

DISPUTATION CLVIII

February 2, 2017

Dearest Peucinians,

I hope you all are enjoying your classes and have assimilated yourselves the flow of the semester. As many of you are aware (since you have been reminding me frequently), we have not congregated in that hallowed room in Massachusetts Hall for disputation since late November. Due to the length of this hiatus, it is my opinion that we ought to begin with a bang rather than a whimper. Welcome back!

RESOLVED: POLITICAL CORRECTNESS ADVANCES SOCIAL JUSTICE

Affirmative: Andrew Carnegie '17

Negative: Jean-Jacques Rousseau '19

Political correctness, it seems, is a label that describes a wide range of speech and deeds that are not obviously similar or related to each other. For the purposes of this disputation, political correctness is understood to be the policing of speech for the furtherance of a political or social goal. The question at hand, then, is whether the regulation of speech is actually effective at furthering such a goal. Despite our frequent encounters with political correctness of this variety in the world around us, this question is seldom asked.

Those who do the policing instinctively cringe at the sound of a misplaced word or an insensitive comment. The immediate concern is the emotional harm done to the individuals whose identities are implicated in these comments. Those that already struggle with their racial, sexual, and gender identities can find their greatest fears confirmed in the unfiltered speech of an otherwise well-intentioned person. In extreme cases, a sentence uttered thoughtlessly can even suggest physical danger to some listeners.

The ultimate goal is to adjust language so that it reflects our sentiments about the equality of individuals and our respect for the dignity of all peoples. Without realizing it, we import concepts and phrases into our common speech that are born of ignorance and prejudice, and whether or not we care to admit it, these phrases and the concepts they signify alter our manner of seeing things. The medium is the message, so to speak, insofar as it delineates the contours of our thoughts. By limiting or extending the acceptable use of language, we necessarily limit or extend the way we think because we can only conceptualize things in terms that are familiar to us. On a societal level, we can imagine that prejudice becomes inconceivable to a future generation that is accustomed to a mode of speaking that instills respect for diversity and an innate sense of the equality of persons.

That, at least, is the theory behind the practice.

Those who find their speech attacked and regulated bristle at the notion that they are somehow enforcing oppression or inciting fear. The people that genuinely fear speech are too sensitive — these are just words, after all — and need to engage in conversation rather than censor their opponents. There seems to be something nefarious, even dystopian, about trying to change hearts and minds by restricting language rather than exchanging ideas openly. Furthermore, it is the intention of the words and the particular ideas that the speaker is trying to communicate that matter, not the imaginary hostility that the listener reads into them.

More importantly, adjusting the words we are permitted to use in certain circumstances does not necessarily change the way people think; it simply masks what is going on inside. Hatred and prejudice are so powerful and vivid in the mind that they can overcome any barriers erected by proper use of language. They are

feelings rather than ideas that are neatly formulated into sentences, and reforming these feelings requires stronger medicine than political correctness can offer.

In Germany, a nation that guarantees free speech, holocaust denial and anti-semitism in speech or in writing are punishable under the criminal code. Has Germany gone too far to correct its past injustices, or have we not gone far enough to correct ours? Do we need to regulate our own speech to compensate for the mistakes of our forebearers, or does historical consciousness make cowards of us?

*Thursday February 2nd, 8:10 PM
3rd Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-Formal Attire*

Yours,
μὲνω - Meno

Pinos Loquentes Semper Habemus