

DISPUTATION CXLVIII

April 14, 2016

Dear Peucinians,

Spring, as we all know, is a time of renewal. We need no further proof of this than walking down to the quad, and marveling at the students arrayed on the sun-warmed grass like a pod of beached dolphins. Very soon, these same students will properly inaugurate the season by recreating the [Garden of Earthly Delights](#) in deliciously sordid fashion.

Peucinian, too, has been busily renewing itself. In the past two weeks we have rinsed ourselves in the blood of rabbits and ushered in a new regime. Long may it reign.

Yet in the midst of all this feverish activity, we have not had time for a disputation. Indeed, our last one took place before Spring Break. It's high time we got back to what we do best. [Insert joke about boxed wine juice here.]

With that, I introduce to you our CXLVIIIth disputation:

RESOLVED: TO THINE OWN SELF BE TRUE

Affirmative: Ajax '16

Negative: Harriet Beecher Stowe '16

At issue is the construction of the self. Am I essentially defined by my relationships, or by my essence? Am I fundamentally a son, brother, student, and Peucinian? Or is there some inner core which I should seek, and, having found, to which I should hold fast?

The Affirmative will argue that we must look inward if we wish to construct a sense of identity. To say otherwise is to surrender our full agency to the rest of society. Doing so leads us into inauthenticity; how can we deny the disjunction between what we feel ourselves to be, and all the inaccurate ways in which other people imagine us? Even if the two could somehow align, why should you compromise your sense of individuality to conform to external expectations? In order to avoid alienation from yourself and others, you must stay in touch with your independent sense of identity.

The Negative rejects the idea that we can create ourselves *ex nihilo*, even when we attempt to do so from a place of relative freedom. It will maintain that human identity is necessarily limited, and that it necessarily follows from the individual's position in society. To exist as a social animal is to remain subject to substantial and inevitable social constraints. As a result, the self is imposed externally rather than created internally. And this, saith the Negative, is no tragedy.

This fault line runs right through philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The psychologist Edward Higgins, for instance, articulated something called self-discrepancy theory, which holds that we compare ourselves to internal standards for ourselves, and that the gaps between these standards open us up to a host of emotional vulnerabilities. Karl Marx, on the other hand, forcefully argued that ideas in general and identities in particular are nothing more than the products of material circumstances. We cannot escape the bonds of historicity and class, for we are all products of our time and social station. I look forward to seeing which other thinkers you might bring into this discussion.

As always:

TONIGHT, 7:45PM, THIRD FLOOR OF MASSACHUSETTS HALL. WESTERN BUSINESS ATTIRE STRONGLY ENCOURAGED.

And with that, I bid you a pleasant spring afternoon.

Authentically yours,
Voltaire