assumptions and biases. Such an approach is integral in establishing an environment of open communication and trust among diverse ethnicities and identities, enabling the identification and rectification of misinformation that has shaped their perceptions and behaviors, and "freeing individuals from prejudices, biases, fixed beliefs, stereotypes, narrowmindedness, self-inflicted negativity, and bigotry" (Hashim, 2023, p. 2; Rosli, 2023).

Furthermore, it is imperative to integrate Practical Philosophy in the traditional curriculum. Practical Philosophy, as shown above, can be understood as an activity of critical thinking rather than solely as a subject. This approach can seamlessly integrate Practical Philosophy into teaching learning activities within both the classroom and co-curricular pursuits (Shahab, 2013, p. 2321-2322). For instance, in the Moral subject, values can be taught through Socratic Dialogue on practical issues ranging from responsibilities in interpersonal relationships, such as friendships and romantic relationships, to human rights and dignity, ethical use of technology, and ethical practices in governance. In the History subject, Socratic Dialogue can encourage students to critically analyse historical events, explore alternative historical perspectives, and appreciate diverse cultural viewpoints, as well as empower them to contemplate their potential role in instigating positive change in the present and future. Moreover, collaborative dialogues should transcend formal educational settings and extend across various public spheres, including workplaces, informal meetups, affinity groups and community forums. These informal dialogues are vital to generate a ripple effect and nurture a culture of critical inquiry, to instigate change in oppressive policies and structures in the employment sectors and legal systems. Effectively facilitating these dialogues can be achieved through the active involvement of think tanks, NGOs, grassroots organizations, and established philosophy bodies devoted to fostering critical inquiry and dialogue.[28] These entities play a pivotal role by providing platforms that encourage a mosaic of thoughts and experiences, often unexplored in more structured environments. Within these informal dialogues, friendships emerge as conduits to empathy, fostering a deeper comprehension of the intricate intersections among voices within our country. These grassroots organizations, in collaboration with employers and media entities, wield substantial potential in rebalancing power, through policy reforms that prioritize critical engagement, emphasize collaborative learning, foster inclusive dialogues, encourage participatory decision-making, and create environments conducive to productive discourse.[29]

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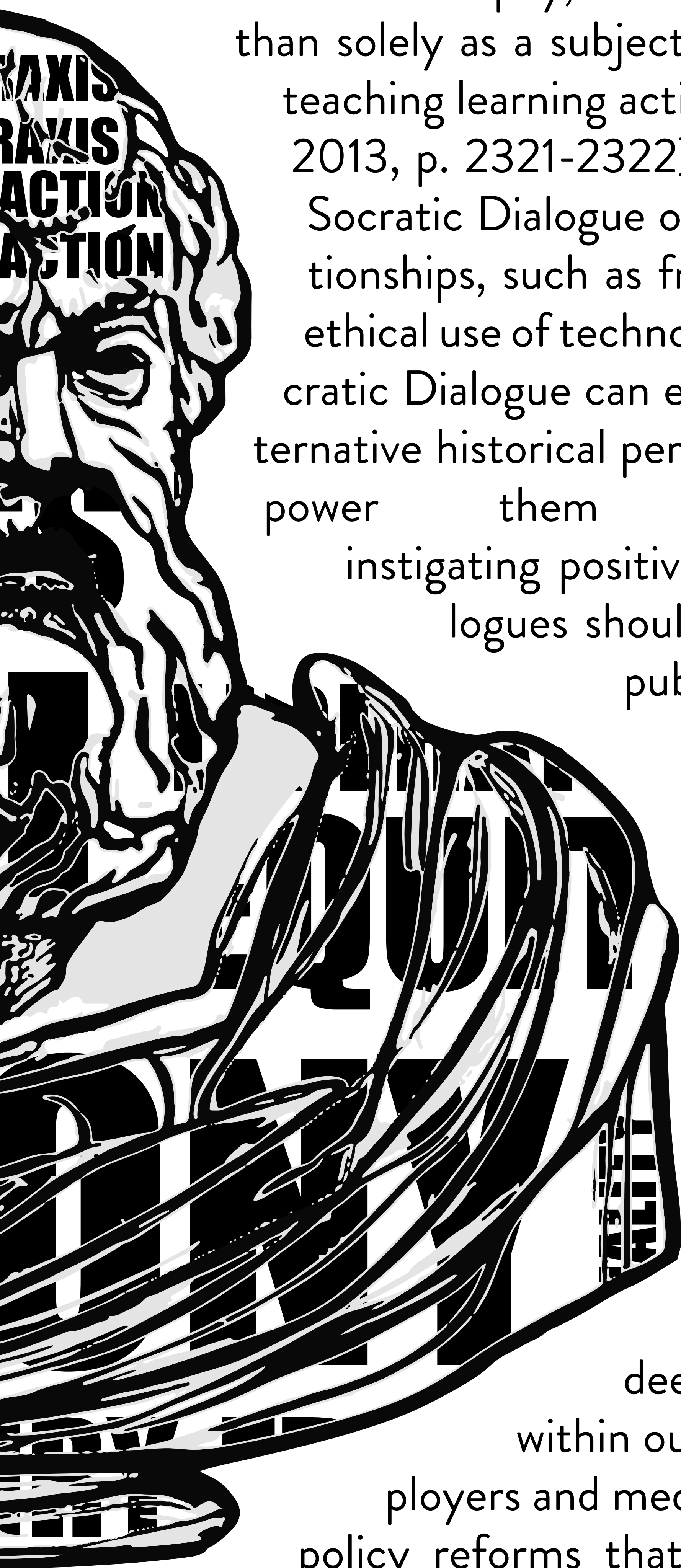
[28] Organisations such as the Malaysian Philosophy Society, Socrates Cafe, Pertubuhan Pendidikan Falsafah dan Pemikiran Malaysia (PPFPM), Purana School, Sisters in Islam, SEEDS, Youths.my, All Women's Action Society, Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), Amnesty International, to name a few, are actively working towards combating oppressive structures and restoring justice in our country through their initiatives, discussion groups and programmes.

[29] For instance, in 2021, The Malaysian Philosophy Society campaigned for greater free speech in the country through sparking unfettered conversations about societal taboos and topics that often go unspoken in the community. See International Think Big Summit (2021). Amnesty International Malaysia has also been campaigning for the repeal of these laws as part of the "Unsilenced" campaign. See Unsilenced (2020).

2.6 The Reluctance to Embrace Practical Philosophy

Despite its merits in emancipating the nation, misunderstandings and misconceptions continue to shroud the essence and impact of Practical Philosophy. Practical Philosophy has suffered opposition both by academic philosophers and the general public. Academic circles sometimes dismiss Practical Philosophy as not being "true" philosophy due to its perceived simplification for the layperson. Conversely, among the public, philosophy is often viewed as abstract, elitist, and disconnected from real-life concerns, regardless of its form or adaptation. And as a result, any related terms that have to do with philosophy are dismissed, irrespective of manifestations and adaptations. I aim to address these objections in turn.

Firstly, the dismissal of Practical Philosophy by academic philosophers might be premature. There is no strong justification that Theoretical Philosophy should enjoy prima facie advantage over its practical counterpart due to the perceived lack of academic rigor offered by Practical Philosophy (Thompson, 1983, p. 11). Practical Philosophy typically demands an equivalent, if not a more robust level of critical inquiry. This is owing to its direct application in real-life scenarios, which demands not only a profound grasp of the subject matter and concepts but also an intricate understanding of human existence and culture. At its core, Practical Philosophy serves as a bridge between abstract theories and their practical manifestations, necessitating a nuanced approach that integrates theoretical wisdom with practical wisdom. Far from diluting philosophical discourse, Practical Philosophy involves rigorous examination and reflection on applying abstract theories to concrete situations.

Secondly, the negative public sentiment towards Philosophy and Practical Philosophy is understandable. Even until today, philosophy is not taught at the undergraduate levels in most of the universities in Malaysia. This omission is primarily owing to the effort to align our curriculum to bolster national economic growth since the 1970s, resulting in an imbalanced emphasis on Science and Technology related subjects (Shahab, 2013, p. 2320; Ahmad, 1998, p. 463). However, the time has come for us to not take the omission of Philosophy from the curriculum as given, and recognise the values of the subject in liberating the nation from injustice, inequalities and oppressive structures. Beyond advocating for the inclusion of Philosophy in the curriculum, one can actively participate in Practical Philosophy through dialogues and discussions organized by grassroots organizations, as will be discussed below. Historical records showcase the significant impact of practical philosophers on socio-cultural transformations.[30] Furthermore, the skill set derived from Practical Philosophy aligns with the coveted attributes sought after by contemporary employers (Chew, 2021). With a commitment to address a non-philosopher audience, Practical Philosophy inherently centres on public interests. Its fundamental goal is to generate practical impact collaboratively with laypeople, emphasizing the application of philosophical reasoning and principles to address tangible societal concerns, as shown above, through Socratic Dialogue (Rasmussen, 2017, p. 14-15).

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[30] To name a few practical contributions by famous philosophers: Peter Singer's notions regarding altruism and animal welfare have fueled the emergence of the Effective Altruism movement, significantly aiding poverty relief efforts and global advocacy for animal liberation. Notably, Camus' Absurdism has provided solace to individuals grappling with the fear of death and existential meaninglessness during pandemics. Practical Philosophy also spurred important historical movements like the Enlightenment and French Revolution. Enlightenment philosophers like Voltaire, D'Alembert, Diderot, Kant, Rousseau, and Montesquieu questioned traditional authority, promoting the importance of reason, individual rights, equality, justice, and critical thinking. See Wilde (2018), Khaw (2021), and Bristow (2023).

3. The Next Steps for Malaysians

Current efforts are underway in promoting a culture of critical inquiry and collaborative dialogue in Malaysia. Initiatives like the Kritikos high school critical thinking pilot program jointly organised by the Malaysian Philosophy Society (MyPhilSoc) and Pertubuhan Pendidikan Falsafah dan Pemikiran Malaysia (PPFPM), and the Hikmah program, an adaptation of Philosophy for Children (P4C) introduced by Rosnani Hashim, mark the beginnings of more progressive educational models grounded in critical inquiry (Hashim, 2020). Despite these strides, significant inertia persists among the public, likely due to the normalization of conformity as a result of the "Banking" model of education. There also remains a prevailing perception that critical inquiry lacks practical, marketable value and economic significance, perpetuating beliefs that hinder the establishment of philosophy departments and programmes in Malaysia.[31] But have we ever wondered perhaps these beliefs are internalised manifestations stemming from the oppressive culture in our society?

If you are willing to put aside your preconceptions about philosophy, diverse opportunities for participation in critical inquiries and dialogues await. From informal discussions at gatherings like the "Thinkers Cafe" hosted by the Malaysian Philosophy Society and local meetups such as "Socrates Cafe," to engaging in professional workshops and attending enriching festivals like the MyPhilSoc's International Think Big Summit, Purana School's Philosophy Festival, and PPFPM's Seminar Falsafah (Philosophy seminars), numerous platforms cater to this pursuit. Additionally, formal education avenues within select Malaysian universities such as the Bachelor of Philosophy, Law and Business (BPLB) program offered by Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) and the upcoming Philosophy, Politics, Economics (PPE) program at Taylor's University offer robust spaces for development of critical thinking. Online avenues like the Philosophy Foundation, School of Life and MOOC platforms like Coursera offer great options in the commitment towards a more critical, rational, just and equitable nation.

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[31] *Another major obstacle to the establishment of philosophy in Malaysia is the perceived conflict between Philosophy and religion. However, Philosophy needs not be seen as the enemy of religion, as philosophy questioning need not necessarily entail skepticism and denial of the existence of God. In fact, it can have the opposite effect of strengthening religious beliefs.*
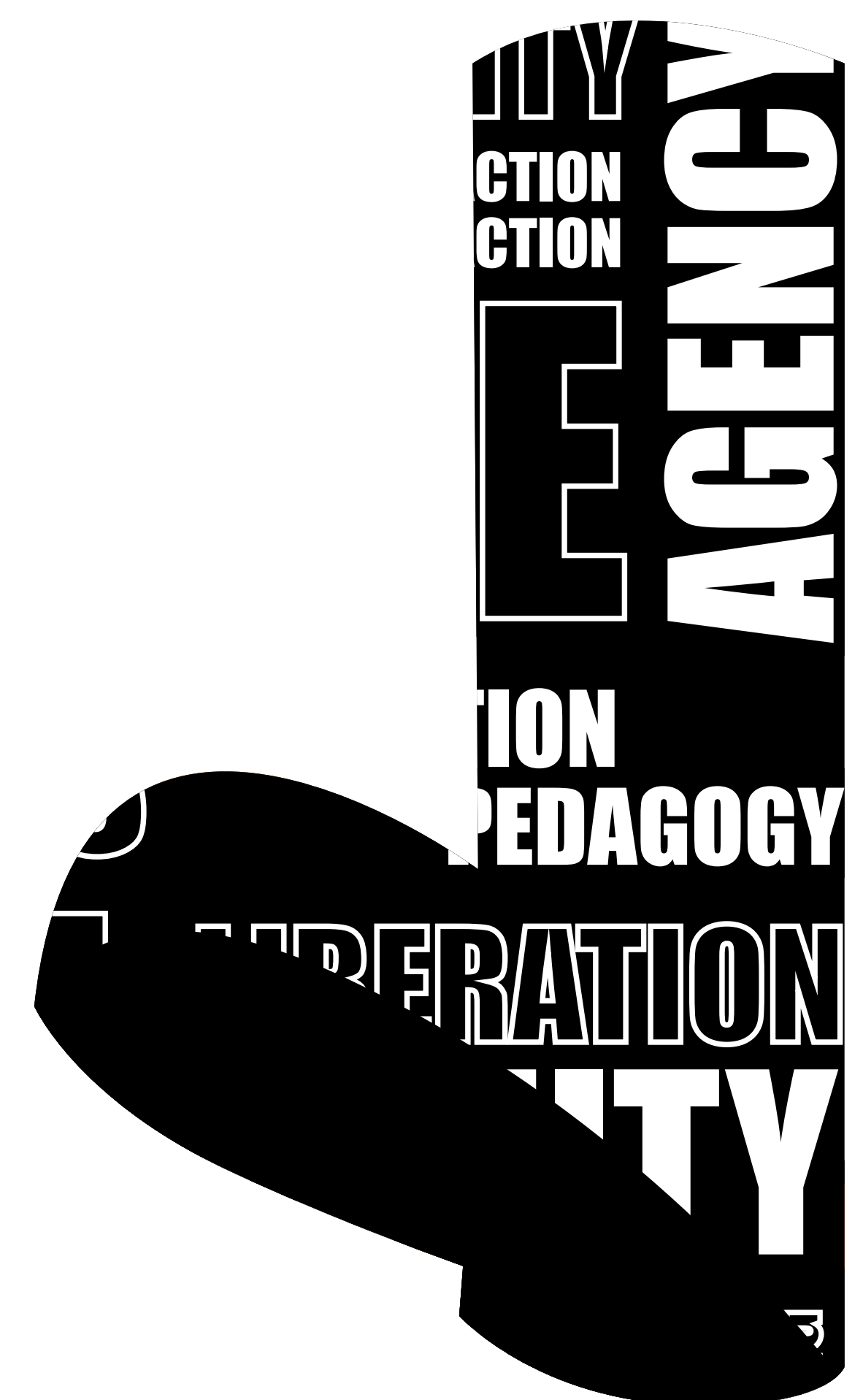
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