

# University of California

## Subject A Examination

### May 1989

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**DIRECTIONS:** Read carefully the passage that begins on the next page and the essay topic that follows. Respond to the topic by writing an essay that is controlled by a central idea and is specifically developed.

You will have two hours to read the passage and complete your essay. You may underline the passage and make marginal notes as you read. Plan your essay before you begin writing, using the "Notes" side of the blue Information Sheet. Allow time to review and proofread your essay and to make any revisions or corrections you wish.

Your essay will be evaluated on the basis of your ability to develop your central idea, to express yourself clearly, and to use the conventions of written English. The topic has no "correct" response.

Writing that appears on the "Notes" page will not be read.

*Introductory Note: Doris Lessing (b. 1919) is a well-known British novelist. The following passage is adapted from a lecture she gave in 1985.*

## **Group Minds**

by Doris Lessing

People living in societies that we describe as Western, or as the free world, may be educated in many different ways, but they will all emerge with an idea about themselves that goes something like this: I am a citizen of a free society, and that means I am an individual, making individual choices. My mind is my own, my opinions are chosen by me, I am free to do as I will, and at the worst the pressures on me are economic -- that is to say, I may be too poor to do as I want.

This set of ideas may sound something like a caricature, but it is not so far off from how we see ourselves. It is a portrait that may not have been acquired consciously, but is part of a general atmosphere or set of assumptions that influence our ideas about ourselves. People in the West therefore may go through their entire lives never thinking to analyze this very flattering picture, and as a result are helpless against all kinds of pressures on them to conform in many kinds of ways. The fact is that we all live our lives in groups -- the family, work groups, social, religious and political groups. We are group animals still, and there is nothing wrong with that. But what **is** dangerous is not understanding the social tendencies that govern groups and govern us.

When we're in a group, we tend to think as that group does. It is the hardest thing in the world to maintain an individual dissident opinion as a member of a group.

It seems to me that this is something we have all experienced -- something we take for granted, may never have thought about. But a great deal of experiment has gone on among psychologists and sociologists on this very theme. If I describe an experiment or two, then anyone listening who may be a sociologist or psychologist will groan, Oh no, not **again** -- for they will have heard of these classic experiments far too often. My guess is that the rest of you will never have heard of these experiments. If my guess **is** true, then it aptly illustrates my general thesis, that we -- the human race -- are now in possession of a great deal of hard information about ourselves, but we do not use it to improve our institutions and therefore our lives.

A typical experiment on this theme goes like this. A group of people is taken into the researcher's confidence. A minority of one or two is left in the dark. Some situation demanding measurement or assessment is chosen: for instance, comparing lengths of wood that differ only a little from each other, but enough to be perceptible, or comparing

shapes that are almost the same size. The majority in the group -- according to instruction -- will assert stubbornly that these two shapes or lengths are the same length, or size, while the solitary individual who has not been so instructed will assert that the pieces of wood are different. But the majority will continue to insist -- speaking metaphorically -- that black is white, and after a period of exasperation, irritation, even anger, certainly incomprehension, the minority will fall into line. Not always, but nearly always. There are indeed glorious individualists who stubbornly insist on telling the truth as they see it, but most give in to the majority opinion, obey the atmosphere.

When put as baldly, as unflatteringly, as this, reactions tend to be incredulous: "I certainly wouldn't give in, I speak my mind. . . ." But would you?

People who have experienced a lot of groups, who perhaps have observed their own behavior, may agree that the hardest thing in the world is to stand out against one's group, a group of one's peers. Many agree that among our most shameful memories is this -- how often we said black was white because other people were saying it. People who have been in a political movement at times of extreme tension, people who remember how they acted in school, will know this guilt anyway. . . . but it is one thing carrying a burden of knowledge around, half conscious of it, perhaps ashamed of it, hoping it will go away if you don't look too hard, and another saying openly and calmly and sensibly: "Right. This is what we must expect under this and that set of conditions."

Imagine us saying to children: "In the last fifty or so years, the human race has become aware of a great deal of information about its mechanisms; how it usually behaves, how it tends to behave under certain circumstances. If this is to be useful you must learn to contemplate these tendencies calmly, dispassionately, disinterestedly, without emotion. It is information that will set people free from blind loyalties, obedience to slogans, rhetoric, leaders, group emotions. You must be on your guard against your own most primitive reactions and instincts." Well, there it is.

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**ESSAY TOPIC:** How does Lessing propose that we guard against the influences of our "group minds"? What do you think of her proposal? To make your essay convincing, you should discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading -- including, of course, "Group Minds" itself.