

DISPUTATION CLVI

November 17, 2016

Dearest Peucinians,

Last week, in the wake of a bruising presidential campaign and a historic electoral college upset, we voted around the table — some with reservations — that America is indeed exceptional. This week, we leave behind the timely and the particular to engage with an ancient question that every culture has litigated on its own terms, and one which never stops being relevant.

RESOLVED: HUMILITY IS A VIRTUE

Affirmative: Denis Diderot ‘19

Negative: Jean-Jacques Rousseau ‘19

According to Aristotle, greatness of soul is the loftiest of the moral virtues and the hardest to embody. The magnanimous man (for indeed, only a man could be capable of such a status) is distinguished with respect to all of the other virtues and is notable for his elevation of taste. Accordingly, he is unwilling to associate with anything below his dignity, those things which we may call petty or trivial. He is subject only to his own will and he is necessarily disinterested in anything that the masses are interested in, for his judgement is superior to all others. He is liberal in dispensing favors to others, but to accept favors would be to admit that there is something he lacks, and he cannot be lacking in anything. He is worthy of the highest praises, but the relevant and decisive point is that he must know this to be true. He must know his worth, for only then can he act in manner befitting his status.

So much for the Greeks. The Christian response to Aristotle, and therefore the prevalent line of thought that resounds through subsequent Western history to the present, is best summarized in the words of St. Francis of Assisi — “What is man before God, that he is, and nothing more.” Man is fallen, flawed, and broken; despite his best efforts, he will always stumble on the path to righteousness. That pagan virtue magnanimity is properly understood to be the vice of pride, the mistaken belief that man can overcome his sinful nature. It is man’s (and specifically Eve’s — misogyny knows no cultural boundaries!) poor judgement that caused our exile into this barren world, and therefore no one can say that their judgement is sound. Whether it takes the form of monasticism or Catholic confession, we must renounce our own will for God’s.

This notion of man as a flawed being is so pervasive that it has exited the realm of the religious and permeates in our pop culture (see: [Hannah Montana](#), “Nobody’s Perfect”). And isn’t there some truth to this? Even those who do not subscribe to Judeo-Christian standards of excellence will readily admit that they often fall short of their own standards of right and wrong. Even the most careful and disciplined among us will eventually underperform in competition, in a class, or in their relationships with others. Isn’t humility the best impetus to self-improvement?

Even if there are some exceptional individuals among us, who is to say that they are capable of assessing their own desserts fairly? Where do we draw the line between proper self-esteem and hubris, and how do we avoid the fate of Icarus? How far can we take our humility before we debase and humiliate ourselves?

Thursday November 17th, 8:15 PM
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire

Yours,
μένω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus