

DISPUTATION CLXXXV

September 6, 2018

Dear Peucinians new and old:

Welcome back from summer, the season invented for kids and suffered through by adults who ride subways. My hope is that regardless of your personal labor philosophy, you put a greater proportion of hours into the “leisure” column than you did during the other seasons. For my part, I worked on a congressional race, volunteer fire fight-ed, studied for the LSAT, and ate plenty of my father’s barbecue. Some of you worked internships and jobs, some instructed children at camps and on trips, others conducted research, and still others did highly questionable and mysterious activities in Marblehead, Mass. All these new experiences—and our time spent reflecting—will bear wonderfully on our discussions as we converge on our big wooden table once again, and again.

Monday was Labor Day. Fittingly, we ask what ought be the role of labor in our lives?

RESOLVED: STRIVE FOR A LIFE OF LEISURE

Affirmative: Gilgamesh, Fifth King of Uruk ’20

Negative: William Godwin ’20

Momentarily disregarding the possibility that an activity could be labor *and* leisure (or, I suppose, neither), why would someone trade one hour of leisure for one hour of labor? Thinking within our capitalist wage-labor system, there is a *tradeoff* between labor and leisure, and the cost of each hour of leisure is the amount of the wage. The wage motivates us to eschew some amount of leisure, because wages allow us to enhance—or make livable—the remaining hours of leisure—with books, food, housing, a French Press, musical instruments, etc. But the leisure itself might be meaningless drudgery, akin to Sisyphus pushing the stone or Anthony working in the grocery store.

On this view, and others, labor is a chore required to be performed before playtime. It’s a necessary distraction from the pursuits that truly matter to us: family and friends, philosophy, art, travel, and recreation, for example. Labor is a constriction on our freedom; it demands our presence, time, attention, and energy—draining many of us, smothering many of us. Absent any inheritance money from a long-lost aunt, in response to this harsh reality and in acceptance of the inherent meaningless and mere instrumental utility of labor, we must strive to reduce our time spent laboring and increase the amount and quality of our leisure—if we are to be the happiest we can be.

Another response to the problem of labor suggests a rosier picture. Labor is not only good for procuring better leisure; labor is a source of meaning in our attempts at survival, a grounding in purpose and motivated thinking. There is beauty in chopping wood, driving trucks, and delivering mail. There is meaning in waking up every morning knowing that people are depending on you. A life of leisure would turn us into drifters, serving no one, vulnerable to fits of existential dread. Bloated and engorged on free time, we will notice the minutes of rest lose their sweetness, and sunny days by the lake become routine instead of special. Our freedom from work leads to a different yoke altogether.

What say you? What is labor? What is leisure? Are they coextensive? How should we spend our *time*? I invite you to trade your academic labor for some philosophical leisure and join us in exploring these questions. All are welcome.

Thursday, September 6th
8:00 p.m.
Third Floor of Massachusetts Hall
Semi-formal attire

PLSH,
Jean-Jacques Rousseau
President, Peucinian Society